

Connecting Youth to Sexual Health Information (United States)

Issue: Improving Sex Education for the Teen Population

It was while standing in front of the Mission High School near her home in San Francisco, California that Deborah Levine, executive director of Internet Sexuality Information Services (ISIS-Inc.), a nonprofit she founded that develops “high-tech solutions for sexual health education,” conceived of a potential solution to a pressing public health problem.

Levine had recently been approached by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH) to develop a website to address rising rates of sexually transmitted diseases among at-risk youth. In 2005, rates of gonorrhea among African-American youth, ages 18 to 25, had gone up over 100 percent, with African-American women being infected by the disease at 12 times the rate of American women of Caucasian descent.

As she watched a flood of teenagers emerge from the school’s entrance, Levine was struck by how many were calling and texting their friends. So began her inquiry into how to use mobile phones as a health awareness and disease prevention tool.

Response: Reaching teens through text messaging

“The thing about mobile phones is that they’re small and can be used privately to access information anonymously,” says Levine. With 85 percent of the city’s youth owning a mobile phone, a text-based approach simply made sense.

ISIS-Inc. and SFPDH had a history of collaborating in using information and communication technologies to address public health challenges. Now, they were poised to enter new territory in using mobile technology to promote teen sexual health.

“ISIS brought its experience in technology, innovation, and working at the community level,” says Jeff Klausner, MD, SFPDH Deputy Health Officer. “We brought a long history of working in sexual health education and disease prevention, financial resources, and expertise in marketing, monitoring, and evaluation.”

As Levine began researching her idea, she learned of a similar initiative in London. In 2002, The Brook Advisory Centre, a national charitable organization, launched a text messaging service that United Kingdom (UK) youth could use to access sexual health information and referral services (see sidebar). Levine received helpful ideas from Brook staff and set out to design a solution to address the needs of at-risk youth in San Francisco. The service would soon become known as “SexInfo.”

A critical first step was informing and engaging local community members. ISIS-Inc. and SFPDH identified representatives of community organizations (e.g., high school health programs, public clinic staff serving African-American youth, juvenile



Credit: ISIS-Inc.

CASE STUDY 4 CONTINUED

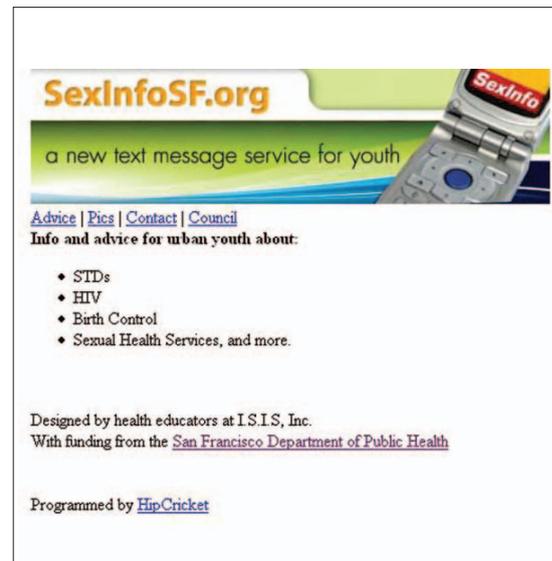
probation officers, and local clergy) to serve on an Advisory Board. The group provided valuable feedback during the planning stage, and was consulted regularly thereafter.

Focus groups were also held with young African-American men and women to determine their needs and how they preferred to access sexual health information. Questions focused on young people's existing knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), their sources of information, and their use of technology, including cell phones. "One hundred percent said this would be a great way to reach them and their peers," says Levine. Focus group discussions also emphasized the need for an 'opt-in' service, whereby users would control the type of information they received and when. "They didn't want anyone pinging them with messages or asking them to get tested for an STD," says Levine.

Based on this research, ISIS health educators initiated the content development phase of the project. They began by identifying key questions that sexually active youth, ages 12 to 24, most needed

answers to when it came to their reproductive health.

