

ADWEEK

Social Messages Seek Out New Tactics for Teens

As youths get more media-savvy, nonprofits find new ways to reach them

In the March 20 episode of *Raising Hope*, called “Poking Holes in the Story,” the mom, Virginia Chance, played by Martha Plimpton, borrows from her own experience as a teenage mother to try to persuade a young couple to wait before having sex. What viewers wouldn’t have known was that the story line was inspired by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Social messaging through TV isn’t new. Remember the “very special episodes” of shows warning you against the perils of sex and drugs? But as teens have become more wary of being preached to, nonprofit organizations have gotten more clever about how to reach teens without turning them off.

The campaign works with TV producers to help get its message out by briefing them on the campaign’s work, helping writers create story lines and guest-blogging on shows’ websites. While the campaign has worked with shows like *Parenthood*, *16 and Pregnant* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, they’ve also had a hand in pregnancy story lines on series from *Family Guy* to *How I Met Your Mother* to *Gossip Girl*. “When we became involved with *Gossip Girl*, we were asked, ‘How can you work with those people?’” said Marisa Nightingale, a senior advisor to the campaign. “But that story line about teen pregnancy is going to happen with or without us, so we want to be there to offer information.”

Other organizations like The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Kaiser Family Foundation’s Health Communication & Media Partnerships Program have also used TV to get their message out. In 2008, the Kaiser Foundation worked with *Grey’s Anatomy* on an episode, “Piece of My Heart,” that focused on mother-to-child HIV transmission. A week before the episode aired, a survey by the foundation found that about 15 percent of viewers were aware of the HIV transmission risk. A week after the show aired, that had risen to 61 percent.

As powerful as a dramatic story line can be, sometimes the best place to talk about serious issues is in an unexpected setting, said Tina Hoff, svp at the Kaiser Foundation. “Working with sitcoms is actually more effective when talking about HIV/AIDS because it makes the issue less serious,” she said.

As for whether nonprofits actually succeed in getting shows like *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* to deliver the precise social message they want, it may not matter in the end. University of North Carolina journalism professor Jane Brown, who studies media’s effect on adolescents’ health behaviors, said girls who saw at least one episode [of *16 and Pregnant*] were more likely to talk with friends and families about what it would be like if they got pregnant. “Even if a message isn’t exactly what health advocates would want it to be, at least viewers start talking about the issue,” she said.