Campaign Analysis: Montana Meth Project

The Montana Meth Project’s graphic advertising campaign has turned more than a few heads since its inception in 2005 “as a response to the state’s critical methamphetamine problem” (“Montana Meth Fact Sheet”). Aimed at preventing methamphetamine use in Montana via public service messaging, the MMP’s thirty-second television ads and print ads depicting gruesome, bloodied, half-insane meth addicts are meant to provide a gritty look into the world of meth addiction and the impact the drug can have on one’s life. While the Montana Meth Project’s graphic advertising campaign seeks to achieve the commendable goal of preventing the youth of Montana from trying meth, responses to the campaign have been mixed. The MMP, along with other organizations, claims it has had great success with the “Not Even Once” campaign; others, however, are skeptical of this reported success. This paper will aim to sort out these mixed opinions and address the true results of the MMP’s campaign: that while the campaign was well intentioned, it was not as effective as the organization claims.

The Montana Meth Project’s series of graphic television spots is primarily an “anti-product” advertising campaign, persuading viewers to avoid the dangers and consequences of meth addiction. Montana, in recent years, has encountered a myriad of problems related to methamphetamine use: according to the Meth Project’s website, before the MMP’s creation, “Montana ranked #5 in the nation for Meth abuse, 50% of inmates were incarcerated for Meth, and 50% of foster-care admissions were Meth-related”. Additionally, “Officials estimated that the total annual economic burden of methamphetamine to Montana was more than $300 million per year based on the costs of drug treatment, other health care costs, lost productivity, crime, child endangerment, and Meth production” (“Montana Meth Fact Sheet”). From this meth-induced chaos, the Montana Meth Project was born. Thomas Siebel, the founder and financier of
the MMP, “sank $5.5 million of his own money into a campaign designed to take anti-product advertising to places it's never been” after seeing the damage that meth addiction had around his Montana home (“Edgy”). The general message strategy behind the MMP’s campaign is to realistically portray the effects of methamphetamine use and show how the drug can destroy one’s body, personal relationships and quality of life, in hopes of scaring adolescents away from trying the drug. The advertisements provide grim close-ups of meth-addicted faces abundant in sores, scabs and rotting teeth, and depict addicts selling their bodies, mercilessly beating their families and doing things that no normal person would ever consider doing in order to gain access to the drug (“View Ads: ‘Family’ and ‘Sister’”). "The messages are very dramatic, and they're in your face," asserts Elvin Martinez Jr., president of the Hillsborough County Anti-Drug Alliance. “We’ve got to portray [meth addiction] as the horrible thing that it is”—and the MMP hopes that this portrayal will serve as a scare tactic (Graham 1).

The advertisements that the Montana Meth Project produces are indeed horrible and graphic, many of them depicting instances of rape, abuse and the destruction of families. However, while certainly disturbing and sometimes revolting, the television ads do not show full-on nudity or extreme violence, the two types of obscenity monitored by the Federal Communications Commission. The ads also depict actual, commonly known side effects of meth use (like sores, rotting teeth, and violent behavior), so there are no “deceptive...acts and practices” for the Federal Trade Commission to punish (Maas 199). Additionally, the campaign appears to follow ethical standards, as well: the Institute for Advertising Ethics calls for “transparency” and for ads to be presented in a “fair, honest and forthright manner” (2). The ads are not deceptive or misleading, and in fact strive to show realistic portrayals of meth addiction. Legally and ethically, the MMP’s campaign is sound—there is no obvious obscenity or
deception to regulate. Regardless, there have been complaints about the graphic nature of a select few of the Meth Project’s advertisements. After the first television advertisements made their debut in 2005, “some parents complained the spots were too graphic to run before 7 p.m., when younger children are more likely to watch TV. The project agreed to run its spots only after 7 p.m” (McKee). Some of the project’s out-of-home advertisements, especially billboards, have received criticism, as well. One billboard in particular, depicting a young, meth-addicted girl pinned beneath a much older man, accompanied by the copy, “15 bucks for sex isn’t normal. But on meth it is” (“View Ads: ‘15 Bucks’”) received a considerable amount of backlash; the Montana Meth Project listened to the complaints and agreed to replace the billboard with something less inflammatory (“Shock Tactics”). The MMP obviously takes care not to violate legal advertising standards with its campaign, and when the audience feels that the organization has gone too far, the MMP is quick to respond and rectify the situation by removing or replacing advertisements, which is certainly commendable.

