

How Texting Meets the Needs of Generation Y in a Public Health Setting in Santa Barbara County, California

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Santa Barbara County is located 90 miles north of Los Angeles and has 437,643 residents. Its racial/ethnic breakdown is 46% White/Caucasian, 45% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 2% Black.¹ The county's largest employers include hospitals, universities, agribusiness, restaurants, hotels, and public services. The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department (PHD) focuses on health promotion and prevention-related issues; it frames breastfeeding as a critical public health and social justice issue that decreases the risk of illnesses in both infants and mothers and saves health care dollars.^{2,4}

PHD's goal is to increase breastfeeding initiation and duration rates for mothers who are the least likely to breastfeed. This includes women/families of lower socioeconomic status and education, women/families of color, adolescents, and Spanish-speaking women; taken together, these women and families are the ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse and are located in geographically and socially isolated areas throughout Santa Barbara County. This population is traditionally underserved and has a high level of need.

"Generation Y" encompasses people born between 1980 and 2000.⁵ They rely heavily on mobile communication, are ethnically diverse, and are more highly educated than previous generations.⁵ While many have struggled to find stable employment, Gen Y, or Millennials, are currently the largest group in the workforce.⁵

In 2011, PHD began a groundbreaking texting program to meet the needs of Millennials within its Nutrition Services Division, which houses WIC. Research has shown that two-way texting communication is helpful as participants feel more comfortable when they know that someone will receive and respond to their text messages. Texting has effectively displaced e-mail and phone calls as the most common form of communication today.⁵ Americans under the age of 55 text more than they call or e-mail.^{6,7}

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PHD's award-winning and internationally recognized two-way Bfed texting program, run by PHD's WIC division, was the first of its kind in the United States. The program's goals were to meet the needs of Gen Y, use targeted social marketing to promote breastfeeding messages, and increase breastfeeding rates through education and support.

Participants agreed to "opt-in" to a secured, HIPAA-compliant texting system. Automated breastfeeding text messages go out on a regular basis from a texting platform to the participant's cell phone. The participant can then text back and the message goes to a Web-based program through which the Breastfeeding Peer Counselor can type back via computer.

Highlights of the Bfed texting program include the following:⁸

- Web-based texting interface.
- Participant opts-in securely; the program does not use long codes or phone numbers, which are not secured.
- Language flexibility (Spanish and English).
- Automated breastfeeding message service.
- Two-way communications; can also be used for caseload management (e.g., touching base, answering questions, scheduling appointments).
- Meets all confidentiality regulations.

Text conversations can be meaningful. Participants have stated the following:

- "I feel supported because I knew nothing about breastfeeding."
- "I feel confident and that I am important. Thank you."
- "I enjoyed receiving messages with information since I am a first-time mom; it's nice to know."

Sustainability needed to be a vital component of the project. The automated messaging system has saved significant staff time and enabled staff to spend more time in the clinic to provide direct support for breastfeeding issues. The texting program saves public health dollars by reducing the number of full-time employees needed for programmatic success. Through the texting program, PHD's WIC program is able to reach more participants with less staff effort, increasing its effectiveness.

Lessons learned include the following:

- Ensure that programmatic staff converse with participants both verbally and via text message.
- Maintain privacy and data control by ensuring that staff do not use their personal cell phones.
- Ensure participants can receive texts (not all prepaid phones allow them).
- A supportive administration is key to success.
- Funding is sometimes difficult to secure and maintain.

Santa Barbara WIC has some of the highest breastfeeding rates in California and the United States.⁷ WIC now has a section on the texting platform for appointment reminders; other programs at PHD are looking into this valuable two-way secured texting system. Last year, Santa Barbara County WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Program received the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Loving Support of Excellence Gold Premiere Award; only six agencies in the United States have received this level of award. PHD's successful Bfed texting program was a big part of the reason the peer counseling program was recognized.

References

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