COMING OF AGE IN THE DIGITAL ERA: REACHING YOUTH WITH TECHNOLOGY
PSI’s programs are using modern information technology to reach youth with resources that empower them to make healthy choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Hotlines have been effective in reaching youth in Benin, Haiti, DRC and South Africa. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, Club en Conexión has gone virtual; its website gives youth a way to connect with each other and learn about comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues. Finally, PSI/Romania is using a combination of several technologies, including web-to-SMS messaging, social media and gaming to reach young men who have sex with men (MSM).

SITUATION ANALYSIS

With today’s rapid advances in technology, people all over the world are more connected than ever. These technologies impact everyone, yet one group of people is always up to date with the most cutting-edge technology available: youth. While the country context may differ, young people know what the newest technology is and how to use it.

Studies have shown that targeted technologies can change knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about SRH issues among youth. Since youth are a hard-to-reach population, the use of technology in youth health programming is especially important. Social or cultural norms about pre-marital sex can make it hard for youth to access services, and a lack of sexual health education leaves adolescents in the dark about many important issues. Technology allows them anonymity and the freedom to ask embarrassing questions. It can also connect youth to their peers with similar concerns and build stronger social support around SRH issues and desired behaviors. PSI is taking a youth-inspired approach to technology in health programming.

INTEGRATED RH/HIV HOTLINES IN BENIN AND HAITI

PSI/Benin has a long history of youth programming, and at the centre is Amour et Vie, a magazine by youth for youth focusing on sexual and reproductive health issues. Amour et Vie provided a perfect outlet to promote PSI/Benin’s ligne verte (toll-free hotline), when it was launched in 2007.

The ligne verte is staffed by trained counselors who speak a combined five languages. The line is open weekdays from 8am to 5:30pm. The peak hours for calls are from 10am to 2pm and most calls last about two minutes. Callers can ask confidential questions about family planning, HIV transmission, or other sexual health issues. When needed, they are referred to one of PSI/Benin’s 38 youth-friendly ProFam network clinics for sexual and reproductive health services, or a public clinic if no ProFam clinic is nearby.

With funding from the Dutch government through the Strategic Alliances for International NGOs (SALIN) program, PSI/Benin was able to extend the capacity of a hotline. They moved the counselors from the head office to a new call centre and expanded toll-free coverage from two to three of the four national mobile networks. They doubled the number of trained counselors from two to four. In 2009 the hotline received 78,773 calls – more than 300 per working day. From January to August 2010, the number of calls was already 66,381. PSI hotlines have also been unexpectedly successful with another hard-to-reach group: men. Seventy-seven percent of PSI/Benin’s ligne verte callers are male, as are 78 percent of hotline callers in Pakistan, and even 84 percent in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While men’s interest in SRH issues, including family planning, is encouraging, the disproportionately large number of male callers point to the need for further research to assess if gender issues, such as unequal access to phones, are causing this imbalance.

Trained counselors at PSI/Benin’s SRH hotline are male and female.
PSI/Haiti’s toll-free hotline has been one of the centerpieces of their youth outreach. A team of trained counselors from PSI’s local NGO partner, Fondation Promoteurs Objectif Zero SIDA (POZ), provides accurate HIV and reproductive health information to callers, the majority of whom are in their teens and twenties. PSI supports the hotline with SALIN funds from the Dutch government.

In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, much of the country’s infrastructure was demolished. However, within three weeks the call centre and the counselors were ready to resume operations. With the failure of telephone lines, only 75 calls were received in February. By March, the volume increased to 760, with equal numbers from men and women. From April to August, the counselors answered 2,022 calls. A refresher training was given after the earthquake, which featured a psychological support session for the counselors, who continue to provide support to callers while also dealing with their own traumas.

WEB PORTAL OF SRH INFORMATION FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN YOUTH

The branded intervention Club en Conexión was started in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua by PSI’s Latin American affiliate, PASMO (Pan-American Social Marketing Organization). The purpose of the clubs is to reach youth with sexual and reproductive health information in a variety of interesting ways.

In 2010, PASMO, working with local partners, launched the website www.clubenconexion.org to connect and communicate messages of healthy behaviors to young people across Central America. Users can create profiles, connect with friends, ask anonymous questions that are answered by trained staff, read blogs, and find information about radio programs and upcoming events in their community. In addition, the Club’s communications materials were adapted into interactive games featured on the site.

The Club website was developed specifically for Central American youth by a multi-disciplinary team including staff members from the behaviour change communications (BCC) department and marketing team. The main characters in this virtual world, Carlos and Carla, were redesigned in Manga Japanese animation to make them more appealing to the target audience. The site was pre-tested with youth, and Carla in particular went through several versions, since the youth supervisors thought she was too skinny for the healthy messages that the Club promotes. A diverse range of skin color and clothing style was also designed to be inclusive of all Central American youth.
From the launch in January 2010 through August 2010, the website has had about 25,000 visits. One of the main challenges has been keeping the information updated, especially for the young audience that will quickly turn elsewhere without new content to hold their attention. PASMO has recently hired a website manager to ensure that Club en Conexión’s content is updated weekly. This change has helped increase the traffic on the site, which increased from 4,317 visits in July, 2010 to 7,557 visits in August, 2010.

ROMANIA: REACHING MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN (MSM) WITH WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY

PSI/Romania’s HIV prevention program for MSM is a great example of combining many types of technology to form a comprehensive approach to healthy behaviors. At the centre is a web-based portal, www.totalgay.ro, which includes integration with Facebook and Twitter, anonymous instant chat system for MSM living with HIV, online medical and psychological counseling, and promotion of user generated content.

The portal also features a free web-to-SMS service, both for regular exchanges between individuals, who receive SMS with a short health promotion slogan inserted, and to notify past partners anonymously if they need to be tested for HIV. From July 2008 to June 2009, 21,116 unique visits were recorded on the web portal and by December 2009 the site reached 20,724 users in just one month.

The major challenge for the portal is to make users return to the website. The program continuously adds new features to the website, such as an “internetnovela,” which is a series of short videos that show the adventures of one young gay man who is faced with various choices. At the end of each video, the viewer clicks on one of the choices, which leads to the next video that shows how the event continues, based on that choice. Other initiatives include a digital photo competition and a campaign for a nation-wide cleaning/ ecology event.

PSI/Romania will pilot a pervasive gaming program during the first quarter of 2011. Pervasive games use mobile devices and GPS; the game progresses according to the player’s location. Pervasive gaming is a concept that is beginning to be used for marketing and tourism purposes but is also a novel tool to deliver social messages that have saturated the MSM community, particularly youth MSM.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Developing programs for youth using technology needs to involve a wide range of program staff, from the technical experts to the marketing team, and should always be pre-tested with the target audience. Finding the right developer or service provider is also key to success. In settings where technology is sometimes unreliable, working with the right service providers is essential to ensure accessibility. While these programs can have a wide reach for a low operating cost, it is necessary to maintain interest, either by updating information or expanding with new technologies.