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The Destructive Influence of Imaginary Peers

By TINA ROSENBERG

We humans irrationally think we're rational. We think that we decide how to behave by weighing the pros and cons. In reality, the strongest influence on our decisions is the example of the people around us — even, oddly enough, when they are imaginary.

Like most universities, Northern Illinois University in DeKalb has a problem with heavy drinking. In the 1980s, the school was trying to cut down on student use of alcohol with the usual strategies. One campaign warned teenagers of the consequences of heavy drinking. "It was the 'don't run with a sharp stick you'll poke your eye out' theory of behavior change," said Michael Haines, who was the coordinator of the school's Health Enhancement Services. When that didn't work, Haines tried combining the scare approach with information on how to be well: "It's O.K. to drink if you don't drink too much — but if you do, bad things will happen to you."

That one failed, too. In 1989, 45 percent of students surveyed said they drank more than five drinks at parties. This percentage was slightly higher than when the campaigns began. And students thought heavy drinking was even more common; they believed that 69 percent of their peers drank that much at parties.

But by then Haines had something new to try. In 1987 he had attended a conference on alcohol in higher education sponsored by the United States Department of Education. There Wes Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and Alan Berkowitz, a psychologist in the school's counseling center, presented a paper that they had just published on how student drinking is affected by peers. "There are decades of research on peer influence — that's nothing new," Perkins said at the meeting. What was new was their survey showing that when students were asked how much their peers drank, they grossly overestimated the amount. If the students were responding to peer pressure, the researchers said, it was coming from imaginary peers.

The "aha!" conclusion Perkins and Berkowitz drew was this: maybe students' drinking behavior could be changed by just telling them the truth.

Haines surveyed students at Northern Illinois University and found that they also had a distorted view of how much their peers drink. He decided to try a new campaign, with the theme "most students drink moderately." The centerpiece of the campaign was a series of ads in the Northern Star, the campus newspaper, with pictures of students and the

caption "two thirds of Northern Illinois University students (72%) drink 5 or fewer drinks when they 'party.'"   (See here for Haines's thorough description of the campaign and here for lessons from a later, also successful, campaign at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.)

Haines's staff also made posters with campus drinking facts and told students that if they had those posters on the wall when an inspector came around, they would earn $5. (35 percent of the students did have them posted when inspected.) Later they made buttons for students in the fraternity and sorority system — these students drank more heavily — that said "Most of Us," and offered another $5 for being caught wearing one. The buttons were deliberately cryptic, to start a conversation.

After the first year of the social norming campaign, the perception of heavy drinking had fallen from 69 to 61 percent. Actual heavy drinking fell from 45 to 38 percent. The campaign went on for a decade, and at the end of it NIU students believed that 33 percent of their fellow students were episodic heavy drinkers, and only 25 percent really were – a decline in heavy drinking of 44 percent.

NIU was the first large-scale trial of an idea developed in parallel by Perkins and by Robert Cialdini, now a professor emeritus of psychology at Arizona State University and the author of the book "Influence," which is, well, influential.

Bad behavior is usually more visible than good. It's what people talk about, it's what the news media report on, it's what experts focus on. Experts are always trying to change bad behavior by warning of how widespread it is, and they take any opportunity to label it a crisis. "The field loves talking about the problems because it generates political and economic support," said Perkins.

This strategy might feel effective, but it's not — it simply communicates that bad behavior is the social norm. Telling people to go against their peer group never works. A better strategy is the reverse: give people credible evidence that among their peers, good behavior is the social norm.

The best-known application of social norming comes from the company Opower, where Cialdini is chief scientist. If your utility company is a client, then you'll get a gas or electric bill that compares your energy usage with that of your neighbors in similar-size houses. It gives you a smiley face if you are doing well — two if you are in the top 20 percent — and provides tips on how you can save more energy. Opower cuts usage by 2 percent or more, and sustains those cuts.