SexInfo was also designed to provide youth with information on where they could access free, confidential sexual health services. To address this need, ISIS-Inc. staff mapped youth-oriented clinical and social services in communities in or near where those young people they sought to reach lived. Staff then visited the clinics to gauge their relevance to youth.



Credit: ISIS-Inc.

“Ask Brook”: Providing Young People in the United Kingdom with Sexual Health Information

In 2002, The Brook Advisory Centre, a UK charity, launched an enhanced “Ask Brook” information service providing young people with sexual health knowledge and support via telephone, the Internet, and text message.

To access the service via mobile phone, young people text BRK, followed by their postcode, to 81222. Subsequently, they receive information regarding sexual health services in their area. They can also select standardized responses to questions relating to contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and other sexual health issues. In 2006 and 2007, the service received an average of 100 text message queries per month.

According to Lisa Bartlett, Ask Brook Programme Manager, a major benefit of text-based services is that they are confidential and appeal to young people who are intimidated at the thought of talking about sensitive issues. “Once up and running, such services don’t require a lot of resources beyond promotion,” she says. Brook benefits from its name recognition and 40-year history. Given its relationship with local government and national health services, Brook is able to promote the service without investing significant ongoing resources.

For more information, visit: www.brook.org.uk

Developing the Technology and Launching the Service

ISIS hired HipCricket, Inc., a mobile marketing firm in Australia, to program the service and ensure the confidentiality of users. Next came the task of working with mobile operators to provide mobile phone subscribers with access to the service. HipCricket offered to let ISIS-Inc. use its five-digit ‘short code’ during the project’s start-up phase. Levine was then able to work through an aggregator in the United States to obtain the short code (61827) now being used to access SexInfo. Short codes are generally used to market or promote a product or service to mobile users.

Prior to launching SexInfo, ISIS-Inc. worked with Youth United Through Health Education (YUTHE), a program of SFDPH, to develop marketing materials and test their appeal among local youth. Outreach materials included posters, palm-sized cards, and bus shelter ads. To engage parents and community members, ISIS-Inc. created a companion website (www.sextextsf.org) where the public could learn about the service and view the content of the text messages online. ISIS-Inc. has also created a mobile WAP (wireless application protocol) site that can be viewed on mobile phones (m.sexttext.org).

SexInfo launched formally on 24 April 2006. Following the initial media campaign, ISIS-Inc. and SFDPH explored creative means of reminding youth about the service. One of these involved producing a public service announcement for television featuring a popular rap musician, Mistah F.A.B. The announcement was broadcast locally on Black Entertainment Television and MTV and is now available on YouTube.

Outcome: Texting the Relevant Information to Teens— Anywhere, Anytime

During the first 25 weeks of the project (April–October 2006), 4,500 individuals accessed the service, with 2,500 taking the steps to retrieve content and referrals. The top three messages accessed were: “What 2 do if ur condom broke,” “2 find out about STDs” and “if u think ur pregnant.” Table 1 demonstrates the number of inquiries per message.¹²

Table 1. Most Popular Messages

Most Popular	Message	Inquiries
#1	A1 (if ur condom broke)	523
#2	C3 (to find out about STDs)	486
#3	B2 (if u think ur pregnant)	372
#4	D4 (to find out about HIV)	277
#5	E9 (if ur sexually active)	199
#6	F6 (if they’re cheating on u)	181
#7	F8 (if ur not sure u want to have sex)	158
#8	E7 (if u think u might be gay)	110
#9	E5 (Need to speak to some one now!)	78
#10	G11 (if u need a place to stay)	59
#11	F10 (if someone’s hurting u)	44

“Working with the government—and in our case, the public health department—has helped enormously with evaluation efforts,” says Andrew Woodruff, ISIS-Inc. Program Director. “We’ve found that a text-based approach can get the information into people’s hands. They can be anywhere and access the information they need.”