Representation in this campaign is also sound: the MMP does a fine job at representing different genders and races within its campaign. Obviously, the ads are attempting to portray the dangers of methamphetamine use, and the target audience of the campaign is teenagers and young adults who have not yet tried meth or have been considering it: “Because most meth addicts first tried meth between the ages of twelve and seventeen, the Project focused its prevention efforts on that group” (Siebel 410). Thus, the people depicted in ads are almost always of high school age, doing typical teenage things—getting ready to go out, hanging out with friends, or having a great time at a party. The ads will take a dramatic turn at this point, however: for instance, the girl getting ready to go out will find a bloodied, scabbed, meth-addicted version of herself curled up in the bathtub, seeping blood and imploring her normal self,
“Don’t do it” (“View Ads: ‘Bathtub’”). On a basic level, the representation appears to be fair, as there is an equal mix of males and female adolescents of different ethnicities, and there are no glaring stereotypes to offend anyone of a certain ethnicity or gender. The ads want to suggest that meth can affect everyone, whether they are male, female, black or white, and that the drug does not discriminate against whose life it ruins. The only possible representation issue within the campaign is that the ads only portray teenagers between the ages of roughly thirteen to eighteen. While this is understandable, given that this age group is the target audience of the campaign, some adolescents may feel offended that only their demographic is being portrayed as a band of half-crazed meth addicts, when it is certainly true that people of all ages can become addicted to meth.

Media for the campaign were strategically chosen to reach the Meth Project’s target audience with the best efficiency. Because the target audience of the campaign is mostly teenagers between the ages of thirteen to eighteen, the MMP used media that would have the most reach (the number of people that have the opportunity to be exposed to a message at least once [Maas 51]) and frequency (the number of times the message can be seen or heard [Maas 51]) for adolescents. As a result, the MMP developed ads to be broadcast on television and radio, and also used print ads and out-of-home advertising on billboards, all strategically chosen to effectively reach the target audience and impart the message of the campaign. “As the largest advertiser in the state,” founder Siebel writes, “the campaign included 45,000 television ads, 35,000 radio ads, 10,000 print impressions, and 1,000 billboards statewide” (Siebel 412). These media are certainly more likely to reach an adolescent target audience than placing ads in a newspaper, and it appears that the decision to shows ads through these media has been effective. Peg Shea, the executive director of the MMP, says that the television spots have been especially
effective in reaching the target audience, noting, “One kid said it's like a train wreck. You hate to watch it, but you can't help but watch it. They are curious about the television ads. That spurs conversations with the parents and with each other” (Graham 2). Overall, the MMP has succeeded in strategically choosing the media through which to show ads and spread its message.

In theory, the campaign does communicate well with its target audience. The MMP selected various types of media that most adolescents would have access to, and the ads themselves are “edited, lit and scripted for fast pace, stark visuals and real teen-speak” (“Edgy”). The advertisements are harsh and unforgiving as they depict with brutal honesty how meth can destroy one’s body, one’s relationships with family and friends, and even lead to the destruction of lives. However, while the ads should communicate well with the MMP’s target audience in theory, it appears that they do not always do so. David Erceg-Hurn, a Ph.D. student of psychology at the University of Western Australia, mentions that many teens believe that the ads exaggerate the dangers of meth use (261), and since the inception of the campaign, there has been a “fourfold increase in teens approving of regular methamphetamine use” (“Study Finds”).