Social norming is an obvious strategy for reducing drug and alcohol use, but it can be used to curb other behaviors too.   Haines now runs a consulting firm that helps schools and communities use social norms to reduce alcohol and tobacco use. Perkins and others have carried out successful applications of social norming against bullying – people are less likely to bully and less likely to be passive bystanders when they know that most

students disapprove of the practice and applaud intervention. Berkowitz works with universities, the military, and the United Nations to use social norming to reduce sexual violence and promote intervention by bystanders.

Cialdini has run successful experiments using social norming to reduce littering, increase recycling and protect wood from theft at the Petrified Forest National Park (telling people "please don't remove the wood" and showing a lone thief inside a red circle and slash worked five times better than telling people that many past visitors have removed wood, with a picture of three thieves). The strategy has even helped encourage hotel guests to reuse their hotel towels. It turns out that "most guests re-use their towels" is 26 percent more effective than "please protect the environment by reusing your towels."

Farther afield: Britain changed the dunning letters it sent to tax scofflaws to "9 out of 10 people in Britain pay their tax on time," and collected £5.6 billion (about $8.5 billion) more in overdue revenue in 2009-10 than it had the year before.   (The details are in a Harvard Business Review story called "98 Percent of HBR Readers Love This Article.")

It seems that almost anything you would want to nag people about can be more effectively done by instead telling them how much everyone else is doing the right thing. If you want young people to vote, don't tell them how many people aren't voting. Tell them how many are.   Safe sex, anyone? Hand washing? School attendance?

Why does this work? How could it possibly affect my behavior to know that other guests in a hotel re-use their towels?

Cialdini says that when we don't know what to do, we look around to see what our peers are doing. From that we learn what is appropriate, and what is practical.

With traditional approaches to behavior change, an outsider comes in, warns you of the dire consequences of your behavior and tells you what to do differently. That often just makes people defensive.

With social norming, you don't tell anybody what to do. You just tell them what people like them are doing. It's a bit like the positive deviance approach I wrote about in February: your focus is on spreading the word about what a community is doing right.

One of the most important keys to making social norming work is salience. "We can only hold one thing in consciousness at a time – and it is that thing that drives behavior," said Cialdini, who is writing his next book about the topic. Success is more likely if the social norming message hits people just when they are about to make that behavioral decision.

Social norming is also most effective when the evidence about the norm is highly credible and accurate.   Also, it helps to compare people's behavior to the closest peer group possible. For example, Cialdini's towel study found that people were even more likely to re-use towels when told that most people who had stayed in the same room did so.

But what if the immediate peer group is behaving badly? Social normers have ways around it. If a neighborhood's record on recycling isn't so good, they talk about the city, or the country. Or they use absolute numbers, not percentages: "join the millions of people who are recycling." Or they talk about what people approve of, not what they do – "most Americans endorse recycling."

A trap lurks here. If people know the true social norm, those that are doing worse will improve their behavior. But this works universally only if we live in the anti-Lake Wobegon, where we're all below average. Some people, of course, are above average. Knowing that their peers are slackers might turn them into slackers, too.

This is called the boomerang effect, and it is real. Opower initially found that households that were saving a lot of energy relaxed their efforts once they know how other people were doing. But Opower officials solved the problem by providing rewards for good behavior. Well, a computer did – the "reward" was a smiley face or two on their bill. That small change kept people from backsliding, and the boomerang stopped.

One of the mysteries of social norming is that although it is being used by some people in several fields, it isn't used by a lot of people. Even institutions that used it successfully in the past have abandoned it when the champion left.

Why isn't this idea more widely used? One reason is that it can be controversial. Telling college students "most of you drink moderately" is very different than saying "don't drink." (It's so different, in fact, that the National Social Norms Institute, with headquarters at the University of Virginia, gets its money from Anheuser Busch — a decision that has undercut support for the idea of social norming). The approach angers people who lobby for a strong, unmuddied message of disapproval — even though, of course, disapproval doesn't reduce bad behavior, and social norming does.

Cialdini thinks that the idea hasn't caught on more widely because it works underneath our conscious radar. "People don't see themselves as easily influenced by those around them," he said. When he asks people what would make them change, they rank "what my peers are doing" dead last. But when he tests what really works, it comes in first. Following the crowd is primal. "You don't have to change the social norm," said Haines. "You just have to show people what it is."

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