

1. Introduction

When asked about interventions to strengthen marriages, most people likely would think first of *marriage therapy*, a proven method to help many couples deal with serious problems that threaten the quality and stability of their relationship (Bray & Jouriles, 1995). Today, however, some people might think of *marriage education* as another kind of intervention to strengthen marriage. During the last ten years, a marriage education movement has emerged to increase opportunities for individuals and couples to strengthen their relationships and prevent future marital problems (Gallagher, 2000).

Typically, one thinks of marriage education as a specific curriculum with formal classroom instruction taught by trained marriage educators. Hawkins and his colleagues (Hawkins et al., 2004) refer to this approach to intervention as "specialist marriage education." However, they argue that marriage education includes a much broader range of activities and approaches designed to strengthen marriages. They list four broad approaches to delivering marriage education, each of which makes a needed and valuable contribution. In addition to "specialist marriage education," they discuss "integrated marriage education" (i.e., education integrated into a more comprehensive set of human services provided to individuals and couples in multiple settings and at multiple times during their lives); "citizen marriage initiatives" (i.e., grassroots, citizen-led initiatives responding to a shared, local problem and enlisting participants as both consumer-learners and producer-advocates); and "marriage culture seeding" (i.e., attempts to produce cultural change that will result in stronger marriages for individual couples and more nurturing environments for all marriages).

This last approach to marriage education — marriage culture seeding — has received the least attention and action thus far in the marriage education movement. Yet this approach may be crucial to an overall cultural strategy to strengthen marriages. One reason that the marriage culture seeding approach lags behind is that it employs a set of intervention tools that may be unfamiliar to most marriage educators: public health campaigns, mass communication, and policy and legislative change. Whereas the specialist marriage education approach involves recruiting specific participants for formal, in-depth education, marriage culture seeding sends simple but powerful messages to change a specific thought or behavior among a broad target population. Moreover, the marriage culture seeding approach measures success in terms of cultural movement as much as individual change. Another difference is that specialist marriage education seeks to produce significant change in a wide set of complex attitudes and behaviors that are important to marital quality and stability. Couple by couple, the sum of these changes strengthens the institution of marriage. Yet the number of couples who participate in formal specialist marriage education is currently small enough that its cumulative effect on the institution of marriage is likely to be small. In contrast, the marriage culture seeding approach to intervention targets a small, simple, movable attitude or behavior that has the potential to have an impact on a broader marital trend. Although the change at the individual level is small, when it is multiplied across a significant proportion of a population, the change actually modifies the culture of marriage. This effect further sustains and strengthens individual change.

Because of the benefits that stable, healthy marriages provide to children, adults, and the communities in which they live (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), legislators, policy makers, and community activists have been searching for ways to support effective interventions to strengthen marriages (Horn, 2003; Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004). For example, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has been a leader in exploring policy possibilities for strengthening marriage. ACF emphasizes promoting and supporting healthy marriages; it recognizes that some relationships are unhealthy and marriage should not be encouraged or

supported at all costs. But ACF also recognizes that marriage education services may be able to encourage and support more healthy relationships. Accordingly, ACF has initiated a set of major demonstration and research projects to evaluate whether marriage education programs, especially for disadvantaged populations, can be successful (Dion, 2004). These projects will be testing "specialist marriage education" and "integrated marriage education" approaches. In addition, another project will evaluate the effectiveness of community-wide healthy marriage initiatives, an approach to marriage intervention that fits the "citizen marriage initiative" approach. To date, however, ACF has not ventured formally into the "marriage culture seeding" approach to marriage education.

Could a public communication or media campaign approach to marriage education be successful? The purpose of this paper is to explore this question. We review what public health communication scholars have learned from evaluations of past media campaigns and then apply those general lessons to marriage education.