The gritty, realistic approach the MMP has attempted in its campaign has not always succeeded in scaring adolescents away from trying meth. Rather, while the ads are indeed catching the attention of many Montana teens, some are skeptical of the message the MMP is conveying or may be drawn to the drama depicted in the ads.

The Montana Meth Project claims that it conducted a great deal of research before launching the first advertisements of its campaign, beginning in “early 2005” (Siebel 411) extending all the way through August 2005 (Erceg-Hurn 257). According to its website, the “Montana Meth Project utilizes a comprehensive research program, including both quantitative and qualitative studies, to measure attitudes and behaviors related to methamphetamine use”
Nicolas 6

(“Montana Meth Fact Sheet”), further illustrated by an article composed by the founder himself, Thomas Siebel. “The Project began with extensive market research,” he writes. “The Project retained San Francisco-based advertising firm, Venables Bell & Partners, to organize and conduct focus groups” (Siebel 411). These focus groups yielded interesting results—including that most teens decided how and when to experiment with drugs by age thirteen, and that many adolescents believed that meth was merely a “party drug” and not addictive. It was around this misconception that Siebel started planning his new campaign:

Could an anti-meth media campaign change these views? The teens who were interviewed or participated in focus groups said that an anti-drug campaign would not be effective unless it "cut through the clutter" of images and messages that teens encountered every day. Montana teens in 2005—like most teens today—were over-stimulated and desensitized... An effective anti-meth campaign would need to sound like it was coming from other teens, not from adults; it would have to feel immediate, real, and tangible. (Siebel 411)

While the MMP claims that its research was thorough, science-based and refined through continuous use of surveys, others believe that the research the MMP conducted is faulty. David Erceg-Hurn notes:

The advertisements have remained essentially the same since 2005, despite research revealing that many teens believe the advertisements exaggerate the risks of methamphetamine use...and the approach of scaring individuals into not using methamphetamine ignores a sizeable literature demonstrating that scary, graphic public health campaigns are frequently ineffective and sometimes harmful. (261)
The fact that the MMP has failed to conduct or take into account new research is somewhat troubling. While initial research before the launch of the campaign was thorough, it appears that the MMP has become complacent with its approach and has failed to conduct research in recent years that may help update or retool its approach.

After conducting research, the MMP moved into planning its strategy and tactics for getting the message across. Siebel and the MMP sought to develop a “hard-hitting, integrated media campaign” in order to target Montana teenagers and young adults and warn them of the dangers and consequences of using meth (Siebel 411). As a result,

The Project developed fifteen television ads, thirty-one radio ads, fifteen print/outdoor ads, and nine internet ads that focused on conveying five key messages: 1. Meth is dangerous to try even once. 2. Meth will make you look different than normal. 3. Meth will cause you to act in a way that you do not want to act. 4. Meth affects many people's lives other than the user. 5. Meth problems could happen in your town or school. (Siebel 411)

To ensure optimal absorption of the intended message, the MMP also planned for the ads to be released “in stages, so teens that had become desensitized to a particular ad's message would be struck anew by the images and scenarios in the next phase” (Siebel 412). During the planning process, a certain amount of creative problem solving would have had to be performed in order to effectively communicate the message and solve any potential communication issues. The ads had to stress the importance of the issue and realistically depict the consequences of meth use to persuade the audience without disturbing people too much, which overall appears to have been done successfully—the ads have definitely turned heads, but have not received an exorbitant amount of complaints.
Execution of the Montana Meth Project’s “Not Even Once” campaign commenced in September of 2005 and the ads immediately began to gain attention. Indeed, for the next two years, “the Project sustained a saturation level, statewide advertising campaign that reached seventy to ninety percent of its target audience three to five times a week,” using television and radio spots, print ads and billboards (Siebel 412). The MMP implemented its plans and rolled-out the project within a reasonable time frame—initial ads were released just a few months after initial research was conducted—and the rest of the ads were released in stages over the next two years, with different phases appearing as lately as December of 2011 (“View Ads”).

