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| pn-logo-on-wte | **2013 ACE Critique and Awards Program** ***NMSU Media Productions — Jeanne Gleason*** |

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| ***Don’t Be Gross*****Class 46:** **Marketing and media relations programs for targeted publics** | http://ace.nmsu.edu/2013/DBG/Class17DBGlogo.jpg |
| **To see examples of media tools used in marketing (the above image is only a sample), please visit:** [ACE.nmsu.edu/2013/DBG/Class46DBG.html](http://ace.nmsu.edu/2013/DBG/Class46DBG.html) |

Overview:

This marketing campaign was designed for multi-ethnic middle schools to raise their awareness of positive steps they can take to prevent illness. Because research shows the most powerful way to reach this age group is through peer networks and social norms, the *Don’t Be Gross* campaign used a “viral marketing” strategy, with students posting the videos and slogan on their favorite social media sites.

The Problem:

Food safetyeducation is especiallyimportant foryouth populations, because changes in the educational system mean home economics is no longer taught in most schools. Growing reliance on fast food means children may no longer learn safe food handling at home. As a result, many teens have limited food preparation experience, have never learned basic food safety principles, and, thus, lack the critical knowledge needed to protect themselves. Yet national surveys indicate that middle school teens, especially from ethnically diverse populations, have growing responsibilities related to family food shopping and preparation, even serving as caregivers to young children and the elderly in their homes.

A critical challenge in reaching middle school populations is motivating them to actually perform healthy behaviors once they know them. Traditional health education programs increase knowledge but rarely lead to sustained improved behavior.

The Strategy:

The effect of social networks on health behaviors has been demonstrated by hundreds of studies, and these effects are especially important for adolescents. Peer social networks can help youth gain vital safe food handling skills and shift perceptions about appropriate or acceptable food and health behaviors. Digital communications, including social networks, text messaging, and blogging, are widely used by teens to consciously influence their peer networks. This strategy involves creating a message that is so unique or entertaining that individuals share it via social networks. Although advertisers have had great success with such viral marketing, health educators have rarely capitalized on it.

Purpose (goals, objectives, need):

The *Don’t Be Gross* marketing communications campaign is part of a USDA grant project, with all media tools produced by NMSU’s Media Productions and outreach delivered by Rutgers University in New Jersey middle schools. The campaign was based on preliminary research into the importance of peer networks and social norms on food safety behaviors of middle school youth. The **goal** was to use viral marketing to distribute messages through pre-existing social networks. The **objective** was to create social norms within the student body deeming certain behaviors *really gross*, such as sharing water bottles, not washing hands properly or eating food that fell on the floor. By establishing what is *gross*, visual storytelling may change behavior more efficiently and permanently than traditional forms of education.

Audience:

The pilot schools included 13 middle schools in New Jersey, with formative evaluation conducted both in New Jersey and in NMSU’s Learning Games Lab. New Jersey and New Mexico are ideal partners and well suited for developing media for diverse audiences. New Jersey has a highly diverse population, with 15% of residents self-identified as Black and 8% as Asian. Nearly 18% of the New Jersey population was born outside the United States. New Mexico is ideally suited for development targeting the Hispanic and Native American populations: with 47% self-identified as Hispanic (highest percentage of Hispanic residents of any state) and 10% as Native American (third highest in the nation).

Secondary audiences included members of the students’ social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, or Google+. The audience for the YouTube animated videos expanded across the country.

Marketing/Promotion:

*Don’t Be Gross* had a robust marketing and promotional plan through 13 New Jersey schools during the initial research phase. The posters, wristbands, temporary tattoos, water bottles, and soap case key chains were distributed within the schools on a staggered basis, to allow researchers to analyze the hit data of the animated videos based on school release dates, and to measure behavioral change (such as use of soap in school bathrooms).

Role of each entrant for the project:

All media for this campaign, including posters, wristbands, temporary tattoos, soap case key chains and online animated videos, were designed in New Mexico State University’s Media Productions Studios by a team of animators, programmers, and instructional designers and a formative evaluation specialist.

Extent to which project met goals and objectives:

All media tools underwent extensive formative evaluation conducted both in New Jersey and in NMSU’s Learning Games Lab in New Mexico. This formative evaluation found that the campaign media and media channels were ideally suited to meet the project’s goals and objectives. The statistical data and conclusions from the 13 middle school test sites are still being evaluated by Rutgers University and have not yet been published. However, the researchers indicate that the results were positive.

How diversity was incorporated into your entry:

During development of the messages and channels, the project’s developers and researchers were careful that all focus groups were representative of New Mexico’s Hispanic-majority student population and New Jersey’s highly diverse middle school populations. Because so many students are caregivers for younger siblings and the elderly in their homes, these messages about food safety are important to their families as well.