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COM 564
June 2, 2017

Research Critique: No Stank You Ad Campaign

Introduction

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) has contracted with a Seattle based advertising agency to create a strategic communications campaign to prevent tobacco use among teenagers. The agency created and executed the No Stank You campaign which targeted almost 900,000 young people aged 12-18 in Washington State. After the campaign was executed, the agency conducted multimodal research to provide the DOH with summative data demonstrating the campaign's effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to provide the DOH with a thorough evaluation of the research conducted by the agency and recommendations for their next meeting.

Research Analysis

NSY.com Survey: Loyalists.

The first study completed by the advertising agency was an online survey of nostankyou.com's loyal visitors, nicknamed MOB members. 408 of the 76,494 MOB members volunteered to complete an online survey which measured t-shirt popularity and effectiveness, message sharing, overall campaign awareness, and message retention.

The survey produced quantitative results which provide the appearance of formal research. While surveys are a common tool for formal research, this study does not classify as formal research. This specific survey leans more toward informal research on the research method continuum due to the purposefully selected sample of MOB members. The decision to

limit the survey to MOB members makes the results unrepresentative of the general population (low external validity), a common characteristic of informal research.

Austin and Pinkleton state that “just because a research method is informal does not mean it has no benefit of practical application” (pg. 85). That is the case with this survey which makes it appropriate for our purposes. Even though the survey does not represent the entire population of 12-18 year olds in Washington State, it does yield great information about young people engaged in the No Stank You campaign, specifically their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Survey participants included 0.5% of MOB members (408) who volunteered to take the survey. The sampling method used by the agency was a non-probability based convenience sample. Convenience survey participants consist of whomever are willing to complete the survey and had time to do so. This sampling approach presents challenges. First, visitors who were willing to participate in the survey may be more concerned with smoking than those who weren't willing to take the survey. Second, some visitors may not have noticed the call-to-action to complete the survey whereas others did. While this sampling approach may have been appropriate for polling the “loyalists” perceptions, it is ineffective at determining the perspectives of the entire target population. A better approach for that would be a stratified random sampling targeting age groups, genders, and geographies.

Overall, the questionnaire developed by the agency was well-designed and flowed logically. However, there are two concerns. First is the outlier question was “*Did you know your NO STANK YOU shirt has an anti-tobacco fact printed on the inside*”. This question does not add value unless the researcher is seeking to understand if the participant thoroughly inspected their shirt. To make this question applicable to measuring engagement, the following questions should have asked “*Which message was included?*” followed by a drop-down list of options,

then “*Did you share this message with your friends?*” with yes, no, or I don’t remember answers as options.

Second, the No Stank You campaign is an integrated marketing campaign comprised of print advertisements, television commercials, environmental graphics, and digital. The questions in the survey only discuss the television commercials, not the other elements. This limited questioning prevents the DOH from understanding the effectiveness of other media.

The survey executed is low in external validity, however, the conclusions inferred do make sense and are supported by the research findings. The survey results show that those who are actively engaged with the campaign are fully aware of the negative effects of using tobacco. I have reviewed the mathematics presented and the results appear to be accurate. Reliability, however, is questionable as the repeatability of this survey is undetermined.

The main limitation around this survey is the low external validity due to the sampling method. The results are limited to those who were fully engaged in the campaign and not representative of the entire population. This means we cannot tell if the campaign is effective outside of these 408 “loyalists”.

Street Interviews: Their world, their voice.

The second study presented by the agency were street interviews where researchers claim to have entered their world and heard their voice. The interviews were conducted in two local shopping malls and at a skate park. In total, they spoke with 31 teens to measure campaign awareness, likes/dislikes, message understanding and relevance.

The Street Interviews were an informal and qualitative study. The interviews are considered informal because like the MOB member survey, they produced results that lack generalizability. Unlike the MOB member survey that produced quantitative results, this

approach yielded qualitative data that required subjective researcher interpretations. Qualitative methods lack a standardized procedure which is a key characteristic of formal research. The procedures for this study were appropriate as they are effective at exploring attitudes, ideas and feelings, which is exactly what the researchers from the advertising agency sought to measure.

To conduct this study the researchers probably employed a mall-intercept approach and interviewed any teens who would be willing to talk to them about the subject. This approach is classified as a non-probability convenience sampling and results in data with low generalizability. Additionally, it is possible the researchers also employed snowball sampling to increase their sample size. For example, if interviewing at the skate park was difficult, researchers could ask the interviewee if one of his/her friends would be willing to be interviewed as well. This is another example of non-probability sampling. The sampling methods used in this study were appropriate as the research was exploratory and precise statistics concerning the population were not required.