2. Public Communication Campaign Evaluation Research

A vibrant body of research exists on evaluating the impact of public communication campaigns on a wide array of public health behaviors (for summaries see Backer, Rogers, & Sopory, 1992; Bryant & Zilman, 2002; Coffman, 2003; DeJong & Winsten, 1998; Flay, 1987; Hornik, 2002a, 2002b; Rice & Atkin, 2001; Rice & Atkin, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Snyder & Hamilton, 2002). Media campaigns to improve public health are common in our media-saturated culture. An accumulation of sound research over the past 20 years shows that effective media campaigns can increase awareness and knowledge, change attitudes, and even change behaviors across a wide set of public health issues. To name just some, these issues include: smoking cessation, drinking and driving, bike helmet use, teen sexual behavior, fruit and vegetable consumption, greater physical activity (walking), reduced sun exposure, crime prevention, knowledge of community parenting resources, child abuse prevention, and other health and well-being issues. National, state, and local community media campaigns have been successful at promoting increased awareness and modest behavioral change.

Attitudes are easier to change with media campaigns than behavior, but researchers Snyder and Hamilton (2002) analyzed a large set of media campaign evaluation studies (in a meta-analysis) and found an average effect of about a 10 percent increase in members of the target audience who were performing a specified behavior after a campaign. "Coercive" campaigns (e.g., informing citizens that seat belt laws have changed and traffic fines will be issued for drivers not wearing seat belts) had stronger effects than "persuasion" campaigns (e.g., get your blood pressure checked regularly), which had about a five percent increase in target behavior, on average. These averages, of course, reflect campaigns of differing quality and behavior change objectives with differing degrees of difficulty.

Notably absent from this list of behaviors modified by public communication campaigns are interventions to strengthen marriages or improve couple relationships. Perhaps public health practitioners do not see healthy marriages and couple relationships as something that falls within their area of concern. Some relationship issues that directly impact health and well-being problems, such as sexual behavior, are the topic of numerous media campaigns that have achieved some level of success (McCombie, Hornik, & Anarfi, 2002; Wellings, 2002). But forming and sustaining a healthy marriage has rarely been the target of sophisticated public health campaigns. Few marriage educators have harnessed the intervention capability of public communication campaigns to attempt to strengthen

marriages. But with 98 percent of U.S. households owning TV sets, average households watching almost seven hours of TV a day, two-thirds of U.S. households owning two or more sets (National Association of Broadcasters, 2003), and all the other media available, marriage-strengthening messages targeted at a media-consuming audience may well represent a rich opportunity.

3. Public Communication Campaigns Related to Marriage

This absence of media campaigns on forming and sustaining healthy marriages is noteworthy because media-based interventions have played an important role in changing attitudes and behavior about a topic closely related to strengthening marriage — preventing teen pregnancy. One of the most important steps teens can do to increase the odds of future marital success is to delay childbearing (Maynard, 1996). Over the past decade or so, awareness of the negative consequences of teen sex and teen pregnancy has increased and teen pregnancy rates have dropped. Some researchers have attributed this decline, at least in part, to the effect of media campaigns interventions (Doniger, Adams, Utler, & Riley, 2001; National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001).

For example, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (NCPTP) formed a task force that includes representatives of more than 50 of the most influential media outlets in the U.S. Among the outlets represented are *Teen People* and *People* magazines, ABC Television, Warner Brothers and the WB Network, and Fox Television. These media outlets, which typically target both parents and their teens, are estimated to reach nearly 275 million people over the past several years with teen pregnancy prevention messages. The results suggest a measurable influence of mass media campaigns on attitudes and behavior among teens.

