



MODULE 3:

SOCIAL NORMS MARKETING

Summary:

- Social norms marketing is an approach to alcohol education that attempts to change prevailing norms within a population, substituting positive for negative ones.
- Social norms programs apply a marketing approach to changing behaviors.
- Targeted primarily at young people, the approach attempts to provide an accurate view about the reality of drinking among their peers and reduce the misperception that excessive drinking (and drinking in general) is widely prevalent.
- Currently, the social norms approach has been implemented primarily on college and university campuses in the United States.
- As an effective harm reduction strategy, social norms marketing could be applied to a number of other contexts surrounding drinking where perceptions may change behavior.
- For [EXAMPLES OF TARGETED INTERVENTIONS](#), see the Blue Book index page of www.icap.org.

Several shifts have occurred in the alcohol education field during the past decade. There has been an increased focus on evidence-based approaches; it has been recognized that a population-based focus needs to be balanced with one that embraces harm reduction measures; and an increased attention has been given to the environment in which drinking behaviors take place.

Social norms marketing falls into the third category of these shifts that addresses the environment. The approach is based on an attempt to modify societal norms through institutional and public policy measures, as well as through programs that seek to promote positive change in drinking patterns by correcting misperceptions of prevailing alcohol consumption behaviors.

Defining social norms marketing

Social norms are the perceived standards of acceptable attitudes and behavior prevalent within a community. The objective of social norms marketing is to influence these attitudes and behaviors in a positive way through the application of commercial marketing techniques to increase awareness. There is evidence that social norms marketing is a promising approach to alcohol education.

To date, most social norms marketing has been targeted at young people, particularly on university and college campuses in the United States (e.g., Haines, Perkins, Rice, & Barker, 2004; Perkins, 2002; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). The approach is based on the finding that, when it comes to alcohol consumption, most students on college campuses tend to overestimate their peers' drinking, both in quantity and frequency (Perkins, 1997; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). As a result, young people are likely to drink in a way that they wrongly believe emulates that of their peers, generally through increased consumption. Correcting these misperceptions can help reduce heavy drinking and harmful outcomes (Fabiano, 2003; Haines & Spear, 1996; Haines & Barker, 2003; Haines et al., 2004; Jeffrey, Negro, Miller, & Frisone, 2003; Johannessen, Collins, Mills-Novoa, & Glider, 1999; Perkins & Craig, 2002; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996).

Theoretical explanations for such misperceptions of peer behavior suggest that people are inclined to see the behaviors of others as “typical.” Excessive drinking, therefore, may be perceived as normal rather than an exception (Perkins, 1997).

Applying social norms marketing

Like many other measures applied in alcohol education, social norms marketing is most commonly targeted at young people ([MODULE 1: Alcohol Education](#)). Mass media and other communications techniques are used to change and correct the perception among young people about their peers’ drinking. These measures have been used most commonly on university and college campuses to reach large numbers of young people. By promoting the notion, based on evidence, that the majority of young people do not drink and that those who do drink do so moderately and safely, the approach has been successful in reducing harmful drinking patterns (e.g., Haines, Barker, & Rice, 2003; Hansen & Graham, 1991; Linkenbach & Perkins, 2003; Perry, Kelder, Murray, & Knut-Inge, 1992).

Well-designed social norms marketing programs are implemented in four stages (Haines et al., 2004):

1. Data Collection

- Collect data about the drinking patterns of the target population, including quantity and frequency measures, outcomes, and prevailing perceptions.
- Identify protective, healthy behaviors already prevalent in the target population.

2. Development of Intervention Strategy

- Conduct market research to determine what media are most commonly used by the target populations, where, and what they perceive as credible and are likely to remember.
- Select most appropriate medium to be used for message delivery and develop a marketing plan.
- Develop a prototype message that is simple, positive, truthful, and consistent; refine approach following the test run.

3. Implementation

- Implement a marketing campaign that delivers messages frequently and consistently.

4. Evaluation

- Assess the extent to which messages reach target audience, how well they are recalled, and what reaction they elicit.
- Collect and analyze outcome data to assess effectiveness and impact on drinking behaviors and outcomes.

Currently, social norms programs include a range of approaches:

- Launch intensive communication campaigns through newspaper advertisements, posters, flyers and leaflets, editorials, letters to the editor, and articles addressing prevailing perceptions surrounding drinking norms and factual information to correct misperceptions, where necessary (Haines & Barker, 2003).

- Positive messages about drinking, such as the ones below, may be provided (Haines & Barker, 2003). Cash incentives may be offered to students who have posters on display so others may see them:

- *If you drink... PACE drinking to one drink per hour or less.*
- *Most students drink moderately by keeping track of how much they drink. (Statistics on actual consumption among students are given in the poster.)*
- *Alcohol's effect on sex: Any positive effects of alcohol work only at low dose levels. Check out the drink chart and see what this means for you.*
- *If a friend gets drunk... STAY ... MONITOR. (Poster provides tips on what to do.)*

Effectiveness

Evaluation of the social norms approach has shown promising results among young people on university and college campuses. Decreases have been reported in heavy episodic consumption of alcohol, as well as in the incidence of injuries to self and others (e.g., Fabiano, 2003; Haines & Barker, 2003; Perkins & Craig, 2002).

Social norms marketing has also been adapted for use in other settings and with different target audiences. Programs have been developed to address drinking among younger groups, for example, students at the secondary school level (e.g., Haines, Barker, & Rice, 2003), who have similar misperceptions about their peers' behavior (Beck & Treiman, 1996; Thombs, Wolcott, & Farkash, 1997). Other programs focus on drugs, smoking, and sexual violence (see the Web site of the [Social Norms Resource Center](#)).

Used in combination with other harm reduction strategies, the social norms approach has been applied to promote safer streets near bars and problem areas in city centers (e.g., "Think Safe Drink Safe," 2005). There is emphasis on providing simple coping strategies that will reduce the risk for harm, as well as on reinforcing positive rather than negative perceptions. Messages that have been used include:

- *PACE: Small decision, big result. Pace your drinks and stay out of trouble.*
- *FRIENDS: Stay together, stay safe.*
- *PLAN to go out... to get home.*
- *NO: no thanks, no problem, no trouble.*
- *Think safe... Drink safe.*

While social norms interventions have shown positive results in a number of diverse settings, they also have shortcomings. Relying on harm reduction approach, social norms programs have little applicability and relevance in settings that promote an abstinence message. Although, compared to other community-based alcohol education measures, social norms marketing is relatively inexpensive, it still requires resources in terms of program development, monitoring, and evaluation. In some countries where resources are scarce, this may be difficult to achieve.

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