

Chapter 2

Using Social Media to Cultivate Positive Community Norms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the use of social media in health risk prevention campaigns. According to the Positive Community Norms (PCN) framework, prevention is defined as the process of proactively cultivating positive cultures through transformational leadership, communications, and an integrated portfolio of strategies. This chapter focuses on social media strategies. We review two extant prevention models (Everett Rogers's framework and the PCN framework), examine underlying theoretical explanations for consumer behaviors related to prevention and the use of social media, provide three brief case studies of prevention campaigns at various stages of maturity and success, and offer caveats for campaign managers who might be considering using social media to reach out to audiences. We intend this material to prove beneficial for researchers, public policymakers, and managers of prevention campaigns.

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INTRODUCTION

Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) is defined as “investigations that are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strive to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands, potentialities, and effects of consumption” (Mick, 2006, p. 2). Prevention of health risk behavior is an area in which TCR can be applied on both academic and practical levels. Prevention has many definitions. According to the Positive Community Norms (PCN) framework, prevention is defined as the process of proactively cultivating positive cultures through transformational leadership, communications, and an integrated portfolio of health-promotion strategies (Linkenbach & Otto, 2009). For example, by correcting misperceptions of norms related to binge drinking, by promoting healthy body image, or by normalizing safe cell phone use/non-use while driving, norms can be impacted in a positive manner.

Social media provide a set of key tools that TCR strategists can use to achieve their goals, such as prevention of health and safety risks. In the era of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogger, and other social media platforms, people have the ability to cultivate positive cultures—teaching and learning, supporting and critiquing each other—irrespective of traditional boundaries, such as geography and sociocultural status. Word-of-mouth communication has exploded in the Internet era (Dellarocas, 2003), and has caused a paradigm shift in the way that people interact with each other, both as individuals, and as agents of larger entities (e.g., brands, clubs, schools, causes) that they feel a part of (Austin, Zinkhan, & Song, 2007). As such, social media are ideal platforms for nonprofit organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community-based businesses to conduct TCR, and develop and distribute health risk prevention materials.

Successful prevention campaigns have been “investigator-driven, theory-based, focused on changing a target behavior, and replicated with fidelity over time” (Rotherham-Borus & Duan, 2003, p. 518). By emphasizing the relative advantages of engaging in desired behaviors, using up-to-date, factual messages that do not overstate their claims, and selecting social media outlets that enhance the message and the audience’s preferences, prevention campaigns can see gradual changes in audience behaviors, though it often takes considerable time to see such results (Rogers, 2002).

This chapter takes an in-depth look at how social media can be used in prevention campaigns to help positively transform consumer behavior. We examine, in detail, a strategic framework for diffusing preventive innovations that Everett Rogers outlined in 2002. Rogers called for leveraging peer networks to change norms and perceptions about prevention innovations in order to achieve change (Rogers, 2002). Using data from existing prevention campaigns, we analyze how Rogers’s recommendations have been applied over the past decade within the emerging social media paradigm.

Although we find it to be a powerful tool, Rogers’s framework does not specifically address social ecology, which renders it less useful than it could otherwise be. Social ecology theory seeks to explain people’s behavior in terms of an “ecology” of forces at the individual, social, political, cultural, and other levels, rather than simply at the individual level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, in this chapter, we supplement Rogers’s recommendations with similar proposals from the PCN model of social transformation (MOST of Us, 2010), which strives to account for the myriad influences on individual and collective behaviors within populations. We also identify consumer behavior theories that underlie both Rogers’s and the PCN model, in order to create

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