The study results provided by the agency withhold many of the questions asked during the interviews. From the presentation, I assume they ask kids *what they think of the campaign spots, why they try smoking, and what could make the campaign better*. These questions seem appropriate but without seeing the entire questionnaire (if they had one), it is hard to determine if they make sense or follow a logical flow. One question that raises a red-flag while reviewing the research is “*Why DON'T we put skating in it?*” I’m not sure if this was asked to interviewees or a suggestion to the DOH. In my opinion, inserting this question detracts from the agency’s credibility as researchers.

The conclusions of this research project do make sense, but are not supported by the research findings. The agency touts that 3 in 4 kids have seen the ads, they’re entertaining and

reinforcing, and have the winning combination of humor and message. The results presentation provided lacks data to back these claims. Furthermore, the quotes explaining *what contexts teens relate to* seem to be completely unrelated to the question and instead discuss parties, running, and choirs. The conclusions that make most sense are the responses to *why and when do kids try*.

The findings of this study are unlikely to be high in external validity. The convenience and snowball sampling methods used make it impossible to scientifically determine how the results represent the entire population of 12-18 year olds in Washington State. Considering this, I would determine these findings to be accurate as qualitative research by nature is typically less precise and relies on interpretations made by researchers. While accurate, I determine the findings are unreliable as it would be hard to replicate these findings when interviewing a new set of interviewees in different geographies.

While there are many benefits for choosing this method – low cost, flexibility, adaptability – there are also significant limitations. The primary limitation is results that are low in external validity. The snowball sample method for example, may result in an abundance of like-minded participants giving the same answer and skewing results. Another limitation is bias, both being introduced during the interview as well as while interpreting the results.

Friendship Circles: Social dynamics.

The third study completed by the agency were Friendship Circles, a clever name for focus groups. The agency conducted six focus groups in three markets – South Seattle, Spokane, and Yakima – and included a total of 33 participants. Each group was comprised of 4-7 participants who were considered close friends. Unlike the previous studies, these focus groups targeted triers and kids with high-risks of trying tobacco. The purpose of this research was to

identify compelling messages, explore their daily lives, contexts, stresses, curiosity, and finally, evaluate the creative components of the campaign.

Focus groups are a type of informal research. Formal research requires a structured process and large sample size to yield results high in external validity. While some focus groups may be structured in terms of questions, researchers may often vary their approach to different participants and focus on some participants answers more than others (pg. 89). Results from focus groups can be classified as qualitative, as is the case here. Once the study is completed, research professionals and their clients attempt to gain key insights and draw meaning out of the participants' comments (pg. 89). As with most qualitative data, the insights gained are subject to the abilities of the researcher and are at risk of bias.

As the purpose of this study was to explore the daily lives, contexts, and stresses of teens in Washington State, the procedures used in this study do seem appropriate. Focus groups are valuable for measuring the behaviors of groups, their thoughts, opinions and feelings. Instead of simply checking a box on a survey, this method of study allows researchers to dig into participant responses and understand them on a deeper level.

It is likely that the agency used non-probability based convenience and snowball sampling methods. Due to the limited information provided by the agency concerning sampling, I assume that the researchers connected with willing participants in each market and then asked them to invite friends who would also be interested in participating. Austin and Pinkleton state that (focus group) participants usually share similarities with respect to key characteristics such as age, gender, product usage, political party affiliation, or any other deemed important by a project's sponsor (pg. 88). Considering this, the sampling method does seem appropriate. However, the focus group size should be scrutinized as Austin and Pinkleton suggest a sample

size of 6-12 participants. The agency reports that the Friendship Circles they studied were comprised of 4-7 participants, which seems too small to create conclusive results.

The agency did not specifically share the questionnaire used in the Friendship Circles and instead shares only results which are comingled with the online anonymity focus groups. It could be that the researchers simply asked generic questions such as, *Tell me about your daily life* or *What do you do in your free time*. This approach could be considered okay, however the omission of a detailed transcript of questions asked takes away from their credibility and makes it harder to create strong inferences.

Due to the sample method and small group size used when conducting focus groups the results are low in external validity. This does not mean the data and results created are not accurate or reliable. Since the answers provided were sourced directly from the target demographic and reflect their thoughts, opinions, and feelings, they can be considered accurate. They can also be considered reliable as results from the online focus groups conducted also reinforce these opinions.

