

COI/DH Online – Alcohol and Sexual Health

Summary Report of Findings: March 2007

1. BACKGROUND

In 2006, Research Works conducted research on behalf of COI/Department of Health which explored the general public's health and social care information needs, and in particular, the role of the Internet in delivering these information needs. Department of Health now wished to build on these findings by exploring the health and information needs of two distinct audiences, particularly in terms of Internet delivery.

The core target audience for the *'Know your limits'* alcohol campaign and the *'Condoms: Essential Wear'* sexual health campaign have been broadly defined as people aged 16 – 28 years old. Qualitative research was conducted in order to consult this audience regarding its information needs, and in particular how the Internet might deliver this information.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The business objective for this research was to provide evidence to inform a decision on whether the websites for these two campaigns could feasibly be incorporated into a potential 'Youth Portal' site. The Youth Portal site would potentially contain information on various topics from government departments.

The overarching research objective was:

- to understand the strengths and weaknesses of hosting information on a potential portal-type website, compared to the current arrangements.

In order to do this, the research aimed to:

- understand current sources of information about alcohol and sexual health
- explore attitudes to the provenance and trustworthiness of information on these topics (including the effect of information from government)
- understand the 'category' in which young people place this kind of information, by understanding:
 - o the search strategies and behaviour used when looking for information on these topics
 - o who they expect to provide information on these topics
 - o what other information they expect to find alongside these topics

Examples of single issue sites (current campaigns sites) and portal-type or multi-issue sites (need2know, directgov, nhsdirect) were used to illustrate to respondents the principles being discussed.

Finally, the research investigated the journey taken by someone who is exposed to other campaign materials and then visits the campaign website, in order to understand:

- what their search behaviour, strategies and views on provenance of the campaign site might be if they had previously seen another element of the campaign, and
- what their views would be on look and feel of the site if they had come to it after having seen another element of the campaign.

Overall, the research intended to gauge the relative importance of having a campaign identity online, for those who have been exposed to other materials. Equally, the research also needed to inform regarding which mechanics might deliver this identity if it is felt to be necessary (i.e. should it come from the URL, look and feel, or other elements).

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

The research consulted male and female respondents from two age groups (16 – 19 year olds and 20 – 28 year olds). It was felt important to include both respondents from ABC1 and C2DE socio-economic backgrounds, who often have contrasting attitudes towards health information.

The research approach was based on a mix of **friendship pair depth** and **friendship triad depth interviews** since younger age groups typically feel most comfortable amongst a small group of friends, particularly when discussing potentially sensitive and personal information.

The research sample was as follows:

	16 – 19 year olds	20 – 28 year olds
Alcohol 'Know your limits' campaign	4 pair depths (1 hour, 2 respondents) - Female, ABC1 - Male, ABC1 - Female, C2DE - Male, C2DE	2 triad pair depths (1 hour, 3 respondents) Male, C1C2 Female, C1C2

- All respondents agreed with the attitude statement that *"I regularly go out drinking with the intention of getting drunk."*
- All respondents were using the internet regularly - at least weekly or more - for banking, downloading music, games, on-line shopping, e-mails etc...

	16 – 19 year olds	20 – 28 year olds
Sexual Health <i>(Condoms: Essential Wear campaign)</i>	4 pair depths (1 hour, 2 respondents) - Female, ABC1 - Male, ABC1 - Female, C2DE - Male, C2DE	2 triad pair depths (1 hour, 3 respondents) Male, C1C2 Female, C1C2

- All respondents were sexually active
- All respondents were using the internet regularly - at least weekly or more - for banking, downloading music, games, on-line shopping, e-mails etc...

4. BACKGROUND: FAVOURITE WEBSITES/CURRENT WEB USE

Respondents consistently identified a relatively small group of heavily used websites as their favourites:

- for general use and social networking: Google (frequently set as home page), MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, YouTube
- for entertainment/music: Itunes, Ebay, Premiership/Football Team sites, BBC, Amazon
- for studies/work: Yahoo Answers, Wikipedia.