In an analysis of the effectiveness of this particular campaign, researchers found that 80 percent of American adults and teens said they had noticed more attention being given to teen pregnancy prevention over the past five years. NCPTP included messages in a variety of forms, such as billboards, shopping bags, and slides shown at movie theaters. It also developed public service announcements (PSAs) that reached more than 16 million teens. In August of 2003, the NCPTP compiled data showing a 27 percent decline in teen birth rates in the United States (also see Hamilton, Sutton, & Ventura, 2003). Although it cannot be firmly established that media campaigns directly caused this decline, many scholars believe that public health campaigns contributed significantly to positive social change. It is important to note, however, that the most effective teen pregnancy prevention campaigns were intensive and that when the intervention programs ceased, the rates of pregnancy tended to return to pre-program levels (Kirby, 2001). This finding suggests that the awareness and prevention campaigns need to be maintained in order to achieve long-term change.

We were unable to find evidence of any evaluated media campaigns that focus on preventing spouse or partner abuse. The absence of domestic abuse, of course, is a crucial element that defines a healthy marriage (Moore, Jekielek, Bronte-Tinkew, Guzman, Ryan, & Redd, 2004). Perhaps the reason for not finding any evaluated media campaigns addressing spouse or partner abuse is that it is regarded as a deep psychological, clinical problem that is beyond the scope of preventative education. But recent research has shown that many couples are involved in less severe "situational couple violence," such as slapping or kicking (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). These unhealthy behaviors could be addressed by media campaigns.

A small body of research evaluates the effects of parenting newsletters mailed or distributed broadly in a community or state to new parents. Dissemination of these newsletters is a type of media campaign. This research suggests that new mothers will read these materials and that they report changes in various areas of positive parenting behavior. Moreover, mothers in higher-risk groups (e.g., with less formal education) report more behavior change (Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, & Winnett, 1991) than do other mothers. When mothers share the information in the newsletters with others in their social support networks, they also report more positive behavior change (Walker & Riley, 2001). Other research on newsletters directed broadly at parents of adolescents also show self-reported behavior change, such as better monitoring of their teen's friends, activities, and plans. Again, some evidence suggests that higher-risk parents benefited from receiving the newsletters even more than did other parents (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997).

We believe that marriage educators need to explore the potential of media campaigns as preventative interventions to build and sustain healthy marriages. We uncovered only one sustained national media campaign to strengthen marriage. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) has produced and broadcast numerous PSAs over the past 30 years in a series called "Home Front." The PSAs focus on positive marital relationships, parenting, and other family messages (Mike Hemingway, personal communication, April 14, 2004). Unfortunately, no evaluations of the campaign's ability to affect behavior change have been done. Just in the last year or two, some local media campaigns focused on marriage have emerged. An example is the work of "First Things First," a coalition of community activists in Hamilton County, Tennessee, dedicated to strengthening marriages, reducing nonmarital births, and promoting father involvement. The coalition has used media messages to strengthen marriage and inform community members of marriage support services. The Louisiana Department of Social Services has recently developed some healthy marriage and couple relationship PSAs. "Healthy Families Tampa" (FL) recently conducted a month-long fatherhood campaign that included messages related to marriage. Again, however, evaluation research has not been conducted on these campaigns.

Because of the lack of evaluated campaigns focused on marriage and couple relationships, lessons learned from other campaigns, though helpful, will be imperfect guides for marriage education media campaigns. One public communication campaign scholar (Smith, 2002) argues that lessons learned from one effective campaign focused on changing one behavior cannot be applied directly to other behavior change efforts through other campaigns. Behavioral change is inherently idiosyncratic, he argues; each effort will be different and have its own learning curve.

An additional caution is that the "gold standard" of policy evaluation research — randomized, control-group studies — may not apply in this case. Randomized, control-group studies can be impossible or ineffective with studies of mass media interventions because the notion of "control" can be misleading when the intervention is mass media. By its nature, mass media can permeate a culture, and it is difficult to isolate a true "control group" that receives no exposure to a campaign or to news coverage about the issue addressed by the campaign (Hornik, 2002a; Snyder & Hamilton, 2002). According to one scholar, the "image of pristine treatment and control communities associated with the concept of a controlled trial is a false image" (Hornik, 2002a, p. 10). Accordingly, media campaign evaluation researchers often employ designs that look to other experimental or evaluation researchers as inadequate. But, in this case, these "nonstandard" designs are more effective at getting an accurate sense of how media campaigns affect behavior change.

