

OPERATION HOT PIPE, SMOKEY HAZE, AND REHAB DISRUPTING AN ILLICIT DRUG MARKET

SAN DIEGO POLICE DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1998

- THE PROBLEM:** University Avenue has been the source of citizen complaints concerning drug sales and associated crimes. This drug corridor has earned its reputation as a violent, drug-infested den of criminality. Officers tentatively identified the problem as street level drug dealing and sought to solidify that as the core of the problem
- ANALYSIS:** Analysis was divided into four areas: literature review of current research on street level narcotics dealing; offender interviews—those in recovery and current users; community survey and interviews; and marketing executives assisted in generating data. The research led officers to rethink the initial problem statement. The problem statement was changed to an illicit drug market fueled by word-of-mouth marketing of rock cocaine in a business environment.
- RESPONSE:** A three-phase response was developed. Phase one dubbed "Operation Hot Pipe," was designed to destroy the positive marketing done by the sellers and users of rock cocaine to make the area so hot on specifically targeted users-facilitators that they would no longer want to be there. The second phase, named "Operation Smokey Haze" was designed to create confusion among the frequent drug users who constantly loiter on University Avenue. This was accomplished through fliers, posters and a disinformation campaign targeting users and sellers. The third phase, "Operation Re-hab" focused mainly on a community response that was designed to bring back non-criminal customers to University Avenue and get fringe users into a rehabilitation program.
- ASSESSMENT:** Most of the key drug marketers were incarcerated destabilizing the drug market and reducing its profitability. Robberies dropped in direct proportion to the level of narcotic law enforcement. A re-survey of the area businesses, those most knowledgeable about the problem, showed that 83% said the problem was much better and as a result felt much safer. Local businesses reported that business was up 36%, mostly from local residents returning to spend money.

SCANNING

University Avenue is a business community bordered by apartment complexes in one of the

most densely populated areas of San Diego. Beyond the first couple blocks of medium sized apartment complexes are established single-family homes. These residents have lived in the

neighborhood for decades, while the apartment dwellers are transient, ethnically diverse, low-income renters. The local middle school has 33 languages spoken as a primary or secondary language. Low rents attract section 8 and welfare recipients, as well as undocumented immigrants. The businesses in the area are a mixture of thrift, pawn or second hand stores, along side of ethnic restaurants, automobile shops, liquor stores and storefront churches.

There were a few community groups and civic organizations that played an important role in the scanning of this problem. The University Avenue Business Improvement Association (UBIA) has in the past been at odds with police over how to handle crime problems. They have also been at odds with the local governing organization which had been much more moderate and supportive of the police, although they have not hesitated to apply pressure when it suited their cause. Police had formed one other group of note. This group, primarily comprised of long-term residents and business owners, was designed to guide the police in identifying problems and determining priority. The Weekly Problem Solving Group, as it was called, meet at a local church to give intelligence information and feedback to the police. They were especially vocal in lamenting over the problems on University Avenue. All three groups were unanimous in their disdain for the problems drug trafficking caused on University Avenue.

To verify that drug dealing was a top priority for the residents of City Heights, officers surveyed the community. The result of the survey showed that 82% of the community viewed narcotics dealing as the number one problem facing their neighborhood (see Neighborhood Survey of Priority in appendix).

The results of the survey allowed supervisors and officers to refine their focus from "quality of life" issues, which scored relatively low in the survey, to more substantial issues that were tearing apart the fabric of the neighborhood. In order to gain consensus among leaders, officers interviewed the leaders to determine the extent of the narcotics problem and verify its importance to each group. One of the questions asked in the interviews was, "why here?"

Community leaders and business owners did not know why, but wanted the problem gone.

Shortly thereafter, interviews were conducted with those who had a long-term perspective on the problem. Good information was gathered from these residents and business owners. They tended to point to the belief that University was an "entrenched" problem with businesses that were friendly to drug dealers. Three businesses were known to be co-conspirators with drug organizations, while others tolerated the criminals for increased sales of merchandise. Based on this information a problem statement was identified: Street level rock cocaine sales on University Avenue?

