

PARTICIPATION IN ACTION



# Truth about friends helps to overcome peer pressure



Young people spread the message beyond the school gates via billboards and bus shelter posters

The pressure to conform and fit in is often at its most acute during the early teenage years. It is also a time when risk-taking behaviour and elements of the adult world are first experienced.

However, the majority of young people will not come into contact with alcohol, drugs or sexual relationships until well after they leave school – but that is not to say they won't pretend they have to their friends.

North-west-based organisation Social Sense has developed an innovative approach to overcoming this perception-reality gap through PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) lessons with year nine and 10 pupils.

R U Different? is a social norms campaign run in schools nationwide to help pupils understand the often considerable gap between their perception of what their peers are up to and the reality.

**“Students tell us that they believe 50 per cent of their year group smokes, yet 90 per cent never have. The same misperception applies to alcohol”**

Gary Lovatt, founder of Social Sense

Pupils initially undertake an online, wholly confidential, survey that asks them about their own experiences and what they believe their immediate circle of friends and the wider year group are doing.

Gary Lovatt, founder of Social Sense, says that pupil input plays a part in every stage of the programme's delivery. “Vital to the success of this programme is that the students are involved in the feedback sessions, and that we disseminate positive messages about their behaviours.

“At a very basic level, this means the use of interactive keypads at the first feedback session, where students are asked to state what they believe to be the true statistics for smoking, and so on. The gasps as they get it very wrong are quite something to hear.”

Lovatt says the findings have been remarkably consistent across all areas: “For example, students tell us that they believe that more than 50 per cent of their year group smokes, yet the reality is that almost 90 per cent have never smoked.

“The same misperception applies to alcohol – teenagers think 90 per cent of their friends drink, when in fact 85 per cent of them never or rarely do.”

In September 2011, Swindon Borough Council

ran it in four schools. Following analysis of the survey results, a series of targeted interventions were undertaken to test whether it was possible to positively affect misperceptions, with an immediate priority of tackling those around alcohol.

The programme was split into three tiers, with the aim of testing what degree of feedback and intervention with students gave the strongest positive result. All schools undertook an interactive feedback session with survey participants, where the results were delivered and fully discussed. Tier 1 schools stopped here. Tier 2 schools engaged in an intensive internal marketing programme involving the use of posters highlighting key messages, plus a Smartphone app that asked participants how well they really knew their friends – revealing the gaps between perception and reality. Finally, in Tier 3 schools, the message was spread beyond the school gates via billboards and bus shelter posters.

A key element in the Tier 2 and 3 interventions was the inclusion of the participating students in the marketing messages developed for each school.

Lovatt says: “In Tier 2 and 3 schools, we had posters using photography of the actual students from each school that participated in the survey. They really create a talking point when put up all around the school and every student has been incredibly proud and excited to be involved.

“Elsewhere, we've also worked with pupil enterprise teams to develop the school's interventions, and with arts and theatre groups.”

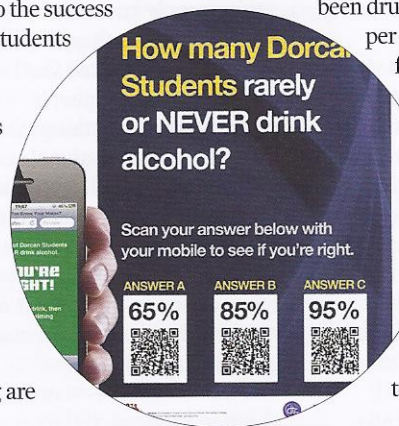
In June 2012, a second survey was undertaken, asking the same questions. In those schools where significant interventions were undertaken, the perception of the numbers of students who had been drunk in the last week dropped by 13 per cent and the reported behaviour for those who said they themselves had been drunk in the last week reduced 36 per cent.

Since 2009, more than 30,000 young people in 10 local authority areas have taken part in R U Different? In Swindon, it has since been extended to a further three schools, and participation nationally is set to double by 2014.

Cherry Jones, acting director of public health at Swindon Borough Council, says: “Results in Swindon show us that this approach can

change perceptions and behaviours, and later on in life, when these young people aren't smoking and drinking to excess, they will have better health outcomes. Therefore this prevention agenda is important to us.”

For more details, visit [www.rudifferent.co.uk](http://www.rudifferent.co.uk).  
By Gabriella Józwiak



Smartphone app asked pupils how well they knew their friends