Case Study #1 • Delrae Benson • COMSTRAT 565, Spring of 2017

“Evan” From The Sandy Hook Promise: A Strategic Communication Campaign for a Prosocial Issue

Background—After the Sandy Hook massacre, it became even more evident that gun-shooting violence in the United States is still on the rise. There have been about 62 incidents in schools with guns that have occurred in our country since 1982 (Shehadeh, 2014).

Due to the alarming amount of fatalities and acts of gun violence, a nonprofit foundation was created by some of the victims loved ones called the “Sandy Hook Promise.” They wanted to make their tragedy not feel so senseless with the loss of life and create awareness (Sandy Hook Promise, 2015).

According to the “Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund,” there have been 210 school shootings in America,” since 2013, and 2 in the month of January of this year (Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, 2014).

When viewing the statistics in terms of an exact number, it’s alarming how many shootings actually have occurred in schools in our country. This doesn’t include shootings near schools and in other areas.

These shootings occur by school aged children specifically accounting for over 336 gunshots in the vicinity of schools in Washington DC alone (Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, 2014).

Target Audience – The Sandy Hook Mandate is geared towards teaching young people and adults how to spot warning signs in individuals who may be exhibiting behavior that could lead to gun violence (Fast Company, 2016).

The intended audiences are students, teachers, school officials, and parents. These people all play a key part in promoting engagement in the community. Once this happens, the community as a whole begins to take notice when something isn’t right and it is the hope that action will be taken before violence occurs.

The goal of this campaign is to promote engagement and teach people to start to recognizing the signs. According to The Sandy Hook Promise, statistics show that 80% of school shooters and 70% of individuals who completed suicides told someone of their violent
plans prior to taking action. Surprisingly, in the month of January 2017, the statistics kept climbing—proving how much awareness is actually needed in order to prevent gun violence (Gun Violence Archive, n.d.).

**Formative research** – The Office of the Child Advocate published a report on November 21, 2014 as one method to acknowledge the 27 individuals who were murdered in the Sandy Hook Massacre. The report was created in part as a recognition of the victims, however, it was also intended to make it easier for communities to recognize the signs and hopefully make their own futures more safe.

The results of this report offered that the shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary school, Adam Lanza, who is now referred to as Al, suffered years of mental illness, which led up to the incident. These symptoms were noticeable in Al from his early childhood and on through high school. Eventually he was diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome, which is a form of autism.

The report suggested that the end result which led to the Sandy Hook Shooting, was a direct reflection of Al’s life; his mental illness, his activities in recreational shootings, his Aspergers, social isolation, depression, and his need for treatment. Also unnoticed was his need for special education support and medication. All this research along with the history of Al’s mental illness was taken into account as formative research for the social media campaign, “Evan” from the Sandy Hook Promise: A Strategic Communication Campaign for a Prosocial Issue. This was used in order to get individuals to be aware of other peoples’ behaviors and actions around them (Office of the Child Advocate (State of Connecticut)).

The group Rally worked with the Sandy Hook campaign and strategies were developed, rapid response messaging, and program development to promote community engagement.

Focus groups were held with participants who were gun owners across the country in order to create content that was part of a national news coverage. This was aimed at uniting parents from different political and social backgrounds to help protect children from gun violence, even if the parents themselves owned guns (RALLY Campaigns, n.d.). During the two years that Rally worked with the campaign, they developed strategies to push new federal legislation checks for all gun sales in Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Ohio (RALLY Campaigns, n.d.). The intent was to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals and try to prevent future gun violence. During these efforts there was a large presence of media relations keeping it very much in the public eye.

On the first anniversary of the shooting, Rally compiled some information they obtained from focus groups and gun owners for the “Parent Together Campaign (RALLY Campaigns, n.d.).”

**MAIN Campaign Message** – The Sandy Hook Promise wants people to be aware of symptoms and signs that occur in people or that they may exhibit prior to gun violence. By helping others recognize the signs of people who are at risk of hurting themselves or others can prevent gun violence (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.).

Research shows that people display signs before an act of violence. The campaign is
designed to help innocent bystanders identify the symptoms before a tragedy occurs so they can reach out or take action and tell somebody (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.).

The answer isn’t always about gun control or safety but more of a deeper recognition that someone may be in trouble long before they have a gun in their hand.

**Project Evaluation** – Shortly after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2013, parents of the victims got together and decided to take action instead of waiting for Congress to step in. Their goal was to recruit over 500,000 parents dedicated to the cause of awareness for local violence and what can be done to create awareness (The Guardian, 2013).

What has resulted are awareness programs across the United States. Some of the key results from all of the evaluations have led to awareness points that are currently being taught in schools today (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.). The awareness points are part of the Sandy Hook Campaign in the fight to protect children from guns.

The Sandy Hook Campaign is still in the fight to protect children from gun violence. Their campaign is stronger than ever and continues to evolve through research and by continuing to spread the word and educate people to recognize the signs and how to get involved. The Sandy Hook Promise has grown and continues to do so with the evolution of the campaign.

**Theoretical Application** – The Social Ecological Model uses four levels of influence to help identify factors that can place people at risk or can guard them from being subjected to violence (Shehadeh, 2014).

Mental problems relate to certain components of gun violence and the application of the theory used in the campaign allows for social networks, peers, and individuals to pay attention to any hints they see that resemble what could be viewed as violence.

By paying attention to individual characteristics and behavior we help identify individuals who may be in trouble as demonstrated in the campaign video.

The video demonstrates the school setting and different examples such as viewing guns on the internet and violence which is not viewed as the social or cultural norm in an educational setting. The lack of interpersonal relationships was also an indicator that something may be wrong. You can Watch “Evan” here: [http://bit.ly/2h6BaPV](http://bit.ly/2h6BaPV).

“I promise to do all I can to protect children from gun violence by encouraging and supporting solutions that create safer, healthier homes, schools, and communities”

Cited by the Sandy Hook Promise
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**Works Cited**


Sandy Hook Campaign. (n.d.).


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The Sandy Hook Promise is a national non-profit organization founded and led by several family members whose loved ones were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. Source: SandyHookPromise.org

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This Case Study was created by Delrae Benson as a student project for COMSTRAT 565 at the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University during the Strategic Master's Degree Program.