



## **The Mall Intercept: A Social Norms Marketing Research Tool**

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“Conduct market research early and often!” is a good rule to follow for those using social marketing techniques to model and promote the positive and protective social norms of a population. Market research is essentially a way of *listening to*—i.e., of gathering data both *from* and *about*—a target population. Listening to the target population and obtaining regular feedback about student reactions to social norms marketing media can be used to prevent habituation because it provides the feedback necessary to make campaign adjustments that will ensure effectiveness.

### **Types of Market Research**

Alan Andreasen has noted, "Good social marketers begin by saying: I need to know everything I can about those whom I am supposed to influence (Andreasen, 1995, p. 76)." The terms *formative* and *pretest* are often given to the kind of market research conducted *before* a project is implemented. The use of focus groups to pilot test messages and media for clarity of meaning and appeal is a well-known instance of formative research used in social norms projects. Research conducted *during* project

implementation is frequently called *process* or *monitoring* research, and it is generally used "to find out how projects are going so they can be fine-tuned to improve efficiency and effectiveness (Andreasen, 1995, p. 98)." This article will discuss one method of conducting process or monitoring research, and demonstrate the kind of rich and important information that it can yield to project staff.

### **The Mall Intercept**

Unfortunately, the kind of process research conducted in social norms projects is sometimes fairly limited in scope, generating data only about the total number of sessions conducted and students present, the number of handouts printed, the number of posters displayed, etc. While this information is certainly important to document, social norms projects should not overlook the need to gather—as often as possible—data and feedback from the target population about its exposure to, and understanding of, the normative messages it disseminates.

One way to do this is by periodically conducting mall intercepts. Technically speaking, a mall intercept is a method of data collection frequently used by marketers in which an interviewer at a shopping mall intercepts a sample of those passing by to ask if they would be willing to participate in a brief research study. Passersby who agree are either interviewed on the spot or taken to an interviewing facility that has been set up elsewhere in the mall. It is important to note, however, that the mall intercept is *not* just a survey as this term is commonly understood. In fact, it is brief dialogue between the interviewer and the participant. Thus, the intercept process allows for both *quantitative* data collection and the ability to *qualitatively* hear what respondents have to say about the

media. While the intercept does collect some yes/no or fill-in-the-blank responses, if properly designed and conducted it can also capture what—in *their own language*—respondents think or feel about the media

Clearly, a mall intercept is a kind of *convenience sampling*, i.e., potential respondents are not necessarily selected at random and may therefore not be representative of the target population. Nevertheless, mall intercepts provide a relatively quick and economical way to do sampling, especially of hard to reach segments of a population, and their results can be triangulated with other data. Adapted for use in social norms projects, they are commonly conducted in high traffic areas, such as a student union, the lobby of a building, or a school cafeteria. Frequently, a small incentive is offered to bolster participation. To minimize the inconvenience and the personal "cost" to respondents, the intercept should be kept as brief as possible.

### **A Case Example**

One campus that uses mall intercepts to monitor and improve their social norms campaign is Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Several hundred mall intercepts are routinely collected at VCU both at the beginning and end of each semester. At VCU student volunteers, such as peer educators or service-learning students, are trained in the mall intercept technique. An intercept form is constructed in order to standardize questions and to speed data collection. After training, the volunteers are sent out with a clip-board, intercept forms and a bag filled with small, easy to carry gifts such as sugar-free gum or granola bars. Volunteers note the date and location of the survey on the form. Students on campus are approached and ask if they would be willing to answer a few

brief optional and anonymous questions in return for a small prize. When the person agrees, the interviewer quickly notes that person's gender and race and then asks their class standing (fresh, sophomore, etc). In this way, the demographic questions are collected in a few seconds and the need to ask the gender and race questions verbally is eliminated, leaving more time for other responses.

The following brief questions were asked in a mall intercept conducted at VCU in November 2002 to assess critical aspects of students' exposure to and understanding of the alcohol norm messages being disseminated.

This semester, have you seen any media campaigns related to the health of VCU students and/or their alcohol use? YES NO

If yes, where did you see them? (a brief check list was provided to speed data collection)

What was the message? \_\_\_\_\_

How often did you see the message? Daily Weekly Rarely

What did you think about them? \_\_\_\_\_

Your gender? Male/Female Race? \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live? On-campus/Off-campus Your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your class standing? Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Grad Student

A total of 368 intercept surveys were conducted. The questions include four that were asked of the 309 students (84%) who responded that they had seen an alcohol-related media campaign at VCU.

Simple though it was, this very brief survey provided a wealth of information to project staff about the extent of students' awareness and grasp of the campaign. The following data, for example, reveal that nearly 80% of the students surveyed could either quote the campaign's main message verbatim or understood its intent. These are very

high figures, and they strongly suggest that the fundamental message of this campaign was both understandable and clearly presented. Had these figures been lower—and had the "did not get the message at all" figure been substantially higher—project staff, alerted to the existence of a serious problem, could have taken remedial action. In our experience, messages and media that test well in a series of focus groups can, and sometimes do, seriously backfire when they reach the general population. The only way to know for sure, of course, is to monitor this by conducting market research!

The figures obtained from the intercept interviews were as follows:

What was the message?

