

Twinking the message Anti-meth ad campaign reaching target audience through peers

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By AMANDA SONTAG of Represent

What can be done with \$5.6 million? Buy a couple houses or maybe a few cars; or launch a huge advertising campaign targeted at preventing methamphetamine use among Montana teenagers.

Montana ranks 11th out of the 50 states in methamphetamine admissions with methamphetamine as the No. 1 cause of crime in Montana, causing 75 percent of all federal prosecutions in the state, compared with the national average of 15 percent.

Tom Siebel, a businessman who lives in Helena part time, decided to take matters into his own hands in January of 2005, and launched the largest anti-drug advertising campaign Montanans have ever seen.

"I presented the germ of an idea to Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath over breakfast at a Perkins down the road, and he said, 'Let's do it.' "

The Montana Meth Project began publicizing television, radio and print advertisements in September 2005. The second wave of advertising was released at a press conference held at the Red Lion Colonial Inn in Helena on April 19.

The press conference was attended by local media, community members, as well as representatives from the state of Arizona who hope to implement a program similar to the Montana Meth Project in their state. It would cost approximately

\$5.7 million a year to replicate this program. State legislators are working on setting this amount aside in federal funding.

Since its conception, the project has garnered much attention from not only Montanans, but also national news sources, such as the New York Times, which featured a piece on the Montana Meth Project on Feb. 26, 2006, that was read by as many as 2 million people.

To date, the project has run 25,000 minutes of television advertising, 25,000 minutes of radio advertising, 150 pages of print advertisements, and 60 billboard and display advertisements, and generated more than 450 news stories. This is a total of more than 13 million impressions.

The project is aimed at Montana teens ages 12-17. On average the advertisements reach 70 percent of Montana teens three times a week.

Siebel and his team have approached the methamphetamine issue with the idea of "unselling" a product.

"The use of authority figures is completely ineffective," Siebel said. "The 'This is your brain on drugs' campaign didn't work because it was adults talking to adults; this project is about kids talking to kids. We are cautiously optimistic that the program will accomplish something significant that can be shared with other states.

"Support of the leaders of Montana has been unbelievable," Siebel continued. "There are no party lines here, it's just 'how can we help?' "

On April 20 Sen. Max Baucus, along with Siebel, Griz basketball coach Wayne Tinkle, and Sentinel Project Success drug counselor Sarah Shae, lead a school assembly at Sentinel in order to present the newest wave of advertisements from the Montana Meth Project.

"We need to get behind the Meth Project and give it our full support. This is a chance to make a real difference in our state," Baucus said.

Baucus and Siebel presented the four new television advertisements, and four new radio advertisements, as well as showing two of the new print advertisements, and then asked for feedback from the Sentinel students.

"This is tough. Here I am, a middle-age businessman who is completely out of touch with your generation who obviously invented sex, rock 'n' roll and drugs, so we're trying our best," Siebel said.

Students responded with one general feeling toward the advertising: As long as you keep it new, it will be effective.

The next four weeks will see a saturation level of the advertisements, with 16 million television impressions, 18.5 million radio impressions, 10 million Internet impressions, 52 print advertisements, and 91 advertisements shown in movie theaters.

Those wishing to become involved with the Montana Meth Project can visit the Web site at <http://www.montanameth.org> to find out how to help.

Senior Amanda Sontag reports for Sentinel's newspaper, the Konah.