

SOCIAL ISSUES

Prescription Drug Abuse

The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that although prescription drug abuse affects many Americans, some concerning trends can be seen among older adults, adolescents and women. Several indicators suggest that prescription drug abuse is on the rise in the United States. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reports that in 2009, the latest survey year, approximately 7 million persons were current users of psychotherapeutic drugs taken non-medically (2.8 percent of the U.S. population).

Challenge

The national trend penetrates all walks of life, regardless of socioeconomic position. Metropolitan or rural locations are not immune to rising prescription drug abuse crisis. A coalition of concerned professionals and residents in eastern Kentucky created a Community Alliance to address the growing problem. Its goal was to identify community norms surrounding prescription drug abuse for the purpose of creating educational programs, drug treatment programs and public service campaigns to combat the issue.

The Alliance partnered with Thoroughbred Research Group to explore the community norms and obtain reactions to drug prevention campaign concepts. There were two key challenges:

1. Create a research methodology that included representation from every segment of the community that was affected by prescription drug abuse.
2. Get respondents to honestly share their experiences and perceptions.

Research Solution

Thoroughbred Research Group collaborated with the Alliance in identifying the key stakeholders to include in the research. The research plan included two phases:

Phase 1 was a comprehensive review of existing data related to prescription drug abuse in the area.

Phase 2 consisted of recruiting and conducting focus groups and IDI's.

The targeted segments included the following groups:

- Professional educators and influencers
- Religious, judicial and medical stakeholders
- Elementary through college students
- Drug-affected families

The focus groups and IDIs were designed to provide ample opportunities for respondents to honestly share their feelings and experiences related to prescription drug abuse. The Thoroughbred Research team coupled traditional qualitative projective techniques with a reflective exercise with the respondents in the Influenced by Drugs segment.

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In this exercise, the lights were dimmed as the respondents were asked to imagine themselves or family members in various social situations. The reflective exercise created a safe environment enabling respondents to comfortably share their personal experiences with prescription drug abuse. The results clearly identified the acceptable behaviors or community norms among this group of respondents.

Based on the qualitative research, a telephone survey was conducted with 400 residents to quantify the perceptions of the community and to test the creative concepts designed for public service messages. The results supported the qualitative findings – prescription drug abuse was an accepted behavior among all population segments in the community.

Outcome

The Alliance used the research results to develop a strategic plan that included education, public relations and advertising to aid its effort in combating prescription drug abuse. Key tactical executions of its strategic plan included:

- Presenting research findings to community members through local media outlets
- Creation of professional development seminars for educators, faith leaders, judicial and medical personnel
- Development of a community coordinator position to attend prevention-related training seminars
- Conducting various activities to educate community leaders and youths
- Creation of mentoring programs for drug-affected youths
- Creative development and deployment of a community awareness campaign utilizing billboards, television and radio
- Implemented a Pharmacy Prescription Bag message campaign, which included warning messages and drug facts on all prescription bags

Conclusion

When community leaders attempt to manage issues that affect the social fabric of a community, city or nation, the solution requires a multifaceted research approach. The inclination is to employ a strategy that attempts to communicate methods to solve the problem or effectively modify a given behavior. However, as this case clearly illustrates, the first step in affecting change is the understanding of the attitudinal factors within the community relative to the social issue.

Only through a thorough understanding of the individual, family and the extended social network can a creative solution be developed to rescue at-risk individuals and the community at large.

