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Assessment & Audience Utilization of Hong Kong's Anti-Drug APIs

Commissioned by Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN)

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D) Project Procedure

The project procedure involved several steps. First was the collection and analysis of the 20 APIs produced between 1987 and 1997 (see Appendix I: List of Anti-Drug APIs, 1987-1997). Next, the APIs were grouped according to their primary persuasive strategies for screening to the focus group participants and inclusion in the CD-ROM educational game. The group of 20 APIs was narrowed to 13 in the interests of time and project relevance (see Appendix II: List of Anti-Drug APIs Used in Focus Group Interviews). Focus groups were formed for each of three target audience segments, and participant profile questionnaires administered (see Appendix III: Interviewees' Profile Questionnaire; and, Appendix IV: Results of Interviewees' Profile Questionnaires). Focus groups were conducted by screening the APIs in chronological order within each persuasive strategy category. After each API was screened, participants filled out brief questionnaires on their memory of the example and its general impact and effect. When all APIs had been screened, a group discussion was conducted to follow up on questionnaire answers and ascertain more in-depth views of the participants. The findings of the focus group interviews were analyzed and compiled into a report including recommendations for the direction of future APIs. Finally, a CD-ROM educational game was produced which incorporates the full APIs, instruction on the persuasive strategies used, and an interactive component allowing users to produce their own anti-drug messages.

E) Strategy Analysis, Focus Group, and CD-ROM Report

This report represents separate discussions on the following components of the project;

1. The analysis and categorization of API persuasive strategies and creative formats;
2. The design, procedure, and findings of the focus group interviews and questionnaires;
3. The recommendations for future APIs; and
4. The design, assessment, and implementation of the CD-ROM game.

F) Executive Summary of the Findings

1) Summary of Analysis of Persuasive Strategies & Creative Formats Findings

a) *Persuasive Techniques*

As a group, these anti-drug APIs represent a wide range of persuasive approaches, with most focus placed on two primary groups, one emphasizing hope and togetherness in keeping a drug-free lifestyle and society, and one using arguments about the negative influence of drugs on a person's life, focusing on bad things (like a car accident or a loss of personal control) that can happen when a person takes drugs. As a whole there is more use of the negative

image approach, which is warranted given that the primary target audience is people actually at risk of using drugs.

Within these two basic approaches, six sub-categories were identified. They are: appeals to parental duty and guilt urging parents to help their children avoid drugs, appeals to hope and togetherness using music and depicting a happy and fulfilling drug-free lifestyle, appeals focusing on peer pressure and the intelligent choice of resisting it, cause-effect arguments showing drug use and its effects, fear appeals focusing on severe negative outcomes of drug use, and testimonial appeal featuring real people discussing their experiences with drugs.

This group of APIs makes limited use of messages that indicate reasons why people might use drugs and offering ways of (or reasons for) refusing these temptations. Peer pressure, lack of supervision, curiosity and boredom are mentioned as reasons teens might try drugs. As a whole there is more emphasis on the negative outcomes of drugs and the positive life that can be lived without drugs rather than on the difficult period of temptation when a person might consider drug use. Focus on the sources of temptation is one possibility for further emphasis.

The focus on parents as a target audience is frequent and includes a number of different appeals. While a large percentage of these APIs focus primarily on parents as the target audience, few give parents concrete suggestions for what to say or do, mostly the simple suggestion that parents talk to kids about drugs. Even the very graphic depiction entitled "Overdose," showing a young boy going to the hospital on a stretcher, focuses mainly on the negative effect and fear of what drugs can do. It tells parents to talk to their kids about drugs before it is too late, and in dialogue suggests that parents need to spend more time with their kids. Additional specific suggestions like this one indicating specifically what parents (or others such as friends) should do and how they should talk to their kids about drugs would be another area on which further emphasis could be placed.

b) *Creative Formats*

Two central creative strategies were presented and used in a variety of ways. The more common of these, and the one employed in the greatest variety of announcements, was the montage, a sequence of images used to create an impression or story without characters or dialogue. It was effectively combined with music, live action, still images, positive and negative messages, and a wide range of persuasive appeals. The second creative strategy, enactment, involved the creation of a story using narrative enactment of a short scene, usually using characters and dialogue. Enactment was used less frequently, and usually in announcements depicting the negative effects of drugs on a person's life. Enactment and montage were combined with each other in several examples.

