



## NPR: On The Media Just Say Know

June 12, 2009



Methamphetamine addiction has overwhelmed many western states. So in 2005 the Montana Meth Project was launched. The group approached the meth crisis as a consumer marketing problem and created a shocking ad campaign that's spread to 7 states. Nitsa Zuppas Executive, director of the Seibel Foundation, told us last year that the ads work.

So gore is what works for anti-smoking ads, what about anti-drug ads?

[CLIP]:

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

ZELDA: I had sex with guys for, for money. I had sex with guys for meth. I'd do anything - to get drugs. I could pretty much sell any part of my body and it'd be okay if I got high later that night. My name is Zelda. I'm 16. I'm from Elmo, Montana. I started doing meth when I was 13.

[END CLIP]

BOB GARFIELD: That radio spot was put out by the Meth Project, launched in 2005 to address the growing epidemic of crystal meth addiction in the Western United States. The project has since been adopted in seven states, including Wyoming.

Last year we spoke with Nitsa Zuppas, Executive Director of the Seibel Foundation, which started the Meth Project. At that time, Wyoming had yet to join the project, but in neighboring Montana, where the project began, the ads were proving extremely effective.

Zuppas said that while the two states had equally stringent pseudoephedrine laws, meth use shot up in Wyoming and down in Montana.

NITSA ZUPPAS: When we first started in the State of Montana, half of the male prison population was there because of meth. Sixty-five percent of the female prison population, half the childcare cases, were because of meth, and we were number five in the country for meth use. Today, Montana now ranks number 39 for meth use, down from number 5. So it's a 70 percent decrease in adult meth use.

BOB GARFIELD: There's one spot that shows otherwise ordinary kids so under the thrall of the drug that they do a home invasion robbery. There's kids abandoning a friend who's having a seizure, just throwing the friend by the entrance to a hospital emergency room. Extremely disturbing, but disturbing historically has not necessarily been a guaranteed way of getting through to young people who tend to think of themselves as invulnerable. Why did you go in this direction?

NITSA ZUPPAS: So the way that we approached this campaign was much like you would, you know, approach a consumer marketing problem where, you know, the consumer is the teen, and

what we wanted to do was make sure that teens knew exactly what that product was. So we spent a lot of time listening to teens about what they thought and felt about methamphetamine, about anti-drug advertising, about general advertising, and what they thought would work.

You know, we learned the first thing we needed to do was have someone communicate with them that they could relate to. So what you'll see in the TV ads is we start with someone who, you know, could be them, and then show the decision and then the outcomes.

The other thing that we learned in the market research was there were lots of things that kids thought were cool about methamphetamine, which is a really scary prospect. You know, 44 percent, before we started the campaign, saw great benefit in using the drug, 24 percent said they saw little to no risk and 66 percent said it was readily available.

This is one of the most highly addictive, destructive drugs, and they think it's no big deal to try, and people are offering it to them.

BOB GARFIELD: It is well documented that teenagers are consuming less and less of traditional media, and they're even watching less television. So it must be a challenge, in the first instance, just to reach your target.

NITSA ZUPPAS: What we do is develop a plan to make sure that we reach, on average, 70 to 90 percent of teens three to five times a week, through a combination of avenues – the Internet, TV, radio, billboards, near schools, near shopping malls, and then in terms of the print, you know, high school newspapers, you know, posters in the schools, things of that sort, to make sure that, you know, we are reaching kids where they are.

BOB GARFIELD: Now, earlier I made reference to a spot about a home invasion. But, in some sense, all of this advertising is a kind of home invasion because it just shows up uninvited on your television or on your radio. Have you had complaints from those who really, for all the problems with drug abuse in Montana, really don't wish themselves to be assaulted in this fashion?

NITSA ZUPPAS: Yeah, you know, we learned a lot. We continue to evolve the campaign and certainly have mistakes that we learned from. Initially when we launched the campaign in Montana, we had the advertising on throughout the day, and we very quickly learned, basically in the first day, that it's really not appropriate when, you know, some parents just sit their small children in front of the TV as a babysitter and, and, you know, these ads come on. We shifted the media campaign to start after 7 p.m., which is entirely appropriate.

Before we launched it in Montana, we were, you know, wondering what kind of public response there would be. And we had thousands of people, you know, come out and support the program. The public response was just really, truly overwhelming.

BOB GARFIELD: Well Nitsa, thank you very much.

NITSA ZUPPAS: Thank you.

BOB GARFIELD: Nitsa Zuppas is executive director of the Seibel Foundation.