



Changing lives in 30 seconds

By Pia de Solenni

Abortion advocates are quick to assert that women are being denied “health information.” Yet a few hours in any pregnancy resource center (PRC) makes it painfully obvious that despite sex-saturated media, years of explicit sex-education courses and widely available contraception, women of fertile age know very little about their bodies and perhaps not much about sex. Little wonder, then, that they have no idea what exactly an abortion is and don’t know that they have options when faced with an unplanned and undesired pregnancy.

Today, young, sexually active women armed with years of sex ed and abundant contraceptives express shock and amazement when they visit a PRC and learn what pregnancy means. They also think that abortion is their only choice. Unless they make it to a PRC, chances are they won’t know that they have real options. Nevertheless, opportunities still exist to educate with facts and to change the misconceptions of a culture that tolerates abortion as a necessary evil.

The power of TV

The Vitae Caring Foundation, based in Jefferson City, Missouri, preempted this scenario when it began funding research in 1991 to explore the attitudes of women and men concerning abortion. Vitae combined this research with studies that evaluated how people come to certain conclusions about abortion. This data provided the basis for developing television and radio ads that either aim to change an attitude by presenting a thoughtful hook to draw in that middle group or they are a direct call for help designed for women who are facing a difficult pregnancy.

The ads generally offer a toll-free number that will connect a woman to a PRC in her area. Vitae’s contribution of these ads to the pro-life cause offers a much-needed development in comprehensive pro-life strategies.

The media play one of the most important roles in shaping ideas and

values. The online supplement to *The Sourcebook for Teaching Science: Strategies, Activities, and Internet Resources* cites A.C. Nielson Media Research’s findings that the average American spends 28 hours a week watching TV. Ninety-nine

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percent of all U.S. households have at least one television. Sixty-six percent have two or more. So, for better or worse, the media have a determining role.

Illustrating this point, abstinence educators have frequently commented to me on how one episode of the sitcom *Friends* has been effective in educating young people about the limitations of condoms, despite the fact that the show typically advocates a sexually licentious lifestyle. Ross, a professor of paleontology, learns that a night of casual sex with his former girlfriend Rachel has resulted in a pregnancy. Indignant, he demands how it could have happened, since he used a condom. Joey, generally regarded to be of lesser mental abilities, explains to his Ph.D. friend that condoms don’t always

work. Ross counters, “They should put that on the box.” Joey enlightens him, “They do.” When abstinence educators talk about the failures of condoms, students frequently respond, “Like what happened to Ross in *Friends*,” even though the show has been in rerun cycles for several years now. In this discussion, it matters little whether or not TV programming has redeeming aspects. The fact remains that many people watch a great deal of television and that TV is one of the single greatest opportunities to affect how and whether people think.

A necessary outreach

Both the *Friends* episode and the reactions from teens demonstrate the utter failure of so-called sex





education to teach about sex and sexuality. In fact, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood, claims that 54 percent of all women who “unintentionally” became pregnant were using contraceptives. In other words, knowing about, having and using contraception doesn’t necessarily prevent pregnancy.

While efforts to reduce the amount of time watching TV or to improve the quality of programming may be laudable, they require long-term strategies. Only immediate intervention and engagement with the media culture can affect the lives of mothers and children desperately in need and at risk now.

Aiming at an audience of women 18-34 years of age, Vitae’s ads present an alternative to the status quo. The ads provide a tool for educating people about a woman facing an undesired pregnancy—what she’s thinking, how she’s feeling, how she feels in relation to others. These scenes allow a woman in a similar situation to identify with the woman or girl in the ad. Then

the ad offers a nonjudgmental, neutral tagline with a toll-free phone number to call for assistance.

Vitae has developed nearly 30 ads for use in 65 media markets. The ads, including some in Spanish, are run in cable and broadcast zones during shows that have been identified according to the statistical data compiled by A.C. Nielsen Media Research, the foremost expert in this field, in conjunction with a population profile. Using this data, Vitae identifies when and what the target audience is most likely to be watching.

