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# Technology, Sex and Health: 4 Ideas to Reach Young People

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If you work in the field of adolescent reproductive health, here's a techno-pop quiz for you:

1. Have you ever posted on Instagram or Pinterest?
2. Do you have a Tinder account?
3. Are you familiar with Grindr or OkCupid ?

If you are like me, you probably did not answer yes to all of these questions. The technologies used by young people change quickly and many of us struggle to keep up. And yet, use of digital technology is increasingly the norm among youth, including in the developing world.

The Pew Research Center's [Global Attitudes Project](#) this year found that emerging nations are embracing the internet and mobile technology, and that this phenomenon is "significantly more common among young people." For example, [the following percentages](#) from Pew Research show people aged 18-29 who access the internet or own a smartphone: Brazil, 72; Turkey, 67; Mexico, 65; Philippines, 52; Nigeria, 45; and Ghana, 38. The numbers for use of social networking sites are almost as high.

Young people use mobile phones and social media in order to communicate and obtain information. They also use it to meet and date other young people, and sometimes to "hook up" for casual sex. For those of us tasked with influencing the health behavior of young people, the challenges are clear.

First, let's dispense with those who question whether there is a need to reach young people with information about contraception and reproductive health. The data on this is overwhelming.

Young women, especially those who are married, are not likely to use modern methods, according to the [Status Report on Adolescents and Young People in Sub-Saharan Africa](#) published by the Population Reference Bureau and UNFPA. For example,



contraceptive use remains "very low in all regions in Sub-Saharan Africa among 15- to 19-year-olds and 20- to 24-year-old married women." Among women ages 15-19, only 2 percent use modern contraception in Nigeria, 4 percent in the Democratic Republic of Congo and 6 percent in Mozambique.

Comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS among people aged 15-24 is also low -- 28 percent among females and 34 percent among males in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Population Reference Bureau's [World's Youth 2013 Data Sheet](#).

So what can we do to reach young people more effectively? Here are four broad themes on which to focus.

### **Maximize the benefits and minimize the downside of technology.**

Young people need clear, concise information that is relevant and delivered in a way that is convenient to them. They likely won't spend 10 minutes reading a brochure. But they might "like" the [Facebook page of a condom brand](#) as over 15,000 people have done in Ghana. We must leverage the diverse nature of technology to provide information across different technology platforms. One message on Facebook is no longer enough. Just as young people don't use only one social media account, we should be wary of approaching education through only one digital lens. Additionally, we will need to repeat (often) the same message in different ways.

Build on the "me-too" aspect of social media to promote messages. If people see their friends re-tweeting a post, they might too. If friends share information, it is more likely to become part of the social norm. This assumes, of course, content that is relevant, interesting and easily shared. Integration of health information into lifestyle content will be more easily accepted than 'talking down' to young people.

### **Employ young people to implement youth programs.**

Young people are more adept at, knowledgeable about and interested in communicating via digital technology. We must utilize and channel this expertise.

In Ghana, DKT's [No-Yawa](#) program (which means "no problem" in local vernacular), targets young people 15-24, and aims to reach 4 million youth with sexual and reproductive health information within three years. No-Yawa is run by young people for young people. The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which funds the program in Ghana, encouraged youth participation in program design and implementation.

In Ethiopia, a team of university students are [tasked with reaching fellow youth](#) with information on how to avoid risky sexual behavior and proper condom use. They use





creative approaches that make sense to their peers and include key health information at the same time.

The good news here is that young people usually like talking about sex. Safe sex just needs to be a part of the conversation. Leveraging that interest and curiosity needs to be part of health programming.

### **Make it cool and fun.**

We need to be leading and innovating -- not simply following the digital trends.

In Brazil, the Prudence condom brand has been leading the charge to sexualize (and normalize) condom use, especially among young people, through diverse and aggressive use of technology. Customers can sign up as a Prudence condom tester, providing you and your partner comment on [condom use and tag your location via GPS](#) to show where you have recently used a condom.

[IntraHealth](#) works with the [Beat Making Lab](#) to train young people in developing countries how [to use an electronic music studio that fits into a backpack](#) to make music that addresses health issues of 15- to 24-year-olds.

Condom video and TV ads add a fun dimension to condom use, like [this one](#) from Ghana. MTV has partnered with iCondom to launch the [iCondom iPhone application](#), a geo-aware map that helps users search via GPS for the nearest condom outlet. The app is part of MTV's Staying Alive campaign, its global youth HIV awareness and prevention initiative.

### **Get hip to technology.**

Most young people won't bother with a website that takes three minutes to load. Many don't use email anymore. Increasingly, information targeting youth has to be mobile.

We should be using automation to leverage data on consumer behavior to target appropriate messaging just the way advertisers do. Might we connect educational messages to people whose profiles are young and have searched for information on HIV/AIDS or have watched pornography? We must quickly learn to integrate messaging with the changing nature of social media; Tinder, a social media where you can "like" people nearby and meet them, would be a natural place to add in reminders on condom use.

While the means of communication will continue to change, the laws of communication are immutable. One such law is that effective communication requires that you deliver your message to your target audience in a format that is relevant to them. For youth around the world, that increasingly means internet, mobile technology and social media.

