

NETREACH: ONLINE PEER OUTREACH TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ACROSS AUSTRALIA

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Introduction NetReach was a peer-based sexual health promotion outreach program targeting Australian men who have sex with men (MSM) via Internet chat rooms and profile sites. It was a collaborative effort of the AIDS Councils of Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania and the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

In essence peer volunteers and peer staff entered existing commercial online chat rooms in a similar way to peer outreach at social, community and sexual venues. The program aimed to be implemented in a way that respected and support the users of this virtual environment and the online community they had created.

Outreach

Outreach protocols were developed the basis of past experience in outreach and the participation of peers.

A six month development and trial period was conducted in 2006. There were 304 outreach shifts (2-3 hours per shift), with exposure to 27,672 people and 460 (2.5%) people engaged in more detailed online chat with peer outreachers. Consistent data was collected across the five agencies.

Then in May 2008 a forum was held with key online outreach staff from participating agencies to discuss experiences and sustainability of the program and why some had maintained the interventions and why some had ceased Internet outreach in this format.

18 month follow up:

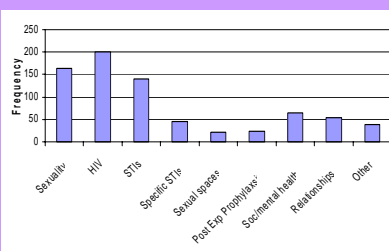
Feedback from AIDS Councils 18 months after the trial period focused around:

- challenges of sustaining outreach with limited numbers of participants;
- limited capacity to track direct impact;
- benefits of linking outreach more directly to online social marketing strategies; and
- the need to be part of the rapidly developing context of online communities.

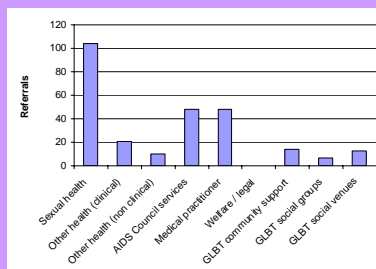
Agencies had experienced continued cultural changes in the online environments and needed to constantly adapt to meet these changes.

Participating agencies considered online outreach now to be a standard part of their community outreach programs.

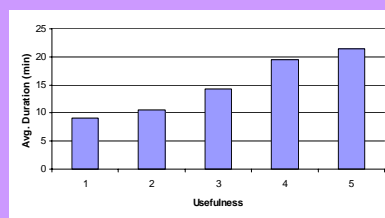
Frequency of topics discussed



Number and type of referrals



Chat duration by peer outreach rating of usefulness to participant



Outreach comments

Although early in the project we received some negative feedback about our presence in chat rooms we now receive overwhelmingly positive feedback. Many members make a post in the main rooms saying hello and thanking us for being in the room.

Community members are used to us being in the chat rooms; or in fact expecting us to be there! We also receive thanks and positive comments during chats with individual members.

The volume and quality of interactions on chat has been of a high quality. I believe the nature of chat rooms (and instant messaging) allow guys to think through questions more thoroughly than they would if they rang our service

Insights

- The online environment may change significantly in as little as six months, requiring the delivery of online outreach programs to be modified. Planning, funding and evaluation arrangements need to reflect this.
- Involving participants from the online community in the project was critical to maintain a level of cultural acceptance and credibility, adapt to rapid changes in culture and technology, and to sustain a reflexive approach.

Future Challenges

Organisations looking at online outreach need to consider their infrastructure, connections to online cultures, and flexibility of funding requirements before embarking on an investment into online outreach.

Full report is available at...www.afao.org.au