In 2006, a five-month ad buy began in Atlanta on April 24 and featured four different broadcast and cable ads. The first 38 days of the 2006 ad campaign in Atlanta prompted 1,535 calls. By the end of May, there had been a 41.5 per-

cent increase in the number of calls to Optionline (which works with about 2,000 PRCs), the number for a PRC referral service. The calls continued; by the end of the ad buy, about 7,000 calls had been received. While there were some prank, obscene and hang-up calls, the overall volume was markedly increased and referrals to PRCs significantly increased.

Public response

The most important indicator, however, remains the women who respond to the ads. In particular, one 18-year-old had decided to have an abortion because her boyfriend was pressuring her to do so. After seeing one of Vitae’s ads, rather than call the toll-free number, she took extra initiative, went

to the library and looked up the web site of a nearby center. The center was able to assist her in her choice to give birth to her baby. She told a counselor that once she saw the ad, she knew she couldn’t go through with the abortion.

As part of my work in preparing this article, I visited an Expectant Mother Care-EMC FrontLine Pregnancy Center. EMC FrontLine, one of Vitae’s collaborating PRCs, has five locations in the Bronx, three in Queens, four in Brooklyn, two in Manhattan, one in White Plains and one in Jersey City, New Jersey. (EMC-FrontLine is also an American Life League Associate group.) The center I visited stands across the street from an unmarked Planned Parenthood clinic. Women come into the center for a variety of reasons. Even though some of these women make their final decisions weeks or even months later, many decide to give birth to their children. EMC FrontLine estimates that about two-thirds of the abortion-minded women who enter opt

to take the pregnancy to term. Had they not had the original contact with the center, they probably would have ended their pregnancies with abortion, without knowing all of their choices.

While other PRCs exist in addition to EMC FrontLine, their collective presence pales when compared to the abortion environment of the New York City area, in which there are about 100 facilities performing approximately 130,000 abortions annually, making New York City the abortion capital of the United States. According to the Guttmacher Institute, more than a third of all pregnancies in the New York metro area end in abortion. The New York State Department of Health puts the number at a much higher rate of 73.4 abortions per 100 births. (Presumably, this high number is due to the fact that many women come to New York City from outlying areas and even other states to have their abortions.) The area also lays claim to the highest rates of repeat abortions and the largest number of late-term abortions. This expansive market suggests that many more pregnancies could have an end other than abortion.

Lifesaving results

In 2005, EMC FrontLine teamed with Vitae to run a five-week television campaign in the Bronx. Pregnant women as well as those who knew pregnant women responded to the ad, resulting in a 42.5 percent increase in calls. Before the campaign, the centers were receiving about 400 calls per month. During the campaign, those calls increased to 710. Anecdotal evidence reveals that the campaign had effects lasting longer than the campaign. People

actually wrote down the toll-free number and saved it, using it after the campaign had finished, thereby demonstrating the unique staying power of the Vitae TV ads.

In 2006, the campaign was extended to include Brooklyn. The six-week ad run yielded more than 500 calls and generated 250 new clients of whom about 140 had been abortion-minded and decided to take the pregnancy to term.

The calls represent women whose decisions might keep them from becoming the next revenue generators for Planned Parenthood or another abortion clinic. The ads are changing the lives of thousands of women and their unborn children, not to mention the lives of all who know them. Each time an ad is viewed, it becomes a teaching reference, much like the *Friends* episode previously mentioned.

As the Vitae ads continue with their success, more and more women will come to know all the options that PRCs offer. The fact that they enable thousands of women to identify their own self-worth flies directly in the face of the abortion lobby, which claims the same and instead leaves them completely alone, without additional resources or support. Somewhat ironically, Vitae has developed one of the best ways to hold abortion providers to some modicum of truth by advertising what they can never provide: positive choices, health and happiness.

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