

Why the Minnesota Health Department took its anti-vaping campaign in a very uncool direction

The state's latest campaign urging teens not to vape may look familiar to fans of 'Better Call Saul.'

by Eric Berger April 06, 2023



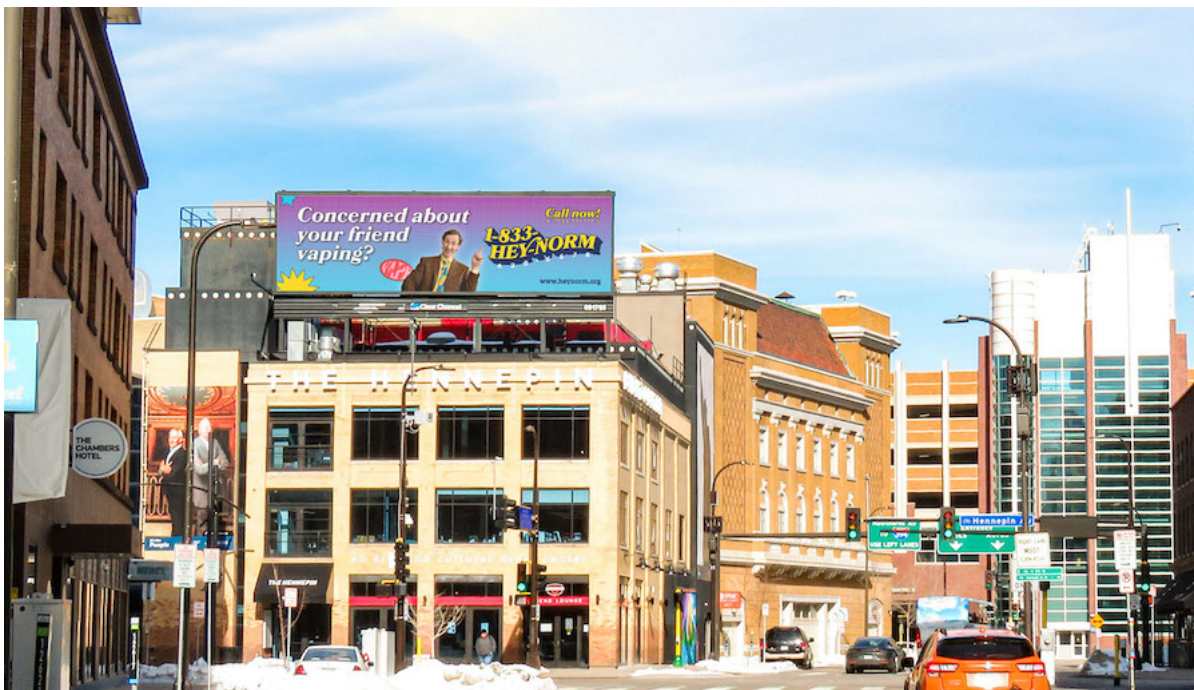
Two-hundred people called the hotline before the campaign explained it.

ST. PAUL, MN: Anti-youth-vaping advertisements that try to be cool or scare teens often don't work well, said Zach Keenan, creative group lead at marketing agency Haberman.

So when the Minnesota Department of Health hired the firm to conduct such a campaign, Keenan and his colleagues decided to go a different direction. "Instead of trying to be cool, what's the opposite of that?" the creatives asked.

They answered that question with Norm Davidson, proprietor of 1-833-HEY-NORM, "Minnesota's first and only teen-focused vape talk service."

"Norm literally embodies the opposite of whatever on-trend-coolness thing that kids are into right now," Keenan said. "He's aesthetically a little dated."



While groups like the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) say it's difficult to determine whether more adolescents are using e-cigarettes after an earlier spike and subsequent decline, vaping remains a concern for state and federal agencies.

The Minnesota Health Department invested \$2 million in the campaign, Keenan said, which features an actual working hotline.

The group launched the effort on March 6 with billboards around high-school basketball and hockey state championships in Minneapolis. The signs featured just the hotline number and the direction to "call now!"

When consumers dial the number, they're greeted by a recording of Norm, who is played by actor Tom Reed, saying, "Holy cow! You actually called. One second, let me finish my deviled eggs."

Norm says that vaping is dangerous and that it can be awkward for teens to share their concerns with friends who vape or are considering starting. He offers options: If the caller would like him to speak with their friend, press 1; if they want advice on how to talk with a friend, press 2; if you interested in purchasing Norm's used watercraft, press 6.

Norm was modeled on Saul Goodman, the sleazy lawyer played by Bob Odenkirk on "Breaking Bad" and later "Better Call Saul," Keenan said.

"This is sort of like a kinder, gentler version of him," Keenan said. "Norm is very much a pitch guy. He has a business, and he's trying to create momentum around this."

The agency wanted to avoid advertisements that seemed to be inspired by the show "Stranger Things," Keenan said.

In one from the Food and Drug Administration's [The Real Cost](#) campaign, a student appears to become possessed by a demon. The ad then warns viewers that if "you vape, nicotine cravings could take control of you."

In Minnesota, the health department [established a youth council](#) that advised the state that it was inundated with fear-based messaging.

"When you try to tell a teenager to do something, they are going to go the opposite direction," Keenan said. "This character of Norm felt very fresh, which is ironic, because he is very not fresh."

[A video advertisement](#) featuring Norm looks like a cheap, late-night ad for a personal injury lawyer. He tells the audience that he has helped "nearly 11 teens talk to their friends about the harms of vaping."

The campaign also includes paid media on social media, streaming audio and YouTube, among other mediums.

After the first billboards, before the campaign had even explained what the hotline was, 200 people called, Keenan said.

"As long as folks are engaging with that, that's a success for us," he added.

Haberman has also worked with the [state on a campaign](#) to stop tobacco use among residents outside the Twin Cities, as well as African Americans and the Hmong community.

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