Despite these cautions, we believe a set of general principles have emerged from media campaign evaluation studies that can provide an initial guide to healthy marriage media campaigns. We believe there is reason for optimism that effective campaigns can be designed and executed to help form and sustain healthy marriages and couple relationships. Said differently, there is no strong reason to think that knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that help individuals form and sustain healthy marriages need to remain outside the scope of effective media-based marriage education interventions.

Public communication campaign evaluation research has identified principles of successful campaigns. Next, we summarize these principles. With each principle, we include a brief discussion of how it might apply to media campaigns focused on marriage. (Some scholars have provided general best practices summaries for media campaigns worth reviewing in more detail. See Backer, Rogers, & Sopory, 1992; Smith, 2002).

4. Principles for Crafting Effective Campaigns and Messages

- A. [Target the "Easy" Behaviors](#)
- B. [Intervene with Adequate Dosage](#)
- C. [Focus the Campaign on the Right Target](#)
- D. [Combine and Coordinate Campaigns with Other Intervention Activities](#)
- E. [Enhance Campaigns by Attracting Journalistic Attention](#)
- F. [Monitor and Adapt the Message Over Time](#)
- G. [Make Messages Personally Relevant; Appeal to Existing Motives, Needs, and Values](#)
- H. [Communicate New Information](#)
- I. [Stimulate Interpersonal Communication](#)
- J. [Create a Specific, Simple Call to Action](#)

- K. *Target the "Easy" Behaviors.* Media campaigns are most effective when they target behaviors that are relatively easy to change and the consequences of change are highly valued (Hornik, 2000a). A prime example of this principle was the highly successful media campaign to reduce Reye's Syndrome in children by encouraging parents not to give their young children aspirin to treat the symptoms of various illnesses (Soumerai, Ross-Degnan, & Kahn, 2002). Preventing children from contracting this serious and dangerous disease is highly valued by parents, and changing from aspirin to an equally effective acetaminophen product (e.g., Tylenol) is no more difficult, costly, or inconvenient. Media-based campaigns targeting parents and health professionals, along with news coverage, created substantial reductions in Reye's Syndrome over a short period of time in the early 1980s. A large part of the reason for the success of this media campaign was that the behavior change needed on the part of parents was simple and low-cost. This is not to say that more complex behavior changes, such as smoking cessation or diet change, are beyond the power of media campaigns. But more complex behaviors will require more intensive campaigns with more resources, and complex behaviors may need to be broken into simpler components.

Are there relatively easy behavioral changes that can be effective in strengthening marriages? We believe so. For example, marriage researchers have found that interpersonal communication and problem-solving processes play important roles in maintaining or destroying marital quality. For instance, wives beginning a discussion of a relationship problem with a "soft start-up" rather than a strong attack are conducive to better problem solving and marital quality (Gottman & Silver, 1999). A "soft start-up" is a fairly straightforward interaction skill to learn, doesn't "cost" anything, facilitates solving problems,

decreases the likelihood of emotionally charged arguments, and increases marital satisfaction, which are all highly valued ends. Creative campaigns might be designed to target a behavior through such an approach. Similarly, taking a premarital inventory can be an effective tool for helping couples to prepare better for marriage (Larson et al., 2002) and sometimes even to decide that marriage is not a wise choice (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995; Stanley, 2001). Inventories are relatively easy to access and low cost (compared with other wedding expenses). And they can help couples form a stronger foundation for the early years of marriage and diminish the likelihood of serious problems in the early marriage years. These are also highly valued ends. Campaigns that encourage using a premarital inventory and taking on other relatively easy, premarital tasks could be designed, as well.

