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What Works

Unselling Meth: A graphic ad campaign shocks teens away from drugs

By Suzy Oudsema & Rick Wedell

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Unselling Meth

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A TEENAGE GIRL rolls over on a motel bed in her underwear while an older man zips his pants. As the older man leaves the room, he hands the girl's boyfriend a bag of methamphetamine as payment. "My boyfriend takes care of me," says the girl's voice. The teenage boy then sits down on the bed and puts his hand on her shoulder, just above the scabs where she clawed herself, thinking there were bugs crawling beneath her skin.

This haunting television advertisement is a product of the Montana Meth Project – a public service campaign that portrays the reality of methamphetamine use, in all its grit. Funded by software entrepreneur Thomas Siebel (who founded Siebel Systems Inc.), the project's graphic ads saturate TV, radio, billboards, and newspapers, reaching 70 to 90 percent of the state's teens three times a week. So far, the shock factor is working. According to a report by Attorney General Mike McGrath, methamphetamine-related crime fell 53 percent during the project's first year.

Siebel, a part-time resident of Big Sky Country, first learned about the state's drug problem from his good friend, the local sheriff, who told Siebel that the county's 17 sheriffs spent nearly 100 percent of their time busting meth labs. The drug was consuming the population: Between 1992 and 2002, hospital admissions for meth rose 520 percent; over half of the children in foster care are there because of meth. Siebel saw a familiar challenge: "It occurred to me that perhaps we could look at this as a consumer marketing problem." But rather than selling the product, he would *unsell* it. He founded the Montana Meth Project in February 2005 to reach kids before the drug did.

Listen to the Children

First, Siebel needed to know his "customers": who they were, what they cared about, and how to reach them. A 2003 study at the University of Michigan had shown that drug



The Montana Meth Project, funded by software entrepreneur Thomas Siebel, creates gritty ads featuring teens on meth. The ads discourage Montana's youth from trying the highly addictive drug.

consumption among young people is correlated with the drug's risk factor and its acceptance by society. To gauge the attitude of Montana's youth, Siebel recruited Siobhan O'Connor, a former marketing executive with Hewlett-Packard Co., to conduct a baseline survey of 1,258 respondents, aged 12 to 24. A third of the participants had been offered meth within the past year, and almost a quarter saw little or no risk in trying it. "Alcohol, pot, cocaine, ecstasy, and meth were all seen as being OK to experiment with," says O'Connor. But "the kids had very informal and accepting attitudes toward meth in particular." In fact, they saw benefits, like weight loss and increased energy and happiness.

Meanwhile, during the summer of 2005, the project's ad agency, Venables Bell & Partners, was collecting information to determine the campaign's creative direction. The team interviewed drug counselors, a recovering addict, and two teens with family members who were addicts. Those conversations revealed what meth does to families – the violence, and the stealing, and the tendency for younger siblings to follow older siblings into addiction.

Venables Bell & Partners also conducted focus groups, just as it would do if it were developing an ad campaign for cereal or sneakers. The four sessions held in Missoula and Kalispell, Mont., revealed that the campaign's planned targets, 18- to 24-year-olds, were too old. Interviews with two groups of seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders and two



groups of 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-graders, each with four girls and four boys, suggested that most teens were forming opinions about drugs around the age of 13. One 12-year-old girl didn't know what meth was, but a 14-year-old girl was already curious: "I would probably ask what it's like," she said. By 16, drugs are a part of everyday teenage life: "Shrooms (mushrooms), pot, alcohol – everybody is trying them," said one participant. Venables Bell & Partners decided to aim for teens while they're young, *before* they think they know everything.

Armed with data, the firm developed seven advertising concepts and 40 potential slogans to test on four new focus groups (a total of 32 teens between the ages of 12 and 18). Each concept, presented on storyboards, used different sets of characters and different messages. In some, adults spouted statistics, and in others, recovering addicts talked about their experiences.

It quickly became apparent that preachy authority figures had little effect. The teens preferred to hear messages from their peers – not just kids their own age, but kids who looked like their friends. And one message hit harder than all the rest: "Not even once."

Originally, the Montana Meth Project had imagined a multmessage approach. "We thought showing a rotting brain would work, for example," says O'Connor. "But over and over again, this one idea ["Not even once"] consistently won out across all age ranges." Kids seemed to have little sense of meth's addictive nature, and so the slogan "Not even once" grabbed their attention.

The TV ads that aired in September 2005 featured 30-second spots that chronicled the downfall of teens who promise in the commercial's first scene, "I'm gonna try meth just once." One girl swears, "I'm gonna smoke this just once." Then, "I'm gonna steal just once." Then, "I'm going to sleep with him for meth just once." In the final scene, her little sister rifles through her room for drugs, and echoes, "I'm gonna try meth just once."

In another series of commercials, meth users appear to their pre-meth selves. The advertising firm had learned that addicts consistently express the same wish: "If only I had been able to talk to myself before I used the first time." In these ads, teens with cracked lips, bruised eyes, and bleeding sores warn themselves of the future. For example, a hooded teen bursts into a Laundromat, demanding money from the patrons. He throws a middle-aged man against the machines, then screams at a mother and her babies. He spots his past, healthy self on a bench, grabs him by the collar, and shouts into his face, "This wasn't supposed to be your life!"

The campaign's raw images make the effects of meth tangible to a generation that isn't easily surprised. Indeed, some TV spots are so graphic that officials requested they air only after 7 p.m. But kids are bound to become immune to the shock eventually. To keep their attention, Siebel has created and released new ads in waves. The most recent package – nine radio commercials, four TV spots, and three print ads that aired in March – focuses on the physical and emotional harm meth users inflict on family and friends.

Drugs on the Brain

In Montana – population 1 million – it wasn't long before people were talking about meth. In March of this year the project's annual statewide survey showed that 96 percent of parents had discussed the drug with their children in the past year – an increase of 13 percent since the ads began. More than half reported that the campaign had prompted those discussions. The survey also showed a profound change among teenagers: They perceived more risk in trying meth just once than in experimenting with any other drug, including heroin. In the first half of 2006, there was a 73 percent drop in the number of people testing positive for amphetamines, including meth, in the workplace.

One advantage of having a billionaire like Tom Siebel supporting a marketing campaign is that it's relatively easy to get its message across. With Siebel's financial support, the Montana Meth Project is the largest advertiser in the state – outpacing even McDonald's. But Siebel wants to make his project a template for all states plagued by meth. His TV and print ads are "100 percent transferable immediately" to any state that wants them, he says.

Last spring in Arizona, where meth use among teens is twice the national average, 10 counties and the Attorney General's Office launched their own Meth Project with TV spots borrowed from Montana and radio ads featuring real teens affected by meth. In California, the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs teamed up with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America to deliver an ad blitz that tells the stories of addicts. National agencies produce the ads for free, and local TV and radio affiliates donate airtime. "The hope," Siebel says, "is to get this down to a cookie-cutter program." □

MARKETING FOR CHANGE

- Conduct consumer research
- Tailor ads to the audience
- Change the ad campaign frequently