Their level of involvement on University Avenue and their sphere of influence identified the stakeholders in this problem over the dynamics controlling this problem. The stakeholders were: Business owners and merchants, University Avenue Business Improvement Association, property owners, consumers, local residents - renters, home owners, long term home owners—police, city government, drug rehabilitation centers and the users themselves.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of the problem was divided into four areas. The areas were: literary review of current research concerning street level drug dealing (including telephone calls with researchers from several Universities and Research Organizations); offender interviews—those in recovery and others who are current users; community surveys and interviews concerning the problem, consumer habits and marketing profile; marketing executive interview on how the marketing of a product works and what factors attract or repel customers.

Literature Review

Research concerning the street sales of narcotics was conducted by two different methods. The first was conducted over the Internet. Team members tapped into the NIJ Web page through Department computers and found critical information concerning street sales of narcotics. Three studies of note were found.

Golub and Johnson [1], among others, treated Crack Cocaine as an epidemic. Like epidemics, which tend to follow a natural course, crack or rock cocaine, too was on a cycle, a cycle of decline. Epidemics tend to be localized in popularity and severity. A key signal that an epidemic is coming is in the established drug user population. From there it expands to youth, where it gains a foothold. The research identified four distinct phases in a drug's popularity over the course of an epidemic: incubation, expansion, plateau and decline. The researchers noted, "each phase can be distinguished by the proportion of hard drug users (such as previous users of cocaine or heroin) at any location who use crack." Early in their analysis officers realized they were witnessing a full-blown epidemic on University Avenue in the form of rock cocaine.

Ethnographic reports of growth and development of the epidemic were very useful. Early pioneers of rock cocaine were said to have told other acquaintances. By this means "the number of smokers and recruiters snowballed." Word-of-mouth marketing was responsible for the rapid expansion of the drug. Rock cocaine has been a stable commodity on University Avenue since the early 1990's when gangsters primarily sold the drug. While it's overall popularity has declined, "the corridor" has remained an entrenched location stabilized by word-of-mouth marketing.

University Avenue was heavily populated with seasoned and hard-core drug users. Based on field inter-views, most University Avenue smokers were established criminals with a long history of addiction. Most had used other drugs. These people were a small piece of the epidemic puzzle as they were the visible part of the problem.

A second study focused on causal factors associated with crime [2]. The study found that offenders increase or decrease in specific criminal behaviors depending on which life circumstance was undergoing change. The powerful nature of rock cocaine as an addictive drug caused people to undergo rapid change, especially when bingeing. Drug addicts, like the ones located along University Avenue, were

54% more likely to commit a property offense, and the odds of committing an assault increased by over 100%. Overall, illegal drug use increased the odds of committing a crime six fold. In essence short term life experiences may increase or decrease criminal activity among serious offenders. This information caused grave concern, because individuals going through life changing experiences were constantly arriving on University Ave. ready to continue cyclic crime waves because of a life-changing drug, Rock Cocaine.

Jeremy Travis [3], Director of the NIJ, was quoted in the San Diego Union Tribune as saying, "There is no single drug problem; there are many local drug problems." The article also stated that 16% of San Diego's crack users lived on the streets (an important figure to be expanded later). The decision was made to analyze the local drug market, as it was probably different than any other place, including other parts of San Diego.

One last source of literature was critical to understanding the problem [4]. In the October 1996 issue of Subject to Debate, a newsletter from PERF, Malcom Gladwell stated: "When it comes to fighting epidemics, small changes can have huge effects. And large changes can have small effects." He was referring to a threshold where an epidemic spreads uncontrollably. The point for police is bringing the problem to the safe side of the epidemic threshold. Small changes can accomplish this, if we understand where the threshold lies.

The second phase of review was to make telephone contact with researchers and build a network of information relevant to this project. What follows is a synopsis of the information collected from a variety of resources: Susan Pennel, San Diego Association of Governments; Dennis Kenny, PERF; Anthony Braga, Harvard University; Loraine Green, University of Cincinnati; John Eck, University of Maryland; Baltimore HITA; Bruce Johnson, NDRI; and Moses Sullivan; Rutgers.