While focus groups can allow researchers to understand target audience members at a much deeper level than a standardized survey, there are limitations to this method. First and foremost is the inability to produce data that is high in external validity. Regardless of focus group size, this will be unachievable. Second, there is a high probability for researchers to insert their bias without even knowing. For example, the Friendship Circles focused solely on why teens think tobacco is bad. This line of questioning could have forced participants to give inaccurate answers, especially if they do use tobacco. Finally, focus groups can often be dominated by extroverted participants who love to talk and share their thoughts and opinions.

These participants may receive the bulk of the researcher's attention and discourage other participants from sharing freely.

Online Groups: Anonymity.

The final research study completed by the agency were online focus groups. This method was like the Friendship Circles discussed previously, however the online component created a sense on anonymity to encourage open sharing. The purpose of this research was to identify compelling messages, explore their daily lives, contexts, stresses, curiosity, and finally, evaluate the creative components of the campaign. The study totaled eight online group sessions with participants from across Washington State. Since there was thorough exploration of the focus group concept in the previous study analysis, the following will be primarily research analysis.

Like the previous focus groups, the online groups are also considered in-formal research. However, it is worth noting that due to the nature of using a survey, the online groups included more structure. The results presented include both qualitative and quantitative data, although the quantitative data shared is limited to demographic information of the participants. The procedure seems appropriate and makes sense considering the purpose of this project. Teens are highly susceptible to peer pressure, so the use of online focus groups provide anonymity which allows them to provide more forthright and reliable answers.

As this is a focus group it is easy to identify that a non-probability based sampling method was used. However, it is difficult to determine how participants were selected. It is possible that MOB members were selected after completing the first survey or even those who requested a free t-shirt were chosen randomly. I suspect that a purposive sampling method was used to select participants who both fall within the 12-15-year-old demographic and have tried or at high risk of trying tobacco.

As with the Friendship Circles, the agency did not specifically share the questionnaire used in their research. As this study was completed online it would be safe to assume that this content would be easy to present to the DOH along with the participants' responses. There are two instances when it appears the agency does share the questions used in the online focus groups. On page 24 and 25 of the results they ask *Why kids DON'T smoke?* and *Why do you think kids smoke? What is good about it?* These questions are followed by checkboxes for the participants. I don't think these questions are worded well and could be considered biased. More appropriately worded questions could be *Why do teens choose not to use tobacco?* and *Why do teens choose to use tobacco.*

The conclusions of the research project do make sense and are supported by the research. The study provided quoted responses from participants directly backing up their conclusions. However, they are not likely to be high in external validity. As with before, this does not mean the data and results created are not accurate or reliable. Since the answers provided were sourced directly from the target demographic and reflect their thoughts, opinions, and feelings, they can be considered accurate and reliable.

The online focus group shared some the same limitations as the Friendship Circles – low external validity and the potential to insert bias. However, the decision to host these online also reduced some limitations such as group-think and a reluctance to share. At the same time, being online also presented new limitations such as the inability to confirm participant identities and the potential for participants to withdraw from the discussion due to internet service failures. It is also worth noting that while Washington State does have internet access in most households, a potential bias towards high income participants remains.

Ethical Concerns

The primary ethical concern with the research conducted by the agency lies within the age of the participants. When children or minors (<18 years of age in many states) are involved in research, the regulations require the assent of the child or minor and the permission of the parent(s), in place of the consent of the subjects (<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/assent.htm>). None of the documentation provided by the agency discuss the methodology or efforts used to gain assent from participants or permission from parents or legal guardians. The DOH should request documentation to make sure that proper protocols were followed and minor's privacy and rights were not compromised.

Conclusion and recommendations

The studies completed by the advertising agency that created the No Stank You campaign infer that the campaign was successful in all areas. They found that among young people aged 12-18 there is great awareness of the campaign, the message choice is successful and resonates, and the media choices communicated the messages effectively. The qualitative and quantitative data is relatively accurate and reliable and supports these claims. However, the informal research procedures and non-probability sampling methods chosen for these studies lack external validity which means their findings may not be applicable to the greater population.

I recommend the Washington State Department of Health invest in more research before making changes to the campaign. Specifically, they should use a probability based survey with a random stratified sampling method. This method is generalizable and will also allow them to divide the target population by age group and identify commonalities and differences. While this technique is more expensive than the focus groups and surveys conducted by the agency, it will be less expensive than changing the campaign creative or distribution channels.

REFERENCES

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