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Montana shows how to divert kids from meth

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WOLF CREEK, Mont. - Meth is wreaking havoc in Montana.

It is destroying the lives of our young people. It is tearing at the fabric of our communities.

It is straining the limits of the law enforcement, prison and foster care systems. The prisons are literally overflowing with meth users. The social costs are staggering. The human costs are incalculable.

Meth is frequently called "the devil's drug" by users. Broadly available. Affordably priced. Highly toxic. Almost unbelievably addictive. Users soon reject everything that presents itself as an impediment to more meth use: parents, family, friends, church and school.

The Montana Meth Project is a large-scale exercise in prevention, aimed at significantly reducing the prevalence of methamphetamine use. We developed an ongoing, research-based marketing campaign, supported by community outreach and public policy initiatives, to realistically and graphically communicate the risks of meth use to the youth of Montana. The campaign's core message: "Not Even Once," speaks directly to the highly addictive nature of the drug.

The goal of the Montana Meth Project's messaging is to equip young people with the facts, in the hope of fostering better educated consumers, so they can make more-informed product-consumption decisions when faced with the opportunity to try meth.

We conducted extensive research to determine what young people will and won't listen to. Based on this information, we produced ads that speak to kids in ways they understand. In ways they are prepared to listen.

Beginning last September, we launched a large-scale, statewide public messaging campaign across TV, radio, billboards, newspapers and the Internet. We target our messages to the most vulnerable Montanans, 12- to 17-year-olds, and reach 70-90 percent of that audience three times a week with meth prevention messaging. You can view these ads at www.montanameth.org.

In less than one year since campaign launch, the Montana Meth Project has attracted more than 125 teen and adult volunteers, who have made more than 100 presentations to 12,000 Montanans. Community groups, service clubs, corporations and private individuals are spontaneously raising money to help fund the Montana Meth Project's efforts. The public support has been universal. There have been 725 news stories about the campaign, and we've had 2.6 million page views on our Web sites, including the teen-focused www.notevenonce.com.

The initial results are encouraging. We are seeing significant increases in the perception of risk associated with meth use. At least 80 percent of teens now believe meth use will cause brain damage. The same percentage, 80 percent, believe it results in unwanted sex. About 76 percent believe it will lead to stealing. And 59 percent now understand it causes tooth decay. These perceived risks have increased as much as 33 percent since our campaign began. We are making progress.

The most interesting, and perhaps the most valuable change is the substantial increase in the frequency of parent-child communications about meth. Studies have shown that teens who have frequent discussions about the dangers of drugs with their parents are much less likely to use than those who don't talk with their parents. In the past year, 93 percent of mothers have talked to their kids about meth. There has been a 44 percent increase in the number of teens having two or more discussions with their parents about meth.

Whether kids choose to try meth has to do with the relative perception of risks and benefits, as well as societal norms. Basically, is it cool? The Montana Meth Project is beginning to make it uncool to do meth. Attitudes are changing. Kids all over Montana are wearing our black "Not Even Once" wristbands. And now, teens from Butte to Browning are creating anti-meth art around the state this summer in our "Paint the State" art contest, www.paintthestate.org.

Not unlike Montana, Arizona has a critical problem with methamphetamine. The governor, the attorney general and the county commissioners of Arizona have declared meth one of the state's most serious problems. It is clear that the leadership in Arizona is committed to addressing this social need. They are going to do something about it.

At the request of state and county leaders in Arizona, we have been engaged in active discussions in recent months to see if we can find ways to apply the learning, messaging and programs from the Montana Meth Project to help address the problem in Arizona. It has become apparent that there are a number of opportunities to accomplish this.

Large-scale meth prevention is beginning to work in Montana. We are putting a dent in this enormous problem. There is reason to be encouraged. But we have a long way to go in Montana, Arizona and around the country.

Thomas Siebel is the founder and chairman of the Montana Meth Project, a charitable organization. He owns and operates the Dearborn Ranch in Wolf Creek, Mont. Siebel was CEO and chairman of Siebel Systems, a leading computer software company recently merged with Oracle Corp.