The most consistently popular (although Google would be the most-used) web-site among all respondents was MySpace. In addition, many tended to

use the web for research purposes (for potential purchases, news or hobbies), for homework/assignments (Yahoo Answers) and shopping (Ebay). Many claimed not to remember the URLs of even important sites - consistently using Google, to find them again (interestingly, however, there was high spontaneous recall of the Frank website and NHS Direct, although not of the related URLs). All have specialist personal interests served by associated websites (online gaming, for example). Overall, there seemed to be very little use of specific URLs – browser auto complete and Favourites folders typically gave guidance where Google is unable to deliver.

5. Personal/Sensitive Issues

Overall, medical and sexual problems formed the core of what were perceived to be sensitive issues. Many respondents were specifically searching to make sure that 'they are not alone' in their troubles and to allay fears by arming themselves with reliable information.

A few older respondents had used the internet to research and clarify financial issues (specifically, debt and money management) – and these were also seen as personal/sensitive by some.

Equally, stress caused by school/college workload issues was also identified as a difficult issue that had caused some to seek help from the internet.

Specifically 'personal' issues were considered to be STIs, pregnancy scares, mental health and drugs. Younger respondents were also concerned with safe sex and condoms.

The internet was considered to be an appropriate and accessible source of information regarding these issues - although it was generally coupled with advice sought from friends and possibly parents, as well as doctors and/or

sexual health clinics. In fact, many would routinely double-check internet information regarding health information: "*just to be sure*".

Respondents felt that the main strengths of the Internet, as a source of information in relation to sensitive issues, are that it is immediate, can be accessed in the privacy of home and allows access to a wide range of information.

Concerns and perceived weaknesses focused on the quality of information available to be accessed – with respondents worried about risk of misdiagnosis and 'dodgy' or in-experienced people running web-sites and providing content/advice.

Common indicators of questionable websites were felt to be:

- the presence of pop-ups
- lots of advertising
- obviously commercial homepage layouts
- content based on opinion/blogs
- unrecognized sources and 'dodgy'-looking URLs (some look for .org as a symbol for quality – and, equally some only pay attention to UK websites).

6. Trust/Credibility Issues

In terms of trust, most would trust obviously established sources such as the BBC and the NHS. All, in fact, trusted the NHS as a provider of information regarding health issues.

Although all also trusted the government to provide information, there were evident reservations. The government was seen as potentially dogmatic and absolutist: 'big brother' and parental. For example, some of the younger respondents felt that, as the Government is perceived to be against teenage pregnancy, then a government-supported web-site would be less sympathetic

to young people in a crisis. There was general consensus that a government web-site would certainly not be first choice, if listed on Google next to other web-sites. Equally, some anticipated that a Government web-site would not be 'friendly' in approach, focusing on the facts rather than the style/look/feel of the site.

'Young' websites were felt to be typically: visually striking; not text-heavy; easy to navigate, not too busy; dynamic and graphically appropriate for particular youth cultures.

7. Information/Advice regarding Alcohol and Sexual Health

Overall, information levels were quite low – as, in fact, was interest in many cases. Most respondents believed that they already know a lot about both of these issues. Female respondents typically discussed sexual health issues with their mothers and peers, while males seemed the most likely to use the internet to seek reassurance (as a consequence of embarrassment and in order to avoid the necessity for a face-to-face discussion).

Alcohol use was not seen as a major problem by a majority of the sample, with most feeling that they know all they need to know about the subject. Few could imagine why they might need to seek advice on this issue: "*it's just common sense really*". Alcohol, for many, was viewed as more of an issue for older people. Consequently, none had searched the internet for information regarding alcohol.

Sexual health was perceived as more of a potential problem, with most knowing someone who has had a problem with STIs, for example. Again, however, many asserted that they felt confident in relation to issues such as condom use and contraception in general.

Some respondents (both male and female) had used the internet to seek information about STIs - and NHS Direct (along with other sites such as Net Doctor) was felt to have provided very useful information. None, however, had access the Condom Essential Wear website.

Overall, a majority of the sample expressed relative satisfaction with their own knowledge of alcohol and sexual health matters – only a small number had reactively sought information about sexual health issues from the internet and then only as a precursor to practical action. None could imagine why they might want to search for information about alcohol use.

8. Pre-Task – Alcohol

Some struggled to understand the point of this exercise (especially males) and had simply quizzed the internet for information about potential venues, taxis home and new drinking options. A few were interested in the mechanics of alcohol use: safe numbers of units, binge drinking, how long alcohol stays 'in your system' and personal safety issues – but these were a minority.