- L. *Intervene with Adequate Dosage.* A campaign cannot be effective if it does not reach a large number of people and reach them enough times to create message recognition and recall. Outreach is one of the biggest challenges campaigns face (Hornik, 2002a). Snyder's and Hamilton's (2002) study of evaluated campaigns found that messages only reached about 40 percent of targeted populations. And a message usually needs to be heard several times to make an impact. As one public communication scholar put it: "Effective intervention must be experienced by the target audience in order to be effective. Despite the seeming simplicity of this notion, one of the greatest flaws to date in interventions has been their inability to achieve sufficient exposure, or scope, to have the intended impact" (Smith, 2002, p. 335).

Of course, exposure is strongly related to the resources backing a media campaign; limited resources will likely produce limited exposure and, thus, limited change in attitudes and behavior. Media campaigns often rely on public service announcement spots (PSAs) to get their message out. However, deregulatory changes by the Federal Communications Commission have pushed most PSAs into late-night time slots that do not reach many people. And the number of public communication campaigns has grown dramatically over the last 20 years, increasing competition for limited airtime. Consequently, many campaigns that formerly relied on no-charge PSA time are now raising funds to buy commercial airtime to get their message out to a larger number of people.

The implications of this adequate-dosage principle for potential marriage campaigns is straightforward: to be successful, marriage media campaigns need substantial funding, both to create effective messages (which will be discussed later) and to get the exposure to the message needed to make a difference. Campaigns with limited resources, even if they have effective messages, are unlikely to make much impact on a targeted behavior because they do not reach enough people enough times for the messages to register.

- M. *Focus the Campaign on the Right Target.* There are two, important, related issues here. First, campaigns need to be focused on the people most likely to be affected (Hornik, 2002b). Campaigns are often effective on one sub-population but not on another. For example, one anti-smoking campaign found effects for younger but not older adolescents (Siegel & Biener, 2002). Segmenting a large audience into smaller, more homogenous groups has generated higher success rates than targeting general audiences. Markets can be segmented demographically (how people vary by age, marital status, health status), geographically (where people live or work), psychographically (what people watch, do, think, and how they interact in relationships), and culturally (how people behave or perform, given ethnic, racial, religious and other backgrounds) (Maibach & Parrott, 1995; Gombeski, 1998). Effective results require careful pilot work and an ongoing commitment to evaluation and re-targeting. This work and commitment would be especially needed in a new area, such as strengthening

marriage and couple relationships, in which so few media campaigns have been attempted. The learning curve for launching such a campaign would be steep; early media campaign work in this area would need substantial resources to pilot test messages, conduct ongoing evaluations, rework messages, and refocus targets.

A closely related, second point is that campaigns are more likely to succeed by first targeting groups that are most likely to change rather than groups that may be the least likely to change. Siegel and Doner (1998) argue: "Targeting the group most willing to make the change often leads to two accomplishments: The audience makes progress towards the social change objective, and social norms are often influenced, thereby creating a climate in which others are more willing to (and indeed feel the pressure to) make changes" (p. 316). This principle does not mean that groups who confront more obstacles to change should be ignored by media campaigns. Instead, the principle suggests that campaigns targeting them will be more successful once social norms are shifting to support that change, and social norms will begin shifting only when some groups begin to change. Thus, it is a principle of sequence *not* exclusion.

The implication of this principle for potential marriage campaigns is that they should first target audiences that will be more likely to change behavior. However, without empirical work it is hard to predict which audiences these are. Some research in marriage education suggests that couples who are experiencing more relationship distress benefit more than couples with less relationship distress (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Reardon-Anderson, Stagner, Macomber, & Murray, 2005). Media campaign messages may register better with individuals who are searching for some kind of help. Another reasonable guess, however, is that the hardest candidates to change will be more disadvantaged groups that face multiple barriers to forming and sustaining healthy marriages and often have had little exposure to healthy marriages in their families and neighborhoods. If this hypothesis proves valid, campaigns first may need to target middle-class populations to generate more normative momentum that can support change in more disadvantaged groups. However, this suggestion is only speculation on our part.

