



Robbie Conal is a Los Angeles-based guerrilla artist who expresses his political views in posters that say a lot with very little—often just an unflattering portrait and two or three well-chosen words. Conal's work has ploughed through such fertile fields as George W. Bush's illegitimate presidency ("Hail to the Thief"), Bill Gates' monopolistic business practices ("Anti-Trust Me") and Jesse Helms' racist voting record ("Little White Lies"). If you're looking for a concise way of cutting to the chase with your messages, visit Conal's website, www.robbyconal.com. It's consistently funny, pointed, and inspiring.



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3250 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 1400
Los Angeles, CA 90010

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Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.

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Why Sioux Falls is Talking About Sex

Parents and teenagers in a conservative South Dakota city are conversing more often and openly about sex thanks to advocates who took a chance with their campaign's message but none with its planning.

"Bye, Mom!" the teenage girl calls as she grabs her purse from the kitchen table and heads for the door.

"Where you going, dear?" her mother asks.

"I'm going to Tim's. We're going to watch a movie, but we'll probably mess around 'til we have sex."

"Okay," Mom chirps without a hint of concern in her voice. "Call if you're going to be late."

"You know I won't," the daughter replies just as pleasantly.

This bizarre exchange, just thirty seconds in a 13-week campaign that played out across all media in Sioux Falls last year, helped drive thousands of parents and teens to the same website, *DontTellMyParents.org*. For kids, the site provides clear and concise information about the risks of early and unprotected sex. For parents, it offers encouragement to have some version of "The Talk" before it's too late. And for public interest communicators, the entire campaign stands as a small-market exemplar of sound planning, calculated risk-taking, and clear-eyed evaluation. ▶



► The story of the “Don’t Tell My Parents” campaign begins at the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation, which launched a Youth Safety Initiative in 2000. Two years into the program, foundation officers decided to focus on a single issue to concentrate their resources and increase the initiative’s impact on the lives of Sioux Falls’ kids. Thus began a planning, implementation and evaluation process that models several of the most important precepts of strategic communications:

Start by talking with the people you intend to help...

“We decided that if we were *really* going to impact youth safety,” says Sue Brown, president and CEO of the foundation, “we had to hear from the kids themselves.” Jenny Pohlman, a 17-year old high school senior who served on the foundation’s Youth Advisory Council, assisted in the recruiting of thirty additional high school students to join the conversation. This teen task force was then given the assignment of identifying a primary threat to youth safety that was not being sufficiently addressed by other initiatives.

With the help of a professional facilitator, the group spent several weeks considering a wide variety of issues including bullying and hazing, body image, smoking and drug abuse. “They decided that the issue that was most problematic and that nobody else was even *talk- ing* about was early and unprotected sex,” says Brown.

...and don’t forget the people who can help you.

“We determined the initiative’s budget in the worst possible way,” Brown candidly admits. “We said this is how much we can devote to a campaign. Now let’s hope we can get some donations of services and time.” Since the magic number was \$25,000—an exceedingly modest sum even for a small media market like Sioux Falls—the teens would require significant donations of both.

Fortunately, Brown had Paul Schiller on her board of directors. The founding partner of a local marketing and communications firm, Schiller was ready and willing to help, and he had his own ace in the hole: John Pohlman, the firm’s creative director and, by happy coincidence, father of Jenny. John volunteered to join the kids’ brainstorming sessions, and a close working relationship quickly developed between the teenagers and the agency. By campaign’s end, John Pohlman estimates that his agency had donated over \$50,000 in creative services, and that \$7,000 of purchased advertising time had helped bring in over \$100,000 in donated media.

Advertising is risky business, so embrace risk!

The line, “Don’t tell my parents!” emerged from the kids’ brainstorming, and John

Pohlman immediately felt it had great potential. “It just captured the whole division between what parents

were thinking and what was actually going on with kids,” he says. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and a statewide study bore out this disconnect: 92% of teens nationally who had sex while in high school reported losing their virginity in their own homes; nearly 70% reported this happened while a parent was there.

Together, the agency and the kids chose a controversial image as the visual signature for their campaign: a teenage girl’s splayed legs (*see illustration.*)

Pohlman knew this would be a tough sell in a city of “conservative Germans and Norwegians who would rather assume the best and look away,” but he also recognized that the modestly budgeted campaign needed to cut through the clutter if it was going to be seen at all. The city’s largest billboard operator refused to run the provocative ads, but the foundation courageously went ahead in the belief that the message was just disturbing enough. (*To view samples of the print, billboard and TV ads, go to www.l-s.com/OurWork/ DontTell.cfm.*)

Target the audience whose actions will matter most.

A campaign encouraging parents and teens to talk more about sex has two audiences by definition, but the creative team wisely decided to focus on the group that would be more responsive. “Teens think they’re bulletproof,” says John Pohlman. “They

approach the issue thinking the worst thing that could happen is they get caught.” Parents, on the other hand, are naturally concerned about their children’s welfare. Accordingly, the ads were designed to depict and entertain both audiences but to speak loudest to the parents.

Measure it, fix it, and try again.

The foundation commissioned Augustana College to evaluate the campaign’s impact, and the numbers reflect strong awareness:

80% of the 400 residents surveyed

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recalled the TV spots, 50% said they discussed the ads at work, and 50% had heard of the web site. More significantly, *DontTellMyParents.org* attracted 8,000 unique users during the 13-week campaign, an impressive number considering Sioux Falls has only 32,000 households with Internet access.

“We’re not comfortable with awareness only,” notes Sue Brown, so the foundation has doubled the campaign budget for 2004 and will allocate up to \$10,000 per year over the next three years specifically to evaluate behavior change. Given the impact so far, it appears likely that “Don’t Tell My Parents,” a campaign seemingly intent on *discouraging* communication, will have precisely the opposite effect. ■