2) **Summary of Focus Group Post-Screening Questionnaire Findings** (see Appendix V: Focus Group Post-Screening Questionnaire, Chinese and English Versions, and Appendix VI: Results of Focus Group Post-Screening Questionnaires, and Appendix VII: Graphs of Focus Group Post-Screening Questionnaires Results)

a) *Memorability and Clarity*

According to the responses on the Focus Group Post-Screening Questionnaires, relative to other APIs screened during the focus group interviews the most memorable APIs were

“Overdose” (‘93), “Youth” (‘94), “Heart to Heart” (‘97) and “Treatment” (‘91), followed closely by “Video Game” (‘96). Notably, the categories of fear appeals and positive musical appeals to hope and togetherness were not represented among these most memorable examples. Of these four most memorable examples, each was in a different persuasive category, so that four categories were represented among the four most memorable examples. “Parental Care” was rated as the least memorable example, with 60% of the participants having no memory of it at all. At least 50% of participants reported some memory for each of the other examples screened. “Join Force” (‘95) was among the least memorable.

In clarity of audience understanding, the top five choices were nearly the same as for memorability. The four best understood were “Overdose” (‘93), “Youth” (‘94), “Blue Collar” (‘92), and “Treatment” (‘91), followed closely by “Heart to Heart” (‘97) and “Parental Negligence” (‘87-88). Again the choices span several categories as well as a representing a wide time span for production (older examples as well as newer ones were selected as clear). All of the examples were rated as basically clear with the exception of “Join Force,” for which 80% of participants marked responses other than “yes” for clarity.

b) *Effectiveness*

According to the responses on the Post-Screening Focus Group Questionnaires, the participants in all three groups found agreement on two key points. First, the single testimonial example among the APIs screened, “Heart to Heart” (‘97) was perceived as the most effective in changing attitudes and persuading audience members that using drugs is a bad idea. “Heart to Heart” was the only example rated as “likely to change attitudes” about drug use by over 50% of respondents. (It was also among the four most memorable examples). Second, the cause-effect approach was judged to be very effective in changing attitudes about drugs. “Treatment” (‘91) and “Blue Collar” (‘92) were standouts in this category. The high rating for perceived effectiveness here is probably due to the clear logic, frequent use of overt visual contrasts, and the straightforward message that drugs are harmful in many ways.

Very little distaste for the API messages was noted, with “Join Force” at the highest level of distaste at only 30%. “Join Force” was also rated lowest in terms of potential to change attitudes about drug use, but again with only at 40% of respondents saying it would result in “no change in attitude.”

3) **Summary of Focus Group Findings** (see also Summary of Individual Focus Group Interviews)

a) *Memorability and Clarity*

In general there was better memorability of the examples that had narrative enactments combined with graphic images of negative drug-use outcomes. The standout among these was the image of the boy on a stretcher (“Overdose”) being loaded into an ambulance. Nearly all participants in all three groups reported remembering this API, and several commented that realistic depictions like this were very useful in attracting viewer attention to the anti-drug message. Respondents remembered the helpful friend in “Youth” and the first-hand message of past drug use in “Heart to Heart.”

As noted above, the basic level of perceived clarity for all of the APIs screened was quite high. There were some comments related to the potential for misinterpretation of examples using metaphors to convey their messages (both "Mousetrap" and "Video Game"), although one respondent also found "Mouse Trap" thought-provoking. These examples elicited the most negative comments of all the examples screened. However, the comments were contradicted by the numerical ratings on the questionnaires. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that participants did not find the metaphoric examples difficult to understand themselves, but they were concerned that other viewers might find the messages vague or easy to reject. Some participants felt strongly that these examples might be vague and ambiguous to some viewers. One group expressed concern that the message could easily be ignored by rebellious teens, and another commented that teens who have a feeling of invincibility might also ignore the message. The suggestion was made that this example might become clearer as the viewer had more time to think about its content or an opportunity to view it numerous times.

Some respondents mentioned that the use of hotline numbers was important, but that more repetition might be useful in helping viewers to remember the numbers. The additional suggestion was made that along with the hotline numbers, mention be made that "all conversations are confidential" as a means of encouraging hesitant or fearful viewers to make the call.

b) *Effectiveness*

There was significant positive response to each API category screened: participants agreed with the targeting of parents and young people, the use of negative and positive imagery, the references to peer influence, and the attempts to relate drug use to experiences that are familiar to teenagers.

i) Parental Duty and Guilt

Participants in every group questioned the potential effectiveness of APIs targeted at parents compared to the potential effectiveness of APIs targeted at other groups. An extreme comment in this area was "parents will never get to see these APIs because they are too busy earning money." Some participants also worried that even if parents did see the announcements, they still would not discuss them with their kids, particularly for children (and parents) who are in the highest at-risk groups for drug use. Although some of the comments related to parents were not directly relevant to the content of APIs, it is important to note that among these at-risk target groups there was some doubt about the effectiveness and influence of some real-world parents. This might suggest that future APIs could be targeted specifically to teens for whom a lack of parent-child communication is a problem, suggesting hope or alternative sources of strength and support for those troubled teens.

