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What Works

Behind the Message

Kaiser Foundation and Viacom take on AIDS – one episode at a time

By Gabrielle Birkner

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2003

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Stanford Social Innovation Review

518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015

Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516

Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

what works

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Behind the Message

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At first blush, it might seem like an odd coincidence.

In a January episode of CBS's drama "The District," two detectives discovered that a suspected dealer was stealing drugs to help his sister cope with AIDS. In February, on the CBS sitcom "Becker," Ted Danson's character educated a 15-year-old patient about the risk of HIV. The same month, an episode of UPN's "Star Trek Enterprise" explored the stigma of an AIDS-like virus. Flipping the channel last winter, TV viewers could have seen shows dealing with everything from the dangers of unprotected sex to the impact of AIDS on friends and family.

As it turns out, the slew of AIDS-themed programming was not happenstance. Viacom Inc., the global media company that owns CBS, UPN, and many other TV and radio stations, aired the shows as part of a coordinated campaign to combat AIDS. In all, 10 sitcoms and dramas have dealt with AIDS-related themes since Viacom launched its initiative, and the episodes have reached tens of millions of viewers, according to Imara Jones, who directs the effort. Behind the campaign, in active partnership with Viacom, is the Kaiser Family Foundation, a Menlo Park, Calif.-based philanthropy with a mission to educate the public about health policy issues.

"[TV] programming is clearly effective because it allows you to explore complicated themes over a period of time," Jones said.

"The programs use situations and language people are familiar with to possibly provide lifesaving information in a way that is entertaining as well as informative."

Viacom and Kaiser first worked together to promote AIDS awareness in 1997, when public service



In a recent episode of "Girlfriends," Joan Clayton (portrayed by Tracee Ellis Ross, left) finds out that a college girlfriend (center) has AIDS. The episode was inspired by a Kaiser Family Foundation briefing.

announcements and documentaries began airing on Viacom stations MTV and Black Entertainment Television.

That year, Kaiser conducted a briefing on emerging health topics, including emergency contraception, for the writers and producers of NBC's medical drama "ER." Soon after, the writers contacted the foundation to help them develop a vignette about a patient who had been date raped, and who wanted to know what she could do to prevent pregnancy. In the episode, doctors tell the patient that she can use birth control pills for postcoital contraception. Kaiser surveyed 700 "ER" viewers before and after the show, and found the number of viewers who knew about the option of emergency contraception increased from 50 to 67 percent after the show aired.

In June 1997, foundation president and CEO Drew Altman and director of entertainment media and public health Vicky Rideout (now also a vice president) published a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, citing the "ER" survey and urging TV writers and producers to make condom use as prevalent as sex on TV. "A condom on the bedside table of a popular TV show ... could have more impact on young people than any government program or public service advertising campaign," they wrote, adding that the industry had the





opportunity “to make money and do good at the same time by incorporating useful public health information and socially responsible themes into regular TV programming.”

Viacom effectively took up this challenge in January 2003, partnering with Kaiser again – this time on a companywide AIDS education campaign involving all Viacom divisions, including Showtime and Simon & Schuster.

As part of the campaign, Viacom has donated more than \$120 million in airtime to run 22 public service announcements. Between January and June, the announcements aired more than 50,000 times on Viacom stations. The company also printed and distributed more than 120,000 educational booklets about sexually transmitted diseases; launched a sexual health resource Web site

(www.knowhivaids.org) and 24-hour telephone hotline; and placed 4,000 outdoor display ads nationwide. But it was television programming that allowed Viacom to tap a new vein of influence.

Kaiser encourages AIDS-themed programs by hosting briefings on the disease for TV writers, producers, and network executives. The foundation has held more than 20 briefings to date (in Hollywood and at Viacom division headquarters in New York City), for more than 75 network employees, providing them with up-to-date statistics and access to AIDS experts and people living with the disease. “We’re giving them access to real-life stories, so they might go ahead and depict these stories in the lives of their characters,” said Tina Hoff, who oversees media partnerships at Kaiser.

The briefings can be emotional and surprising, and therefore compelling. Consider a briefing last fall at the Hollywood lot of Paramount Pictures, Viacom’s motion picture studio. As a man living with AIDS took the stage, assembled TV writers grew quiet, expecting a grim account of life with the disease. Instead, recalls Karen Gist, a writer for the UPN sitcom “Girlfriends,” the man joked about common AIDS misunderstandings, helping put a human face with the disease. “He wasn’t laughing at AIDS, but at life in general,” Gist explained, “and he gave us the OK to do the same.”

Viacom has full editorial control over its programming, and is under no obligation to produce AIDS-themed shows. But often, after the briefings, the writers become effective advocates. For example, when Gist told her colleagues what she had learned – including the fact that black women account for 64 percent of newly diagnosed HIV/AIDS cases –

executive producer Mara Brock Akil was shocked into action.

“At that point, I knew I couldn’t treat the issue properly in one episode,” said Brock Akil, whose show, which revolves around the friendships of four black women, is one of the highest-rated sitcoms among black women. “I didn’t want to give the impression that AIDS is something that goes in and out of your life. That’s not the nature of the disease.”

Brock Akil committed four episodes to AIDS-related storylines, including one in which a character asks her beau to get tested for HIV, and another where the character discovers that an old friend is HIV-positive. Before the shows aired, Kaiser reviewed the scripts to ensure accuracy and authenticity, and before production began, Kaiser arranged for the cast

and crew to meet two young black women living with AIDS.

Though Kaiser has not yet evaluated the campaign’s effectiveness, officials are confident that it will raise awareness and encourage safe sex. They point to a 2002 foundation survey of 500 teens nationwide that showed 72 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds believe TV influences their peers’ sexual behavior, and 43 percent say TV taught them how to talk to a partner about safe sex.

Additional briefings are scheduled for later this year and early next year. And while Kaiser has no guarantee that the time and energy it donates to orchestrate these briefings will pay off, it’s willing to take a calculated risk. “For Kaiser, it’s nothing ventured, nothing gained,” explains Jack Myers, editor of the *Jack Myers Report*, a weekly trade newsletter on entertainment. “But by doing nothing, the foundation ensures a lack of action in the programming community.”

Carl Folta, president of the Viacom Foundation, the company’s charitable arm, said that Viacom executives weighed the potential risk to the company’s brand before launching the campaign. “It deals with sex and death and disease,” Folta said. “Some people don’t think it’s appropriate to talk about this on television. Others object to the notion of condom use because of their religious beliefs.”

Ultimately, the company decided that its potential to make a difference outweighed the risk.

“AIDS is a disease spread primarily by the lack of information, and the inability of people to hear, internalize, and act upon messages,” Jones said. “The people who are affected by this disease are the people Viacom ‘talks’ to every minute of every day.” □

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