Could quote the message verbatim	46%
Understood message intent, but not verbatim	31%
Confused message with smoking prevention	4%
Mixed up words/intent, but had seen adds	9%
Did not get message at all	3%

Something else that a project should assess is the frequency of exposure, i.e., how often the target population is encountering the message(s). While frequent exposure is generally desirable, overexposure is probably not, as it can result in habituation (*Ed: see this issues Feature Article for a discussion of this point.*) At VCU, for example, just over 50% of the students surveyed reported seeing a campaign message on a daily basis, a figure that suggests substantial, but not overwhelming, saturation. Had this figure been higher, however, and if the other data collected (see below) suggested a large negative reaction to the campaign, project staff would have had a pretty good indication that

something was amiss. The fact that 57% of VCU respondents reported actually liking the campaign, with an additional 14% indicating basic indifference (not bad, not good), suggests that the campaign was generally well received and that the level of exposure was not annoying or otherwise antagonizing the population.

The data collected regarding frequency of exposure were as follows:

**How often did you see the message?**

Daily	54%
Weekly	34%
Rarely	13%

In addition, data was collected assessing students' reactions to the campaign.

**What did you think about the message?**

Positive: Like the campaign	57%
Indifferent: Don't care one way or another	14%
Didn't believe it	24%
Didn't like the style of the campaign	4%

**Assessing Location and Channel of Exposure**

Finally, it is critically important to know which locations and channels are most effective. Some types of media are extremely expensive to produce and place, and if they are not resulting in substantial exposure, staff will undoubtedly want to allocate those resources elsewhere. The data generated by the simple question "Where did you see the messages?" confirmed what was found in a previous social norms project at VCU: that

"the cheapest interventions had the greatest impact on recall (Hancock and Henry, 2003, p.141)." Posters (in a number of various locations) and table tents, which are both relatively inexpensive and flexible, were clearly superior to all other channels. By contrast, T-shirts, cups, and pencils, which are relatively costly and inflexible channels, scored quite low, suggesting that they might not be the best investments of staff time and project funds.

Table 1 summarizes data obtained on the location of media and the channels used to disseminate it.

**Table 1: Percent of Students' who Saw Media in Various Locations and Channels of Exposure**

Checked location and type of item recalled	Total exceeds 100: multiple sites noted
<b>Posters</b>	22%
Residence halls	61%
Classrooms and building hallways	8%
Bus stop	6.0%
Commons	3%
Siegel Center (Gymnasium)	7%
Parking decks	
<b>Promotional Items</b>	
T-shirts	4%
Cups	1%
Pencils	1%
<b>Other</b>	
Table tents	9%
Mail box - Health updates	1%
Banner	5%
VCU 101 (Orientation Class)	1%
Student Health	1%
Sit TV	4%

### **Benefits of intercept interviews**

As previously noted, mall intercepts provide a relatively quick and economical way to sample a population. In contrast to standard methodologies, such as pencil-and-paper or

even web-based surveys, mall intercepts are also extremely flexible; that is, they can be readily adapted to swiftly research almost any questions that emerge during the course of a project. For example, in one wave of intercepts conducted at VCU two additional questions were asked:

- Who are the people putting out the campaign?
- What do you think about the people putting out the campaign?

These questions were designed to gauge students' awareness of the *source* of the normative messages, as well as their perception of the *motive* behind the campaign. That 80% of students surveyed knew that the source was the VCU Office of Student Health, and that an equal percentage thought positively about this office (with 13% being indifferent) was taken as another indication that the project was being well received by a clear majority of the students.

Some projects are not so fortunate, however, and there have been instances where monitoring research has revealed that the majority of respondents perceived a campaign to be nothing more than a public relations ploy on the part of the university administration. Of course, such findings should lead project to staff to engage in a thorough re-evaluation of their work.

### **An Unsuccessful Campaign Did Not Use Intercepts**

In a recent article about an unsuccessful four-year long social norms campaign on a college campus to reduce high-risk drinking, the authors noted strong indications that both the messages and the intent of their campaign were not at all clear to students:

During the campaign, we learned that many students were accustomed to traditional anti-drinking campaigns, which rely on fear tactics, and



simply did not recognize that the "Thinking About Your Drinking?" campaign was different. Frequently, when we displayed campaign materials to student groups and asked them to describe the purpose of the campaign, their typical responses were, "It says don't drink," "It's against drinking," or "It's to stop underage drinking." Students seemed surprised that the campaign was not aligned with zero-tolerance alcohol control policies (Thombs et al., 2004, p. 67).

In addition, post-campaign survey data in this project revealed that only 38.5% of students correctly understood that the intended purpose of the campaign was "to document that most students drink in moderation or not at all," while fully 28% of respondents reportedly thought that the campaign's purpose was "to address the problem of alcohol-impaired driving among students, faculty, and staff (Thombs et al., 2005, p. 65)." The authors do not state whether campaign messages and media were pilot tested for clarity of meaning prior to dissemination; nevertheless, there seems to have been strong anecdotal evidence that the implementation of this project was problematic. It is probable that a formal regimen of monitoring research that utilized mall intercepts—if established early on in the project—would have alerted these researchers to the fact that their campaign was not clearly communicating the message that it intended. Had they done so, they would have been able to re-evaluate and make the necessary revisions to their campaign in order to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

## **Conclusion**

The mall intercept is an indispensable tool for conducting timely and effective process or monitoring research. Because it is relatively economical and can be easily adapted to investigate both ongoing and emergent questions, the mall intercept can

quickly generate a wealth of both qualitative and quantitative data about various aspects of project implementation. In addition, a wide variety of students can be trained to conduct intercepts, thus providing an important educational opportunity for peer educators, students in public and community health, marketing students, etc. In short, social norms projects have abundant reasons to use the mall intercept. By doing so, they can effectively bolster the comprehension, reach, and recall of their normative messages.

### **References**

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