

Responsible Drinking

If there is one thing I learned from my focus groups, even from the young age of eleven adolescents know when they are being manipulated. So when you sit down and start to talking to them, the very essence of the conversation "I want to talk to you about fighting, I want to talk to you about sex," raises their antenna. Drinking is one of these hot buttons, similar to gambling because they are warned about the evils, but they see adults participating. Not only do they see adult participating they are bombarded with advertisements promoting the use of alcohol.

In the winter of 2008 I received a phone call from Raj Ramnarce, a detective from the La Crosse, Wisconsin police department, Raj was a regional director of the GREAT program (the anti-gang program for The Department of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms) and we had worked previously together on "The Prevention of Gang Involvement" curriculum. However, this time he was not representing the ATF, he was representing the Wisconsin association of police chiefs. It seems that Wisconsin leads the nation in alcohol related deaths and driving under the influence by individuals under the age of 25. Even though the past year the amount Public Service announcement and promotions had tripled from the previous years, the death rate and DUI rate did not drop.

Raj asked if I was interested in developing an interactive tool to educate college students as well as high school and middle school students. He knew about all the research and energy involved in creating an interactive tool, and of course, the Wisconsin Association of Police Chiefs did not have a lot of funding. He also told me about a recent University of Wisconsin research statistic that identified 40% of high school students had experimented with alcohol. "Do you think you could help?" he asked.

I told him I would put a focus group together and be able to give him a better assessment after the focus group gives me some feedback. The focus group ended up consisting of 1000 student from five colleges, 1 college in Wisconsin, 1 college in Alabama, 1 college in Louisiana, and 2 colleges in Florida. The first thing I found out is that you cannot attack drinking in a negative manner. Not only did

the students get confrontational, but also it made adults seem hypocritical. The second important bit of information that surfaced is that when they saw a friend losing control, their tendency was not to step in and prevent a possible catastrophe. It seemed that an intervention of taking someone's car keys or telling them they had enough was a violation of one's trust. Besides the student focus group, I also took an unorthodox approach, I had never been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but I wanted to really understand how that program worked. Therefore, I attended meetings in West Palm Beach, Miami, Fort Myers, and Saint Petersburg. I learned that there are related issues just as dangerous as death and DUIs. Those issues included complete disassociation with your children and spouse, the inability to function successfully in your chosen profession, an abundance of domestic violence, and a lowering of your own self-esteem, which lead to dysfunctional behaviors. However, all these people were repentant, and they were sharing their pain in an effort to protect one another.

Taking in all this information I contacted Raj, and I gave him the concept of promoting responsible drinking which was an interactive tool that actually highlight irresponsible drinking and the hazards of alcohol. I also explained to Raj that we needed to incorporate a sense of responsibility which indicated that if your friend is overindulging or underage you need to step up to the plate to prevent a possible negative outcome. This interactive curriculum introduces you to an individual who grew up in a family where alcohol was present and never recognized the where slowly becoming addicted. You will meet a number of individuals whose personalities change by drinking alcohol, and you will learn the consequences of providing alcohol to an underage adolescent. The majority of the curriculum places the "user" in a number of situations where they have to determine whether to get involved in their friends or partners over indulgent drinking. As you can probably figure out if they do not get involved, the consequences are never good, but if they do get involved they can stop a possible negative outcome. The actors and actresses are all young people and there is an adolescent peer counselor that observes the choices you have made and gives you feed back.

Upon completion of the curriculum we had a sixth college introduce the curriculum as a learning and educational program that became part of their orientation in February 2009. The Wisconsin association of police chiefs had their executive board review the program, and Raj gave the program to a public school system to judge how young adolescents reacted. This curriculum is now being launch in the state of Wisconsin in the fall of 2009 by every Wisconsin police department in every Wisconsin school and college.

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