The pre-task responses demonstrated that the same search strategies recurred - all had used Google to access the required information, using a few key words and typically felt that the top-rated sites had provided valuable information: *"if they get the most hits, they are usually the most useful..."*. NHS Direct was consistently seen as a very useful and trustworthy source. Many other sites were dismissed on first impressions as *"dodgy and commercial"*.

9. Pre-Task: Sexual Health

Most respondents focused on what were seen as serious and relevant issues: split condoms; STI symptoms; help and treatment for STIs – and, more

generally, unknown symptoms 'down there'. It was felt to be more obvious to use the internet to get initial help in relation to sexual problems – particularly as sexual health issues were often viewed from the position of a victim, whereas alcohol issues were largely seen as self-generated.

Many were clearly using internet-based information as a means of evaluating their problem before seeking professional help. Again, many used Google as a starting point, although a significant number went straight to known sites such as NHS Direct (advertised on TV) and the Durex website (heard about from friends) – although, again, initially through a Google search and not via URLs. Sites such as Teenage Health Freak, RUyouthinking and embarrassingproblems were also cited as useful. NHS Direct, however, was felt to explain the necessary information in appropriate and helpful detail – whereas sites such as BUPA were seen as overly complicated.

Broadly, a majority of the respondents believed that they had found the required information, at an appropriate level of detail and accuracy, without many problems or lengthy searching.

10. Knowledge of the Alcohol/Sexual Health Campaigns

Knowledge of the Know Your Limits campaign was limited to recall of the 'Batman' TV advertising, which was seen as 'cool', edgy, shocking and visually impressive – but not necessarily personally relevant: "*I wouldn't be that stupid*". The core message of the campaign was felt to be '*don't get that pissed*', rather than encouragement to find out more about safe alcohol use. Absolutely none spontaneously recalled the campaign URL (which, when respondents were shown campaign material, was felt to be overly recessive and hard to find). All expected that the website would have the same feel as the TV advertising.

BY contrast, many respondents recognised the Condom Essential Wear campaign material, and agreed that it was a hard-hitting campaign that made them think about practicing safe sex. However, none had been prompted to go on-line after seeing the campaign in the past, and most were unaware that this is possible. Even when they studied the posters, they struggled to find the campaign URL. Having seen the campaign material, all expected the web-site to match the look and feel of the ad campaign – to be trendy, and yet serious, ‘talking to our age group.’ Overall, this campaign was seen as useful and relevant - delivering valuable, practical, information.

Awareness of the Frank campaign was very high across all segments of the sample and reactions were uniformly positive. Frank was seen as relevant, appealing and decidedly non-governmental in style and character.

11. Reactions to the Websites

www.knowyourlimits.gov.uk was well received by all respondents and typically seen as visually strong, stylish, easy to navigate and intriguing. The site was felt to have a true youth ‘feel’: *“not talking down to me”*. Most noted the NHS logo, which acted as reassurance. Ultimately, however, most saw the site as entertainment, rather than a truly useful, helpful information source: *“it’s a bit of fun...but I wouldn’t come back I don’t think...”*. Some of the girls reacted negatively to the scenario section: *“You accept one drink from someone and immediately get raped – that’s not realistic”*. The URL was seen as clunky and unmemorable.

www.condomessentialwear.co.uk was also well received. Many respondents anticipated that it would have the same look and feel as the ad campaign and were reassured when this was so. No one had visited the site before. All thought it was aimed at ‘people like me’ and was age appropriate. They all liked the fact that it focused specifically on issues related to sexual health only, and several respondents claimed that they were going to go home and look at the web-site in more detail. The subject areas were also of interest.

Many were frustrated by the fact that the web-site has the word condom in its URL and is therefore unlikely to be listed in Google if they do a search on STIs. Some older respondents were impressed that this site offered a facility to find your local health clinic. Overall, the sample felt that this site offers genuinely helpful information and represents a valuable resource for young people.

www.nhsdirect.nhs.org received a consistently positive response, essentially because it belongs to the NHS and most generally trust the brand. However, some of the younger respondents were put off with the image of the old man, and the fact that 'strokes' were listed in the health section – leading to sense that this is *"something my mum would use."* Also many felt that the site requires a lot of effort to use, as you have to enter words into the search box and find the relevant page. Some respondents had used this site for homework in the past and were satisfied with the information given. Overall, the website was viewed as clinical, clean and calm - with gravitas. Most felt that they would make the necessary effort to interface with this site (even though the site search engine was consistently criticised for producing irrelevant results). Overall, seen as synonymous with trustworthy, sensible, advice.

