



AIDS in Thailand: Overcoming Uncomfortable Conversations

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was poised to overwhelm the country of Thailand. Heavily dependent on tourist dollars, Thai national leadership were quick to deny that the AIDS epidemic had reached their country. As a traditional society, Thailand leaders were additionally hesitant to discuss the intimate details of how human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) spread.

Unfortunately, Thailand was not in a position to wait to have difficult conversations. Although technically illegal in the country, Thailand had long hosted a billion-dollar commercial sex industry whose workers and customers were particularly at risk for infection. The situation was so concerning that at one point it was estimated that up to four million Thais would be infected with HIV by the year 2000 and over 400,000 dead.

Fortunately, the number of HIV infections in Thailand today is considerably lower than previous estimates thanks to a number of ingenious - and sometimes controversial - interventions. For nearly two decades, Under-Told Stories followed this story, providing a unique longitudinal perspective of the ground-breaking tactics utilized by Thailand's religious leaders and celebrities to discourage HIV infection.

In particular, this learning module takes a deeper look at the work of Thailand's AIDS czar Mechai Viravaidya, a Thai celebrity, commonly known as the Condom King of

Thailand. Mechai and his organization, the Population and Community Development Association, has encouraged not only new thinking but new behaviors in Thailand regarding population control and HIV and AIDS prevention. Mechai's work illustrates the importance of overcoming barriers, no matter how uncomfortable, which keep communities from accessing the products, services, and behaviors which serve them.

Story Links

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2002/10/22/aids-challenge-in-thailand/>

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2007/06/12/thailand-fights-aids-epidemic/>

Required Readings Melnick, G. A. (2007). From family planning to HIV/AIDS prevention to poverty alleviation: A conversation with Mechai Viravaidya. *Health Affairs*, 26(6), w670-w677. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/pdf/10.1377/hlthaff.26.6.w670>

Learning Themes/Topics for Consideration

- AIDS and HIV in Thailand
- Best practices in enabling a behavior change campaign
- The importance of understanding audience
- Responsive social interventions that meet the needs of the community
- Overcoming competition

Preparation

Students are asked to watch the first and second video, in order, and read the required reading in preparation for this assignment. At the instructor's discretion, the questions listed can be assigned to be completed before class, in writing, to ensure a better-informed discussion.

Behavior change campaigns, also known as social marketing campaigns, are complicated, intentional, and integrated efforts to move an audience beyond awareness and into action. From providing malaria-nets for tropical villages to encouraging suburban school children to eat more vegetables, when done well,

these campaigns are powerful weapons that change behaviors, encourage new habits, and even save lives.

A successful behavior change campaign requires: A deep understanding of the motivations of the audience; the ability to be heard above competing messages; community buy-in; issue relevancy; and in some cases, uncomfortable conversations. To be done well and ethically, these campaigns require a deep understanding of the culture and audience it wishes to influence and a commitment to ethics.

The beauty of Mechai Viravaidya's story is not just his organization's impressive results at both reducing Thailand's population rates and incidences of HIV, but also his unique ability to know his audience. Mechai uses humor and honest conversations with average people, not just medical professionals, to encourage a popular understanding of sexual health in Thailand. Many identify Thailand superficially as a traditional culture where conversations on sexual behavior would not be welcomed, especially by the religious, but that has not been the case. Mechai explains Thailand is an "open society with a traditional but open culture. The people were religious but there weren't religious obstacles" (Melnick, 2007, p. 677).

Discussion Questions

1. What changed in terms of the treatment of HIV in Thailand between the first installment of *Under-Told Stories* (Thailand's AIDS Struggle) and the second (Government of Thailand Battles AID Epidemic)? In your opinion, did this change affect the type of social interventions Mechai and the Monastery pursued? Why or why not?
2. How would you describe the tactics used by the Monastery to encourage AIDS awareness in the two videos? How did the Monastery's educational tactics differ from the methods used by Mechai? Is there value in using different tactics for different audiences? Why or why not?
3. Two benchmarks of a successful behavior change campaign are effective promotion and overcoming competition. From the reading, identify at least one unique and novel way Mechai's behavior change campaign overcame the white noise of competition.

4. One of the criticisms of behavior change campaigns is that they are heavily resource dependent and expensive. Based on the reading, name at least one way that Mechai was able to save resources and still promote his message.

Reflection Questions

5. If you are not a native of Thailand, how might your experience be different than Mechai's in encouraging behavior change in Thailand? In your opinion, would your non-local status affect your success in implementing a behavior change marketing campaign in Thailand? Why or why not?

To take a deep dive, you might consider this question:

6. Mechai identifies a number of formal and informal barriers that had the potential to derail his work. Identify at least three specific challenges mentioned by Mechai in Under-Told Stories and/or the Melnick interview and explain how Mechai was able to overcome each. Are any of the challenges examples that of Mechai turning resistance into opportunity? Rank the challenges you selected in order of perceived difficulty, and explain why you selected your particular order.

[Alternative In-Class Activity: Instructor asks the entire class to list as many unique examples of barriers that they can identify from the Under-Told Stories videos and the required reading. How was each barrier overcome? How many examples did the classroom identify? Are there examples of turning resistance into opportunity? Why is overcoming barriers to service, products, and communication so important to a successful behavior change campaign?]

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