Texting and Talking

Are social media campaigns the way to help stop the rise in HIV transmission among African-American youth?

March 25, 2010 By Willette Francis

When Janay Daniel, 20, a student at Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, saw the Centers for Disease Control's "I Know" campaign videos featuring celebrities Ludacris and Jamie Foxx, she liked them.

"I think the campaign is good and makes you aware of HIV statistics among youth," Daniels says. "Generally, these are things I didn't know about."

Daniel says she clearly heard Ludacris's and Foxx's messages about getting tested for HIV and having safer sex, and she believes that the entertainment superstars' adoring fans will also pay attention.

Recent stats show that many of those adoring fans are African Americans, ages 13 to 29, who are among those most at risk of contracting HIV.

The CDC's response to that news was to launch ACT Against AIDS, an ambitious, five-year, multi-media communications initiative using smaller, targeted campaigns, such as "I Know," to reach specific audiences.

The initiative's primary goal is to start conversations about HIV/AIDS through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, text messages and celebrity public service announcements (PSAs), along with using its own website (actagainstaids.org).

"Anybody who is 18 to 24 [the age group the effort targets] can probably tell you that that's where the dialogue takes place," says Booker Daniels, a CDC health communications specialist and lead for the campaign rollout. "That's why we chose to be there."

The campaigns aim to reduce stigma, educate about HIV and prevention, encourage testing and condom use and, ultimately, to reduce transmission of the virus.

In other words, the ultimate goal is to change the course of the epidemic through discussions that lead to action.

Already, the CDC campaign is attracting an online audience. “I know” has 725 Facebook fans, 498 Twitter followers, about 42 million media and press hits and more than 4,000 views of the Jamie Foxx and Ludacris web videos.

But what about young people who may have limited or no Internet access? The CDC has an answer.

“Text messaging is really the critical component for those folks that don’t have web access—that’s a big part of our game plan,” Daniels says. “For those who may not have high-speed Internet access [to communicate with others], being able to send and receive text messages is an opportunity.”

“I Know” text message subscribers also receive updated alerts on the campaign’s recent activities, testing information and video messages from celebrities and youth advocates.

In addition, people can go to the website to identify nearby HIV testing sites and watch the latest “I Know” Ludacris and Jamie Foxx PSAs (also posted on Essence magazine and BET websites).

Latoya Foggie, 23, a help desk technician at New York City’s Queens Public Library, feels the videos are a great way to get young people talking about the virus. She especially enjoys Ludacris’s video. “Young people look up to him so they’re more likely to listen to him,” she says.

Foggie says she’ll use the website as a resource to learn more about HIV. She also says she’ll send friends there who might not know about the virus.

“I think the campaign is good, and I learned a lot from it,” Foggie adds.

Jazmine Gray, 20, a student at Rutgers University in New Jersey, also thinks “I Know” is a good idea, but says she knows a way make it more effective.

“I think the messages would get teens to practice safer sex if they’re delivered in video clips of young people who might be living with HIV,” Gray suggests. “Their stories would hit closer to home. ”

Daniel, the Savannah college student, agrees that hitting youth where they live would work best. She thinks shocking pictures could be used to show young people the possible results of not safeguarding oneself.

“Maybe they could get some celebrities [to bring the information] into the community, where kids could come and hear them speak about what they should be doing,” Daniel says. “[It would be great to] get them into the community to talk about HIV.”

Another social media campaign is “Status Is Everything.” Launched by the Newark, New

Jersey–based African American Office of Gay Concerns (AAOGC) in December 2009, for the state's residents, this campaign targets a group also hit hard by the HIV epidemic: African-American men who sleep with men (MSM).

This CDC-supported campaign also has a website, StatusIsEverything.org, and uses many of the same platforms as the CDC's effort. Via text messaging, videos, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, billboards and print and online ads, the campaign encourages MSM to get tested and reduce risky behaviors. Visitors on any of these online platforms can find local HIV testing sites, or they can dial 1-866-HIV-CHECK to find locations.

Since the campaign's inception, 120 African-American MSM have been tested at one of the three testing sites associated with the campaign (they include the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, St. Michael's Medical Center, and North Jersey Community Research Initiative). In addition, campaign videos clocked 1,648 views on YouTube. And at press time, Status Is Everything had 5,000 followers on Twitter.

Although the campaign targets New Jersey natives, they aren't the only ones embracing "Status Is Everything."

"We're getting hits from Japan and Germany," says Gary Paul Wright, executive director of AAOGC, noting that "a lot of people have picked up on it on the wires."

Even though the campaign focuses on knowing your HIV status, Wright says he's thankful for any HIV/AIDS awareness and information that gets to the public and helps ensure that African-American gay men don't "get lost in the shuffle."

The CDC's Daniels is also all about using "I Know" to generate those all-important conversations. "We will be introducing more specific messaging to address specific HIV-related issues," he says, "whether that's countering common misconceptions, defining and addressing stigma or offering prevention messages as well."

And since social media campaigns become more successful as more people use them, we say: Get connected to these campaigns—and forward them to all your friends.

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