

# Researchers find mass media campaigns useful

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Two University of Kentucky researchers from the department of communication in the UK College of Communications and Information Studies have learned that targeted mass media campaigns alone can be effective in convincing high sensation-seeking, impulsive decision-making young adults to adopt safer sex practices.

Past public health campaigns, particularly those promoting healthy behaviors, were rarely successful unless associated with other interventions. But this study, which was funded from the National Institute of Mental Health, indicates that mass media campaigns can be successful alone, at least in the short-term.

“This study’s findings suggest what we have long suspected and what other smaller studies have found: that mass media campaigns crafted from sophisticated design principles can be effective in changing health behaviors, at least in the short-term, and that a reoccurring campaign presence may be necessary to sustain these safe behaviors,” said UK professor Rick Zimmerman, lead researcher of the study and a center director in Louisville, Ky. for the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE). Philip Palmgreen, professor of communication at UK, was the co-principal investigator on the study.

“The implications from this study are valuable for the public health community because it shows that when used properly, media alone can have significant, positive impacts on health-related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors,” Palmgreen said.

The 21-month-long study assessed the impact of a televised public service announcement (PSA) campaign on changing safer sex beliefs and behaviors. Specifically, the study found that the campaign effectively increased condom use among high-risk young adults, on average, by 13 percent.

Similar effects were found on intentions to use condoms in the future and in perceived ability to use condoms. Impact analysis suggests that the campaign may have resulted in 181,224 fewer occasions of unprotected sex among the targeted population than would have normally occurred without exposure to the PSAs.

The study compared the effects of the campaign that aired on television over a three-month period targeting high sensation-seeking, impulsive decision-making young adults in Lexington, Ky. with an identical group in Knoxville, Tenn., not exposed to a campaign. Both are moderate-sized cities with similar demographics.

“High sensation-seekers and impulsive decision-makers were surveyed for the study because of their proclivity for engaging in risky behaviors. The characteristics of high-sensation-value messages provide practitioners with useful guidelines for developing effective and persuasive health-related messages and placing them in appropriate channels,” said Zimmerman.

Source: University of Kentucky

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