- N. *Combine and Coordinate Campaigns with Other Intervention Activities.* Although research documents that campaigns alone can create change, their effectiveness is often extended when combined with other, supportive community activities (e.g., rallies, workplace posters); coordinated with direct service delivery components (e.g., hotlines, resource centers); and reinforced with structural, policy, or regulatory change (e.g., new support funding, legislation). Through this kind of collaboration and coordination, a campaign can reach more people and reach them more often, and those who receive the campaign message have more resources to support any changes that they want to undertake.

Applying this principle to potential marriage campaigns, a media campaign might work best in locales with active community healthy marriage initiatives that can augment and support the messages. In addition, a number of states have passed or are considering legislation to encourage couples to invest in premarital education or counseling. Media campaigns to promote the value of premarital education or counseling would likely be more effective in such locales, since they are connected to community resources and supportive public policy.

- O. *Enhance Campaigns by Attracting Journalistic Attention.* Some media campaigns explicitly include a strategy to attract attention to an issue through the news media, even though this strategy results in less control over the message. Still, the news coverage usually can help and support the overall campaign objectives of informing individuals and encouraging change. Research suggests that

journalistic coverage can be a valuable part of an overall media campaign (Backer, Rogers, & Sopory, 1992; Fan, 2002; Hornik, 2002b; McAlister & Fernandez, 2002; Viswanath & Finnegan, 2002). Some efficient campaigns are conducted exclusively through news coverage promoted by public relations specialists. Journalistic coverage produces greater exposure to the message, and usually adds credibility to the campaign.

This principle lends itself well to potential marriage campaigns. How to strengthen your marriage or relationship is a topic eagerly covered by journalists, especially at certain times of the year (e.g., Valentine's Day, June weddings). Public relations specialists are skilled at attracting news attention and could be employed as a part of an overall marriage campaign.

- P. *Monitor and Adapt the Message Over Time.* Crafting effective campaigns is an inexact science. Campaigns need to be carefully designed and pilot tested. In addition, however, campaigns that invest resources in ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the campaign that result in fine-tuning messages and strategies meet with more success (Smith, 2002). Ongoing monitoring should include tracking exposure to the message and how people are responding to it and determining if unanticipated negative reactions are occurring. In light of this monitoring, the message can be adjusted, including which behaviors and even which audiences to target. Clearly, this monitoring and adapting process requires time and resources, echoing the previous point that sufficient resources and expertise are crucial to optimizing the chances of a successful campaign. This principle of ongoing monitoring will be important to marriage campaigns because we have so little experience with them.
- Q. *Make Messages Personally Relevant; Appeal to Existing Motives, Needs, and Values.* Messages are more effective when perceived personal relevance of the message is high. Personal relevance is high when a message deals with an issue that is personally and currently important to an individual (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Moreover, messages are more likely to produce change if they communicate incentives or benefits for adopting desired behaviors that build on the existing motives, needs, and values of an individual rather than challenging them (Backer, Rogers, & Sopory, 1992; Siegel & Doner, 1998). This principle is good news for the potential of marriage campaigns. Almost all Americans want a happy and lasting marriage (National Marriage Project, 1999). Furthermore, in a culture with high rates of divorce and unstable, nonmarital unions, there seems to be an increasing desire for reliable information about building and sustaining a strong marriage. Therefore, messages in media campaigns do not have a steep hill to climb to garner people's attention. The personal relevance of marriage messages may be highest at important points of transition, including engagement and parenthood.
- R. *Communicate New Information.* Messages that communicate something new or previously unknown rather than rehashing something already known are more effective, according to a study of public communication campaigns (Snyder & Hamilton, 2002). People quickly tune out messages that communicate things that they already know, even if the topic is something that they need to pay attention to for their own well-being. However, when a message presents new information on that same topic, people are more likely to tune in.

