

# **The WAGER Vol. 9(1) - “Play smart. Don’t bet more than you can lose.” Is anyone listening?**

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State lotteries use the persuasive power of advertising to attract consumers. In response to unprecedented gambling growth and availability, states in the United States are beginning to seek a balance in advertising by sponsoring advertisement campaigns to educate the public about the potential harms associated with gambling. For example, in 2000 Indiana spent \$11.5 million on advertising for its state lottery (Najavits et al., 2003). During the same period, the Indiana Problem Gambling Program also initiated a state-wide campaign to educate the public about the signs of problem gambling (PG) and to increase awareness about state resources. To evaluate the success of this campaign, Najavits, Grymala, and George (2003) administered a state-wide survey before and after the educational campaign.

During the “Indiana Problem Gambling Awareness Campaign,” advertisements ran on 18 radio stations, in 18 newspapers and were placed on prominent billboards across the state. A current public service advertisement is shown below. The campaign focused on the slogan “Play smart. Don’t bet more than you can lose.” During the campaign the governor declared an “Indiana Problem Gambling Awareness Week,” which featured presentations by nationally recognized speakers about problem gambling. Two weeks later, town hall meetings were held at eight locations throughout the state. The meetings focused on topics related to problem gambling and attracted local press coverage.

Najavits et al. conducted a survey to evaluate the impact and reach of the advertising campaign. The researchers administered a telephone survey to 400 randomly sampled Indiana residents (aged 18-54 years) before the campaign started and to another sample of 400 residents after the campaign ended. The post-campaign interviews were conducted six weeks after pre-campaign interviews. The survey gathered information about the respondent’s demographics, awareness of the campaign and knowledge of gambling and gambling problems generally.

The researchers found no significant differences between pre- and post-campaign responses on variables related to familiarity with the issue of PG, identification of PG warning signs, and awareness of state resources available to problem gamblers. Only 8.2% (32 of 392) of the post-campaign respondents reported ever seeing or hearing one of the advertisements; however 72% of those respondents who were aware of the campaign reported the ad increased their knowledge of PG. One respondent reported taking action based on the ad; the exact nature of the action was not reported. Respondents reported high levels of awareness about problem gambling, regardless of whether they had seen the advertisements. Overall, 99% of the pre and post-campaign respondents believed gambling could be addictive and 56% said they knew or had heard of someone with a problem. However, awareness of state resources for problem gambling was low both before and after the campaign. On average, respondents could identify only 2 of 7 gambling resources (e.g., GA, educational materials, toll-free referral line) offered by the state.

The researchers reported that the “Indiana Problem Gambling Awareness Campaign” had no discernible impact on problem gambling awareness. A closer look at the data suggests this might primarily be a function of the campaign’s reach. Possibly of clinical significance, 1 of the 32 people who heard or saw the campaign did access resources. Further, the majority of those who knew about the campaign reported that the ads increased their knowledge about problem gambling. This suggests the campaign’s message has potential; the problem might be that no one is hearing it. Indiana spent \$200,000 on this campaign and did not place any television advertisements. For comparison, Indiana spent \$11.5 million on advertising for its state lottery in 2000 (Najavits et al., 2003). In addition, the campaign ran for less than six weeks. The small sample size and limited number of respondents aware of the campaign prohibits more extensive evaluations of the campaign’s message and effectiveness.

Evaluating the success of an intervention is an important component of any public health campaign. The research described in this WAGER is an important acknowledgment of this tenet. It also serves as a reminder that designing successful public health campaigns requires not only an effective message, but also adequate dissemination of the message. Hopefully, cycles of evaluation followed by program improvements will stimulate the development of strong, effective problem gambling public health campaigns.

Comments on this article can be addressed to Rachel Kidman.

## **References**

Najavits, L., Grymala, L. D., & George, B. (2003). Can advertising increase awareness of problem gambling? A statewide survey of impact. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 17(4), 324-327.

The public service announcement image above was taken from <http://www.in.gov/cji/info/campaigns.htm>. Accessed 1/7/04