www.need2know.co.uk: there was general consensus that this site looked a bit 'young', (with 'nasty' colours) particularly among the older respondents. The layout was seen as messy and felt to lack impact: *"chaotic – I wouldn't know where to start to look for information"*. Many were put off by the use of the term 'teen' and felt that subjects such as 'relationship issues' were just not relevant to them anymore. Overall, this site was not seen as relevant or interesting to many in these age groups: *"it's a bit My Little Pony... it's like Bliss, a bit naff"*. Typically, most imagined it is aimed at young teenagers.

www.directgov.gov.uk: the web-site was largely unknown to (and consistently disliked by) virtually all the respondents. It did not appeal in terms of either the breadth of content or the look/feel of the site, which was perceived to be

text-heavy and 'bureaucratic'. Several respondents recognised the site from previous use in relation to other issues (such as car tax). The alcohol information was seen as plain, factual and reasonably helpful, with some useful links. Many respondents, however, evidently felt uncomfortable about looking up information on STIs and other sexual health issues on the same web-site they had used to search for car tax! Overall, Directgov was seen as visually unexciting, 'grown-up', text heavy and uninviting – with far too many sub-menus: *"too hard to use – and definitely not the place to look for information about your delicate problems"*. Overall, this was felt to be trustworthy but dull and irrelevant: *"I wouldn't use it for this type of information"*

Having seen all four web-sites, there was general consensus that they would much prefer to be directed to a web-site that focused solely on either alcohol or sexual health matters. This approach, it was felt, would save time and trouble - and was consistently felt to be more appropriate. Most also anticipated that the information offered would be more detailed, because the site only focused on a single issue.

The idea of a youth portal did not appeal to many of the respondents. Although the government is largely trusted to produce accurate and relevant information, most assumed that political agendas (related to binge drinking and teenage pregnancy, for example) would colour the presentation of information. Equally, a majority presumed that the site would be very heavy with information and probably quite difficult to use. Ultimately, however, the main problem might be its provenance: *"that's a really sad idea, a government youth portal. I expect we'll have Tony Blair showing us how to play the guitar and telling us about what he did when he was young..."*

12. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Currently, it seemed that these respondents were generally happy with their own understanding of alcohol and sexual health issues – and quite satisfied

with the internet as a source of further information when required. The inputs and support provided by peers and parents were also equally important.

In terms of seeking information from the internet, it was clear that Google provides the common access point to relevant websites, with most respondents believing that they are connoisseurs of the web and able to differentiate between good and bad sites with relative ease. Favourites folders and PC auto complete software typically offered repeat access to favourite sites – and it was clear that specific URLs are rarely committed to memory.

It seemed that a majority of the respondents happily trusted major brands such as the NHS and the BBC. In fact the NHS and its website NHDirect was typically seen as the most accurate and trustworthy source of health information. Where health information was being actively sought (and this seemed to be relatively infrequently), most were happiest when dealing with relevant major brands such as the NHS.

The government was also largely trusted in terms of likely accuracy of information, but its motives were consistently questioned and delivery mechanisms were expected to be heavy-handed and old-fashioned.

The Know Your Limits and Condom Essential Wear campaigns were reasonably well recalled from TV advertising, although none of the respondents had been prompted to visit the websites. Reactions to the campaign sites were largely very positive (although Know Your Limits, it was felt, provided more entertainment than information). The Frank campaign was high profile and highly regarded across all segments of the sample.

Responses to the campaigns materials do indicate that a relevant online campaign identity is important for this audience, which spends considerable

periods in the online world and expects to be able to follow up interest generated by mainstream media, on the web. Even where a campaign is not accessed immediately, a presence is still expected.

Responses to Directgov were uniformly negative, even amongst those who had previously visited the site for information about legal and administrative issues. It was seen as text-heavy, hard to use and (crucially) not aimed at the needs of young people. Crucially, it was not seen as suitable for the presentation of information about sensitive or personal issues.

The idea of a government Youth Portal was broadly rejected, mostly because expectations were that it would be politically-slanted and dull in terms of presentation and usage.