For potential marriage media campaigns, ongoing research presents many opportunities to communicate new information. For instance, Teachman (2003) recently found that women who cohabit (live together) before marrying are at substantially higher risks for divorce, unless they cohabit only with one person and marry that person. Kline and her colleagues (Kline et al., 2004) recently found that individuals who delay cohabitation until they get engaged do not experience the same high risks of divorce as those who cohabit before they get

engaged. Research also suggests those cohabit before marriage (without being engaged first) have less personal dedication or commitment to the person they marry than those who do not cohabit before marriage (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). This seems especially true for men. The authors speculate that this deficit in personal dedication to one's spouse may contribute to the higher rates of divorce faced by couples who had first cohabited. New information like this might interest many people, given the fact that more than 60 percent of Americans cohabit before marriage (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Many myths exist about forming and sustaining healthy marriages, as well as about divorce and cohabitation. Messages could be crafted in ways that help people understand that there are more effective ways to maximize marital success than through cohabitation. These myths can be addressed with current empirical knowledge that will be new to people and attract their attention.

- S. *Stimulate Interpersonal Communication.* Creative messages that get people talking to one another about the topic of the message can increase the power of the message to produce behavioral change (Rogers, 2002; Schooler, Flora, & Farquar, 1993). When the message goes from a few seconds of media time to a real conversation with family, friends, or co-workers, the effect is usually to make the message more memorable and real; behavioral change becomes an interpersonal issue not just a private one. For instance, a message in a recent anti-smoking/fetal health campaign shows a fetal heartbeat increasing dramatically when the mother begins smoking a cigarette. This image can have an impact on someone viewing the spot, but that impact is multiplied when colleagues at work are also talking about the spot and how it makes them feel. Thus, when crafting messages for media campaigns, designers should think about creating this kind of "buzz." For instance, as noted above, cohabitation before engagement appears to be a risk factor for a healthy, stable marriage, but most young people think it is a good way to test compatibility and prospects of a good marriage (National Marriage Project, 2002). A creative message cautioning adults about the long-term effects of cohabitation could get a lot of people talking to each other, thus extending the power of the media message to conversations embedded in everyday life.
- T. *Create a Specific, Simple Call to Action.* This final principle is one of the most crucial. One of the challenges that public health practitioners have faced is seeking to market changes in behavior in the absence of a clear demand for change (Siegel & Doner, 1998). Unlike commercial marketers, who derive benefits from the exchange of money, public health marketers benefit through the fulfillment of institutional goals or nonmonetary rewards. But because public health marketing often promotes negative demand (e.g., don't eat high-fat foods), creating an appealing message is critical (Siegel & Doner, 1998). Further, since reductions in morbidity and mortality are often not realized for many years, many consumers do not find fact- and health-based messages immediately compelling.

As a result, public health practitioners have embraced marketing practices through social marketing to find what the consumer wants and then "redefine, repackage, reposition, and reframe the health product so that it satisfies the demand of the audience" (Siegel & Doner, 1998, p.43). For example, the public health sector is learning that health itself is not the most effective product it has to offer. Instead, public health messages attach themselves to core values such as "freedom, independence, autonomy, control over life" (p.45), "fairness, economic livelihood" (p.130), "democratic way of life" (p.136), and "how they [people] look, how they feel, and how attractive they are" (p.48) to be more appealing and inviting (Siegel & Doner, 1998). Thus, audience appeal is rarely established on the basis of only talking about preventing disease or improving health outcomes.

