

Cyber Cafés: Improving Access to Information for Youth in High Risk Situations

The Internet is a powerful and inexpensive way for people to make connections, share information, and exchange ideas. Although access is still limited in many countries, young people worldwide increasingly view the Internet as an important source for health information. Moreover, cyber cafés are popping up all over the globe to provide Internet access. For gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth and for young men who have sex with men (YMSM), cyber cafés can offer a safe means for finding accurate information and a supportive community.

Young people seek health information on the Internet.

In the United States, a nationally representative survey recently found that 68 percent of people ages 15 to 24 use the World Wide Web to search for health information. Thirty-nine percent look up health information online at least once a month. Forty-four percent seek information on sexual health. Not surprisingly, the survey also found that 82 percent of the youth identify confidentiality as “very important” when looking for health information.¹

In developing countries, sexual health information may be scarce and/or outdated.

In many developing countries, information on sexual orientation, safer sex, AIDS, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, may be limited and hard to find. The cost and accessibility of new information may make acquiring it difficult for clinics, hospitals, and public libraries.

The Internet offers the opportunity for youth in high-risk situations to safely access accurate information.

The Internet can be an especially important source of information for youth who may feel uncomfortable or unsafe seeking assistance through more traditional channels. In many developing countries, YMSM and GLBT youth often have difficulty finding accurate information and safe spaces where they can find support, ask questions, and receive sexual health information without being harassed or attacked by peers or by adults, such as teachers or law enforcement officers. For these youth, Internet access can be invaluable. In many countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have set up cyber cafés to help GLBT youth and YMSM access the Internet and to create a safe space where youth can meet and seek sexual health information.

Best Practices for Setting Up and Maintaining Cyber Cafés²

Operational Considerations

- **Identify a coordinator for the cyber café.** It is important to designate a person to be responsible on a daily basis for maintaining and overseeing the cyber café rather than assigning staff to monitor the café on an *ad hoc* basis. The coordinator works to make sure that the café functions smoothly, even when she/he is not present, by ensuring that the café opens and closes on time, that the computers are on and working properly, that the printers have paper, and by tracking users' time on the machines. The coordinator offers assistance in navigating the World Wide Web. Ideally, the coordinator will be a young person. In addition, the coordinator should possess the following important attributes:
 - Ability to work with youth of varying cultures, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and sexual orientation
 - Ability to work in partnership with youth
 - Ability to communicate well with youth
 - Creativity
 - Flexibility
 - Sense of humor
 - Ability to enjoy people and situations
 - Willingness to empower youth to educate themselves and their peers
 - Ability and willingness to assess the accuracy and reliability of World Wide Web sites and to share this information with users.³
- **Set goals and objectives for the cyber café.** Before opening the café, coordinator and project staff must be clear about the reason (goal) for its establishment and should clearly identify activities to realize that goal. For example, if the goal is to provide confidential access to information and a safe community space for GLBT youth and YMSM, then activities should ensure confidentiality, help build rapport among clients and staff, and aid young visitors in building the skills to access information and community via the Internet.
- **Involve young staff in the cyber café.** Young people can be involved in this project in numerous ways, ranging from running the entire operation to participating as online peer educators for the organization's Web site. Ideally, the young people involved in this project should be those most involved in the organization's primary activities.
- **Offer to train users on how to send/read email and how to research a specific Web site as well as how to assess sites for accuracy and reliability.** Although some users may be Internet and Web-savvy, it is important to offer training so that those who are not can also find the information they seek.
- **Be sure that the instructor knows the software he or she is using.** If the instructor is not proficient in browser software and in how to frame a search, the experience may frustrate potential users and deter them from using the World Wide Web. Proficient instructors, on the other hand, will attract users to the workshops and to the café. Employ proficient instructors and provide them with ample training, especially with regard to communication and interpersonal skills.
- **When launching the café, offer a limited amount of free Internet access each week in order to attract clients and potential volunteers.** Free access can encourage potential clients to try the café and may bring in youth interested in volunteering for the organization.
- **Once the initial clientele is established, continue charging much less than commercial cyber cafés in order to maximize access for youth.** Subsidizing the user fees will make the services more accessible to the community's youth.
- **If some visitors cannot afford to pay user fees, consider providing them with the service in exchange for volunteer work to support the café or the organization.** For example, youth might conduct research on the Web on a topic useful to the program or volunteer at the organization for a specific number of hours each week.