While research, planning and execution appear to have been followed thoroughly, a fair amount of controversy has arisen in regards to the Project’s evaluation of its campaign and how effective it really was. According to founder Siebel, the project was an immediate success: “The Meth Project was effective. While meth use among teens remained relatively constant across the nation, it fell by forty-five percent in Montana” (413). Further comments by Siebel suggest that teens in Montana have a heightened awareness of the risks of meth use, and that the majority of Montana adolescents now strongly disapprove of meth after the MMP’s campaign. While the statistics that Siebel cites are legitimate—many of them confirmed by the Montana Department of Justice and The National Institute on Drug Abuse (Siebel 414)—other sources claim that the MMP has misinterpreted data, and is claiming the decline of meth use in Montana as its own personal success while disregarding other factors that may have contributed to the drop in the interest in meth.

The MMP makes several claims regarding the success of the “Not Even Once” campaign, noting, “Montana teens are aware of the dangers of taking meth” and “The great majority of Montana teens (eighty-four percent) strongly disapprove of meth use...and the evidence suggests
that these changes stem in large part from the Meth Project.” (Siebel 413). However, the Project makes no comment on other possible reasons why meth use has decreased in Montana, claiming the glory for itself, while other sources tend to believe otherwise. David Erceg-Hurn asserts in his critical review of the Project that “the project’s data have not undergone peer review...the only literature on the MMP has been published by the organization on its own website” (257). Additionally, he claims, the “MMP has ignored and misrepresented several negative findings, such as increases in the acceptability of methamphetamine use, and decreases in the perceived dangers of drug use following the introduction of graphic advertisements in Montana” (262). While the MMP is quick to exhort the positive outcomes of the campaign, it has glossed over the possibly negative side effects of its graphic advertisements.

Erceg-Hurn is not the only person who is skeptical of the MMP’s success: indeed, Dr. D. Mark Anderson, of the Department of Economics at the University of Washington, has also expressed criticism of the campaign. Through statistical analysis, he has determined that the effect of the MMP has actually had on Montana teens is negligible, especially because of the organization’s “lack of an adequate control group from baseline” (733). In addition, Dr. Anderson explains that there was already “a preexisting downward trend in meth use” when the MMP’s campaign began in 2005, and that the sharp decline in meth use was not directly related to the “Not Even Once” campaign, like the MMP would want the public to believe. Other sources claim that “aggressive law enforcement, not the Montana Meth Project, was responsible for the decline in methamphetamine use in the state” (“Costly”) and that the MMP omitted some of its own data that showed that prior to exposure to the campaign, “98% of teenagers already strongly disapproved of methamphetamine use and 97% thought that meth use was risky” (“Study Finds”). These findings, from multiple sources, suggest that the MMP was not totally
honest in the evaluation of its campaign, and that it may have manipulated data to exaggerate the success of the advertisements.

Overall, the Montana Meth Project had a commendable goal—to educate Montana youth of the dangers of using meth and to persuade adolescents to avoid the drug at all costs. The advertisements the MMP developed were well researched (at least initially), well developed and attention grabbing, and adhered to all legal, ethical and representational standards. The ads also succeeded in turning heads and starting conversations about the issue of meth addiction and how it can affect one’s life. In theory, the campaign was well designed and had good intentions. However, the MMP has shown a certain amount of dishonesty when it describes the success of the campaign and how effective it actually was. The organization either failed to take into account or simply ignored a preexisting decline in meth use when developing the campaign, and glossed over some of the negative outcomes of the advertisements while only citing statistics and responses that would highlight the success of the campaign. The MMP also skimped on conducting follow up research after the launch of its campaign. In addition, instead of giving a certain amount of credit to law enforcement for fighting against meth use in the state, the MMP claims the decline in meth use as its own personal success. While definitely an eye-catching and well-intentioned campaign, the MMP needs to take a better look at how to accurately describe the outcomes of its work without omitting data or manipulating the results.
Works Cited