¹²Levine, Deborah, et al., “SEXINFO: A Sexual Health Text Messaging Service for San Francisco Youth,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 98 (2008): 393–395.

Challenges: Meeting Teen Needs with a Relevant, Usable Service

In 2007, ISIS-Inc. made a number of changes to the service based on initial results and a usability test. The test was carried out by Youth United Through Health Education (YUTHE) team members—college students—who went out on the street with a video camera and a professional market researcher to document how young people used the service. Roughly half of the young people surveyed reported difficulty in navigating the SexInfo menu of options. To simplify the user's experience, ISIS-Inc. has shortened the number of questions from eleven to four. Now, rather than entering two digits (e.g., A1) to obtain an answer to a question, users need enter only one. These changes have increased the percentage of young people who get to the resources provided by over 100 percent.

ISIS-Inc. is now looking to expand the online component of SexInfo based on evidence that its target group uses mobile technology to surf the web. By adding wallpapers, ringtones, and other items of interest to youth, ISIS-Inc. seeks to reinforce the service's overall appeal and impact.

While getting the technology right is critical, SFDPH's Klausner emphasizes the importance of finding the right partner(s) to develop an effective solution. "Frustrations can emerge between governmental and non-governmental organizations because they have different styles," he says. To address these differences, Klausner stresses the importance of mutually establishing timelines and facilitating regular and open communication.

Health Info-Lines: A Promising Tool in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS

Health information lines, accessible via a mobile phone texting service, are increasingly being looked to as a tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. A new service, 'MyQuestion,' launched in Nigeria in November 2007, is directed at increasing HIV/AIDS awareness and promoting healthy behaviors among 10- to 25-year-olds. Through the service, young people can obtain answers to reproductive health-related questions by sending text messages, emailing, or calling a telephone hotline. Through providing varied options for accessing the service, it is hoped that even the most reluctant youth will find their comfort zone when it comes to asking sensitive questions.

During the first three months of the service, the mobile phone component has proven to be the most popular medium by far, with 14,000 text message responses sent to teenagers accessing the service.

A related monthly competition, 'MyAnswer,' invites young people to text in their answer to a question—for example, what is the difference between HIV and AIDS? Every month, ten of those who answer correctly win a prize. The contest encourages young people to research and reflect on issues that affect their health.

Both services are part of the wider eLearning pilot program, Learning About Living, in Nigeria. Learning about Living is funded by Oxfam Novib and the MacArthur Foundation and is being managed by One World UK, in collaboration with Action Health Incorporated, Butterfly Works, Nigerian Education Research & Development Centre, Federal Ministry of Education, Federal Ministry of Health, Education as a Vaccine Against Aids, and Girls' Power Initiative. To learn more, visit: www.learningaboutliving.com.



Credit: ISIS-Inc.

Next Steps: Expanding Text Services—To Other Cities and Other Public Health Issues

Steps are underway to adapt SexInfo’s approach to Washington, DC and Toronto, Canada. In Washington, ISIS-Inc. is working with the local government and Metro TeenAIDS, a community health organization, to adapt the SexInfo approach. Rather than have youth call into the service, messages will be “pushed out” to young people who have signed up to receive information. In Toronto, ISIS-Inc. is collaborating with the Toronto Department of Public Health and hopes to launch SexInfo there by summer 2008.

Looking ahead, Levine is encouraged about the prospects for more nonprofits to incorporate text-messaging services into their health education and disease prevention efforts. “The more mobile technology work that’s being done, the more costs will start to come down,” she says. “We’re still in the pioneering years of this in the U.S.”

To an ever-growing worldwide population conversant in text messaging, anonymous, mobile-enabled services that provide real-time sexual health information are proving an easy way to communicate sensitive information, anytime, anywhere. Expanding these services to new geographic areas, and across other health issues, is a natural next step in the process of improving public access to health information through mobile phones. ■