- **Monitor and evaluate.** It is important to monitor and evaluate cyber café activities in order to determine whether the project is achieving its goals. In order to assess efficiency, for example, the coordinator could keep track of how the cyber café is being used, by whom, at what times, and how much. This information may highlight difficulties and barriers to correct as well as achievements and successes to replicate. In order to assess progress towards the goals and objectives of the project, baseline evaluation must be carried out at the inception of the project.

Technical Considerations

- **Start with a minimum of three computers.** Upgrading to the desired number of computers can be done later, by adding two or three at a time. The idea is to get started.
- **Try to get new computers instead of used ones.** One cannot predict how a used computer will behave, and repairing old computers may be more costly than buying new ones.
- **Research which Internet service providers are reliable and stable. Then assess which one of these offers the best deal and try to buy the service a year at a time.** In the long run this will be more cost effective than buying the service on a month-to-month basis.
- **Invest in a printer and a scanner.** These will be useful when users want to print articles from the Web or peer educators want to scan print materials to use online.
- **Whenever the cyber café is open to the public, reserve the use of the computers exclusively for clients.** While the café is open, the computers must be available so clients can navigate the Internet. Staff can use the computers for administrative purposes when the café is closed.
- **Hire the services of a freelance network administrator.** It is both useful and necessary to have a computer technician check out the network connections and the machines from time to time. If possible, also train a staff member to troubleshoot the machines.
- **Invest in the software necessary to support users' needs.** Computers usually come with the software required for basic Internet and Web navigation and for basic word processing. However, for workshops and some other special services, such as listservs and message boards, additional software will be necessary.
- **If offering training on how to use the Web or how to use a word processor or spreadsheet, schedule these workshops so as not to interfere with the operations of the cyber café.** This is especially important if the cyber café has few computers. Moreover, holding workshops at off-hours will permit staff to devote all their resources to the training.
- **Purchase the licenses needed to use the software on all of the computers.** Avoid using pirated software because it is illegal. In some jurisdictions, computers may even be confiscated, if local authorities find pirated software installed on them.

Physical Considerations

- **Choose a room with enough space for at least three computer tables and chairs as well as for a larger table for materials, and a trash can.** Too small a space will result in a cramped environment that is uncomfortable, lacking in privacy, and discouraging for users. People will keep using the cyber café if it is comfortable.
- **Ensure that the café has the right electrical connections and that a constant flow of fresh air is available.** This will help keep the machines from overheating.
- **Ensure easy access to the cyber café for the public.** If, for example, clients must walk through several rooms to get to the café, they may be less likely to enter or to return.
- **When conducting workshops, limit the number of participants to the number of computers available.** Schedule additional workshops to handle the overflow, so no one will have to share computer screens and keyboards. This will enhance participants' ability to learn.
- **Put up a "real" bulletin board in a visible and accessible part of the cyber café.** This will allow for posting upcoming events and schedules for training as well as the operating hours and important information about the cyber café. This is also a good place to post information about reliable, accurate Web sites.

Written by Alex Franka and Nicole Cheetham

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References

1. Rideout V. *Generation Rx.com: How Young People Use the Internet for Health Information*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001.
2. The best practices are gleaned from Advocates for Youth's Linkages Project, whereby Entre Amigos in El Salvador, Comunidad Gay San Pedrana in Honduras and OASIS in Guatemala established a cyber café to support their HIV /AIDS prevention work.
3. Renfrew M, Fothergill K, Hauser D, Jackson K, *et al.* *Guide to Implementing TAP (Teens for AIDS Prevention): A Peer Education Program to Prevent HIV and STI*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2002.