

Study dissects anti-smoking campaigns' effect on teens

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Don't underestimate teenagers and expect them to throw away cigarettes just because adults tell them to.

On the other hand, if the message is right, and is delivered by a peer, they are likely to kick the habit.

So says Cornelia Pechmann, professor of marketing at UC Irvine's Graduate School of Management, and her studies of anti-smoking campaigns aimed at teenagers.

"I never got hooked when I was a teenager because my mother kept catching me and kept on grounding me," Pechmann said.

"But it's not like that anymore, nowadays we rely on massive prevention campaigns instead," she said.

Pechmann conducted her latest study together with Ellen Thomas Reibling, director of the Health Education Center at UCI.

The study is published in the latest issue of the quarterly publication *Tobacco Control* and comes out just as states rev up for new anti-smoking campaigns financed by settlement money from the tobacco companies.

"The tobacco settlement money means that everybody has money for anti-smoking campaigns and that there will be money available on a consistent basis," Pechmann said.

In the study, Pechmann and Reibling looked at anti-smoking campaigns in five states — Vermont, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Arizona and California — and Canada.

They compared the campaigns with regional smoking data and concluded which campaigns were most successful in lowering the number of teenagers who smoke.

Campaigns that informed on the dangers of second hand smoke hit the proverbial nerve.

"Teenagers are very environmentally conscious and the idea that smoking hurts innocent people proved to be very upsetting," Pechmann said.

Playing on peer pressure is another effective anti-smoking strategy.

"Teenagers seem to take it seriously if they are convinced that their friends will be disappointed in them if they start smoking," Pechmann said.

What does not work however, is messages talking about illness related to smoking.

Getting sick from smoking is simply not relevant to a teenager and they plan on smoking for a few years or so, not a whole life, which renders the issue of cancer and other diseases moot, according to Pechmann.

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And don't even bother with the bad breath.

"Kids know they can use sprays and gums," Pechmann said.

The researchers also found that a 13-year-old responds to the same messages as a 19-year-old does — something Pechmann is grateful for.

"It would get hopelessly complicated if we had to send different messages to each teenage age group," Pechmann noted.

She also pointed out that good campaigns aren't

necessarily the most expensive ones.

Vermont had the best campaign of all in the study, and they spent a mere 30 cents per capita.

California was a close second: 36 cents per capita.

Even though California's campaign focused on the dangers of second hand smoke, and used spokespeople teenagers could relate to, the initial effects generated by the campaigns could not be sustained because of budget cuts, the study concluded.

Results achieved by using the right message, delivered by the right per-

son, will still only be temporary, if the campaign is discontinued.

"You have to choose one message, and stick with it, repeat it over and over again, and keep the campaign going, essentially forever, because you have children becoming teenagers every day," Pechmann said.

She is currently in the process of acquiring funding to study how advertisements that attack tobacco companies fare with teenagers.

Previous studies have gone both ways, Pechmann said.