MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING GAY MEN INTO AIDS RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT: Recruiting gay and bisexual men into AIDS-related research and education programs will become increasingly common as federal, state and local funds become available. The Pitt Men's Study, a study of the natural history of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection, developed a recruitment strategy based on marketing principles. These techniques allowed the study to target particular gay and bisexual groups for inclusion. 1718 gay and bisexual men were recruited. Non-whites and unemployed men were targeted and recruited in numbers comparable to their representation in the larger community.

INTRODUCTION

The number of cases of AIDS, Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, increased in the United States by 82% in 1985. Sexually active gay and bisexual men remain the largest single risk group for developing AIDS, constituting approximately three-fourths of the reported cases. Therefore, effective research and educational strategies need to target these men. Recruiting gay and bisexual men into programs requires innovative techniques, since social norms require that men who engage in homosexual behavior conceal their identities.
Since 1969, marketing concepts have been developed and promoted for use by non-profit organizations. Kotler, who has pioneered the concept, defines social marketing as “the design, implementation, and control of programs seeking to increase the acceptability of a social idea or practice in a target group(s).”

A key element in Kotler’s model is the application of the “four P’s concept” (Price, Product, Place and Promotion) to non-profit marketing. “Price” includes the identification and prioritization of the often non-tangible costs and benefits of participating in particular services. The “product” is comprised of those goods or services which the consumer considers valuable and desirable. The consumer’s perspective is most important in determining the product; it does not need to correspond with the sponsoring organization’s major goals but can be a by-product or enticement. “Place” encompasses a physical location of facilities and the personnel. In both cases, accessibility, convenience, and empathy are most important. Finally, “promotion” based on the outcome of the proceeding steps could be planned and implemented.

Some universities, hospitals, and political organizations have utilized these concepts to raise money, elect candidates and change attitudes. These efforts go beyond simple advertising, by ensuring effective research, planning, monitoring and evaluation in the entire marketing strategy.

This paper describes concepts, strategies, and methods used for recruitment of volunteers for the Pitt Men’s Study. The study is part of the Multi-Center AIDS Cohort Study (MACS), a collaborative effort, funded by the National Institutes of Health, of four centers in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Chicago to study the natural history of AIDS.

The goal of MACS was to enroll at least 1,000, primarily healthy, gay men at each study center. In Pittsburgh, our goal also included the recruitment of a representative sample of non-white gay men and significant numbers of economically disadvantaged men and men who consider themselves bisexual. The volunteers completed an evaluation including an interview, laboratory tests and a physical examination. They return at six month intervals for a total of 2½ years of prospective evaluation.

As with other health research programs volunteers must “pay the price” of participation by giving energy and time as well as subjecting themselves to potentially uncomfortable procedures. In addition to these “costs” which discourage potential volunteers, the Pittsburgh study faced additional difficulties.

The project deals with the multiple stigmas of AIDS, non-traditional sexual behaviors, and penalized social roles. These “unmentionables” make the marshaling of public resources difficult and inhibit