Along with the skeptical comments about the potential usefulness for some parents, several participants were also upbeat about the emphasis of parent-child communication as an important element in keeping teens away from drugs.

ii) Hope and Togetherness (musical)

In general the participants saw value in the up-beat examples that made use of montage and music to convey a happy feeling of group cohesiveness and hope. They also found these messages may be more appropriate for younger viewers, but may not be particularly well targeted at the most at-risk teens.

Some participants felt that anti-drug API messages were especially important in communicating with pre-teen children, and encouraged the production of APIs directed at the very young to establish values and attitudes that could be kept and built upon over the long term. Some participants mentioned that using entertainment stars or animated characters urging viewers to stay away from drugs might be additional ways to capture the attention and admiration of youthful audiences, and the need for realism was emphasized for older viewers.

iii) Peer Influence/ Appeal to Intelligence

“Peer Influence” was judged to be an important cause of drug use among young people, and the reality of peer pressure to use drugs was affirmed by the participants. One participant commented that “your friends take drugs and then you take them too. At the beginning you try a little bit, and then more and more.” Thus, the examples that mentioned peer influence as a reason for doing drugs were appreciated. There was some appreciation of the positive portrayal of the strong friend who could a young person stay away from drugs, but also some sad recognition that this scenario (“Youth”) might be ideal rather than typical. An extreme comment in this direction was that “if someone acted like that he would be beaten up by the bad guys.” Some participants thought that strong and positive role models such as the friend depicted in “Youth” might be incorporated in other ways or used more frequently. One suggestion was the use of entertainers who are former addicts talking about their mistakes and their regrets. There was some interest in seeing additional depictions of what one participant called “honest and righteous friends” helping teens in times of need, such as the true story of how someone’s friend saved them from drugs.

In general, participants, particular the ex-addicts, looked for a bit more sympathy toward drug users including more focus on why people take drugs (peer pressure, problems, curiosity, boredom), and corresponding answers as to how these factors can be resisted or overcome, along the lines of the approach that says drugs may seem like a way to escape or solve your problems, but are not (similar to “Mousetrap”). The APIs were found strong in displaying information and some experiences that the at-risk viewer may identify with, but less strong in providing helpful suggestions about how to change or help someone else change. There was a general recognition that support is one way to stay away from drug use, and some suggestion that APIs should more often reflect or suggest support options for teens including parents, friends, and crisis hotlines.

iv) Cause-Effect

Respondents were positive about the inclusion of some messages that were down-beat, showing negative effects of drug use. “Treatment” and “Blue Collar” were found most realistic and effective. Respondents clearly saw a need for graphic images depicting damaging effects of drug use. A fairly common response to the overall group of examples screened was that they could be even more specific, detailed, and graphic in their representation of the negatives of drug use. In particular, health effects such as brain damage were mentioned as one area in which further specificity could be given to scare young people away from drug use. For this reason examples that did show health effects and damages to a person’s status and lifestyle were praised as potentially effective. Typical responses in this direction were similar to “taking drugs can ruin a person’s life. The outcomes should be exaggerated to frighten people.” In other words, the participants were not put off by portrayals that emphasized cause-effect reasoning and fear appeals showing negative effects. Rather, they found this approach well targeted and useful in reminding viewers of the

damages caused by drug use, and they preferred the graphic depiction of realistic effects (loss of health and lifestyle) rather than unusual effects (such as a car accident caused by drug use in "Refuse Drugs").

v) Fear

"Mandrax" was judged to be the more effective of the two examples in this category by all three groups. "Mandrax" utilizes an enactment montage showing a young girl out on the street late at night after using drugs, while her parents wait anxiously for her to return home. Thus, this example tells a realistic enactment story and is similar in style to the most highly appreciated examples in other categories such as "Overdose" and "Youth."

In contrast, the second example in this category, "Video Game" was perceived as less effective, in part because participants feared that it was not graphic enough to scare teens aware from their feeling that drugs would be fun rather than harmful. The discussion on this category support the general finding that more graphic examples were appreciated over less graphic ones, enactment approaches over other creative formats. In spite of some hesitations about "Video Game," participants generally agreed with its central message.

vi) Testimonial

Members of all three groups rated "Heart to Heart" as very effective both for current users and for potential users. Its mixture of emphasis on the negative consequences of drug use along with the hard-hitting and realistic first-hand accounts was highly rated. One participant commented that "one man's experience can provide a good lesson for others."

4) Audience Utilization of Findings: CD-ROM Implementation

The findings from the analysis of persuasive strategies and creative formats of the APIs and from the focus group interviews was utilized in designing and creating a CD-ROM educational game for teenagers. The CD-ROM presents the categories of persuasive strategy of APIs along with basic information on drugs and drug use. It allows the user to learn interactively, either creating their own strategy or by selecting a category of strategy, learning about its functioning, and viewing the APIs under that category. It includes an interactive game that provides users with guidance and an opportunity to create their own anti-drug messages with visuals and written dialogue. The user can print out their final anti-drug message to keep or to send to ACAN using the address provided.