When target audiences receive a message that they find appealing, they are more likely to become actively involved. Media and public health experts advocate for two prominent types of appeals: logical appeals (i.e., using reasoning to convince or persuade the intended audience to believe or act in a certain manner); and emotional appeals (i.e., using feelings or emotions to convince or persuade the intended audience to believe or act in a certain manner) (National Cancer Institute, 2002). Emotional appeals (e.g., humor, intrigue, shock, and fear) are most widely supported, both from a theoretical perspective and from professional experts (Maibach & Parrott, 1995; National Cancer Institute, 1995; National Cancer Institute, 2002). The emotional appeals most likely to be effective are those that focus on positive emotions. Research shows that positive emotions result in more positive feelings toward the product and are more likely to gain compliance (Maibach & Parrott, 1995). Favorable examples of positive emotional appeals include entertaining, engaging, humorous or dramatic messages, and campaigns that use appropriate music, artwork, or other backgrounds. In any case, positive emotional appeals often result in deciding to take specific actions. Generally, media and health experts avoid fear-based appeals because target audiences react better to positive appeals (Maibach & Parrott, 1995). Therefore, as commercial marketers have learned in meeting the product needs of a target audience, practitioners should remember these two key points: 1) people generally act on emotion, not logic or facts; and 2) appealing to the audience's emotions, especially positive emotions, increases the motivation for action.

Applying these points to marriage-related media campaigns seems straightforward. For example, a message that simply communicates that couples should obtain some premarital education to lower their probability of divorce in the first few years may not be as appealing as a message that connects this action to a core value, such as control of one's life, and appearing to be smart and prudent in the eyes of others. Also, a message that communicates the fun in learning more about your future spouse may be more likely to generate some initial action than one that stresses the logical need to take a premarital inventory of your strengths and weaknesses as a couple.

In addition, messages are most effective in creating behavior change when they include a "call to action." These calls are used increasingly by the media to identify a satisfying end point to a message. For marketing purposes, they tell the audience what action is ideal (e.g., call, vote, save, buy, visit) or they are used to produce a specific response. Calls to action are placed at the end of the message after an emotionally appealing point has been delivered. A strong call to action may include highlighting the benefits of taking action, emphasizing incentives, or even mentioning the consequences of not taking action. In any case, calls to action show an intended audience a solution to their problems, based on an emotional appeal.

However, research has shown that intended actions or behaviors should be simple, easy, and able to be accomplished quickly (Maibach & Parrott, 1995; Siegel & Doner, 1998). For example, a call to action for a current smoker to disregard her addiction and suddenly quit smoking is unusual and unreal. However, smokers who are hoping to stop may be successfully prompted to call a quit-smoking hotline to receive helpful information or services. By making the behavior easy — like baby steps — members of target audiences are more likely to act on how they felt through the message's appeal. Therefore, by positioning a call to action following an emotional appeal, those in the target audience are more likely to take simple actions or behaviors based on what they feel.

Again, the implications for a media campaign to strengthen marriage appear straightforward. Simple calls to action could include such messages as: call a marriage education hotline to get some resource materials or to see what educational opportunities are available in the area; talk to your religious leader about marriage education classes provided within your faith-based community; or fill out a free, short, online, instant-feedback relationship questionnaire to find out what you could do to strengthen your relationship now.

5. Conclusion

We see no compelling reason why public communication campaigns to strengthen marriages — a cultural seeding approach to marriage education intervention (Hawkins et al., in press, 2004) — could not have a positive impact on attitudes and behaviors, especially as these campaigns follow the guidelines presented above. We acknowledge, as Smith (2002) argues, that each target behavior presents unique challenges, and that the learning curve often is steep. It is an empirical question how effective media campaigns will be in the area of marriage education. And we must be patient to allow campaigns sufficient time to generate positive effects; it took decades for substantial change in smoking habits, for instance. But the average effect size of campaigns derived by Snyder and Hamilton (2002) of about 10 percent change in target behavior is hardly trivial, especially considering how important healthy marriage is to adults, children, and the communities in which they live. And resource-intensive, smart campaigns have the ability to contribute significantly to major cultural change, as seen especially in high-profile campaigns such as those focusing on stopping smoking and preventing teen pregnancy. We suggest that creative marriage educators become involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating media campaigns to strengthen marriages and couple relationships.

6. References

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