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Silver Anvil Awards, Case '03 5B "The Marijuana Initiative"

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Synopsis

In 2002, marijuana had become the most commonly used illicit drug among America's youth. One out of every five eighth graders used marijuana. Children were receiving treatment for marijuana more than for any other illicit drugs combined. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) responded to America's youth's increasing use of marijuana by hiring Fleishman-Hillard Incorporation to launch a pro-active, National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. The purpose of this public relations campaign was to establish an exclusive Marijuana Initiative in order to motivate parents of teenagers ages 14-16, to talk with their children about the consequences of marijuana. One of Fleishman-Hillard's biggest challenges was combating pro-marijuana messages that pervaded media. The majority of media's messages focused on the legalization of marijuana and its use as a medical treatment. Fleishman-Hillard's secondary focus therefore, was publics that influenced parents. It had to provide parents with correct information about marijuana, by primarily delivering the media with arguments against pro-marijuana messages.

The campaign was successful in reaching parents and encouraging them to seek Media Campaign information and tools to communicate with their children. The media contributed significantly in delivering a truthful message of marijuana to parents.

Analysis

Research

Fleishman-Hillard researched a multitude of publics. It conducted eight focus groups with 72 diverse parents of teens, and surveyed their awareness and education

Mary Havell, The Marijuana Initiative 2/20/04

about marijuana. These focus groups were held in Washington, DC, Chicago and St. Louis. Involving parents from rural or suburban areas in these focus groups may have been beneficial in addressing parents of teens not from major cities. Parents were questioned about their understanding of the risks of marijuana use and were asked to identify myths and misconceptions about marijuana.

Fleishman-Hillard held a series of outreach meetings with experts on marijuana to gain their knowledge about effective ways to address parents and the tools communities needed in order to reduce pro-marijuana messages. These experts included family prevention practitioners, policymakers, researchers and parenting professionals. These studies could have included teenagers to determine their knowledge of and attitude towards marijuana use. Teenagers may have indicated media they consider most influential and effective tactics parents could use to address teens. The use of more scientific sources may have also strengthened the credibility of this research. Hill and Knowlton's citing of scientific research provided the foundation of their campaign and invalidated claims made by the Natural Resources Defense Council that apples contained dangerous pesticides.

Fleishman-Hillard conducted a media content analysis in order to determine the nature of news coverage on marijuana. It found that only six percent of stories about marijuana discussed the physical and psychological risks of the drug, and the majority of stories were pro-marijuana.

Objectives

Mary Havell, The Marijuana Initiative 2/20/04

The primary objective of Fleishman-Hillard's campaign was to encourage parents of teen's ages 14-16, to obtain correct information about marijuana's risks and prevention of teen marijuana use, which would facilitate parent's pro-active approach of discussing marijuana with their children. In order to achieve this objective Fleishman-Hillard faced the challenges of reaching an unreceptive media, a skeptical parent audience, and competing with overwhelming pro-marijuana media messages. A secondary target audience was public's that influenced parents.

This objective did not meet the requirements of the SMART criteria. The objective was not measurable or specific. It was not time bound nor was there a specific budget. The objective was improvement oriented, but it did not identify a specific amount of parents it wanted to reach. Although this objective is attainable, it needed to be more specific in order to be accurately measured.

Identification of Publics

Fleishman-Hillard identified parents of teen's ages 14-16 as their primary public. Its secondary public was persons and organizations that had substantial influence over parents. This secondary public included media, physicians, educators, and ONDCP stakeholders in the prevention community, parenting groups and youth advocacy groups. Fleishman-Hillard failed to target teens who were an important asset to their campaign. Teens who had been avid marijuana users could have provided tactics and influences that encouraged them to quit using marijuana. Teens who were not marijuana users could have identified influences and parenting techniques that prevented them from using marijuana.

Mary Havell, The Marijuana Initiative 2/20/04

Public Relations Strategies and Tactics

Fleishman-Hillard had four strategies which included; using current research about marijuana to counter common myths about the drug; partnering with influential organizations to improve its credibility and expanse of the campaign; involving teens to communicate to parents and the media about the risks of marijuana use; using credible media to promote a negative message about marijuana use. The use of one-way and two-way communication techniques achieved these strategies. The media was addressed through two-way communication by means of a press conference, which included prestigious speakers and roundtables that were held in seven cities. The Marijuana Initiative partnered with two youth organizations to host Kids-To-Parents “Wake-Up Rallies in seven cities and four radio media tours were conducted to reach parents and direct them to proper resources.

A variety of one-way communication tools was included in this campaign. A Web site providing parents with information on youth marijuana use was one of the most successful tactics. Other techniques included; a pamphlet titled “Wake Up to the Risks of Marijuana”; a bilingual brochure; a Media Campaign newsletter; an online Marijuana Awareness tool kit; A VNR/B-roll provided to media nationwide and an Open Letter to parents about the risks of marijuana ran in 293 newspapers nationwide.

Evaluation

Parents were reached nationwide and responded by seeking correct resources in order to initiate conversations with their teens about the risks of marijuana use. The day following the press conference, September 18, telephone calls from parents to the

Mary Havell, The Marijuana Initiative 2/20/04

Clearinghouse increased by 375%. Visitors to the Web site increased by 66% in the following four months. The Clearinghouse responded to 179,757 telephone calls and emails during these four months. The media covered 174 stories in the two weeks following the Marijuana Initiative launch. The top 25 media markets in 40 states covered the Marijuana Initiative's message. The media's message of marijuana dramatically changed in favor of the Marijuana Initiative's message by 76% of total impressions. Fleishman-Hillard could however, have conducted extensive research to evaluate the effects of the campaign on teen marijuana users. Although parents and media were affected by the campaign, did its efforts have an impact on teens?