Based on information gathered from researchers, seven critical principles were established to guide our local research:

1. **Beat health evaluation**—Determine if the disrepair of the neighborhood exacerbates the problem. The character of the neighborhood can act as a crime catalyst.
 2. **Role of sellers**—Street drug dealing the seller and the user are often the same person.
 3. **Type of drug**—Type of determines the method of sales. Meth is a closed network, whereas rock cocaine is dealt in an open market.
 4. **Type of rehabilitation**—court imposed rehabilitation vs. volunteer committal, can determine the level of effectiveness.
 5. **Small Change Theory**—small changes can have a major impact while large changes can have a relatively small one.
 6. **Time to Buy**—Expanding the time it takes to purchase increases the risk to both parties.
2. **Safety**—The greater the degree of physical and emotional security will increase sales directly.
 3. **Environment**—The level of comfort the customer feels while deciding to purchase.
 4. **Quality/Price**—The product quality and value in relationship to cost.
 5. **Customer Service**—The level of reliability with which the customer can depend on the retailer to provide top-notch consistent service.
 6. **Need or Desire**—The extent in which the customer believes they have to have the product. How many adversities will a person endure to obtain the product?

Based on the information developed by researchers a brainstorming session identified additional questions, which needed to be analyzed as part of this problem solving effort:

A question that arose during the phone interviews was, "How are the sellers and the users identifying each other?" The question really became, how do the sellers and the users know where to go to engage in this illegal enterprise? Basis principles of marketing became an important focus. To solve this question the advise of a marketing expert was sought. Kevin Stuck, Vice President of Marketing for a local firm, gave officers basic information on marketing.

He compared the illicit drug market to any retail chain. He identified six reasons why people choose to shop. Stores market these six areas. Some highlight one trait, however most try to accomplish as many as possible. They try to perfect these traits and create a market niche. Stuck identified the following traits as critical to retail marketing. These traits we believed carried over to the University Ave drug market:

1. **Convenience**—Ease in which the buyer can access the product.
1. The range of ways buyers find out about the drug market.
 2. How buyers and sellers identify one another.
 3. What kind of drug market adaptation takes place? A time line perspective on how the customers and sellers link up.
 4. Beat health evaluation—how the physical appearance of the neighborhood has value in the business of marketing the drug.
 5. Description on the time it takes for the seller and buyer to identity one another, consummate a deal, and deliver the product and part.
 6. Time it takes for the user to get the product to safety.
 7. Other drug experiences: Type, amount, and quantity.

8. Length of time using before purchasing on their own w/ friends, using facilitators, solo initially.
9. Method of seller adaptation.
10. Is there a conscious effort to market the drug?
11. The types of environment street sales flourish in: level of orderliness, anonymity, commercial vs. residential, abandonment of properties, frequency of commercial shoppers vs. criminal element, secondary benefits (liquor stores, check cashing robbery dens) amount of pedestrian, vehicle and bicycle traffic.
12. What type of environment makes it unpleasant for the buyers and sellers?
13. The importance of access to a freeway.
14. What makes the buyers and sellers uncomfortable? Arrest, rip off, bunk, having to look too hard.
15. The percent that buy with cash vs. stolen property.
16. The amount of time spent in each phase of the transaction and where is the biggest window of disruption.
17. Volume of traffic on the average day.
18. Volume by time of day and day of week.
19. What market adjustments are likely if street sales are shut down?
20. What role do merchants play in the narcotics trafficking?
21. How important of a role do facilitators play in the narcotics trafficking?
22. What are the realistic dissuaders of users? Family notification—embarrassment.

23. Where does the end product get smoked and is it relevant to the crime.

Applying National Research To A Local Problem

To determine why the rock cocaine trade was concentrated on University Avenue two types of people needed to be interviewed. Patrol officers in the field interviewed the first group, the drug users. A volunteer, Bill Amsparger, interviewed users at a drug re-hab facility. Information gathered in the surveys were compiled and compared to gain a fuller understanding of the local problem.

Conditions Under Which Rock Cocaine Was Purchased (see Best Conditions in appendix)

Both those in rehab and in the field were willing to answer questions as long as it was not about specific dealers or their own criminality.

1. 90% had purchased other drugs in the past.
2. 78% of users knew to come to University Ave. because of its history as a drug location.
3. 75% said safety was an important factor.
4. 72% identified where to buy by transients hanging out on street.
5. 72% said access to product was very important.
6. 66% said University Ave was close to home.
7. 61% said the condition of the neighborhood was important to them.

Other important factors were: Time it takes to buy; time it takes to get the drug to a safe spot to smoke; presence of facilitators.

Marketing Tactics Of The Illicit Drug Industry (see Marketing Tactics in appendix).

1. 96% were with a friend when they purchased rock cocaine for the first time.
2. 86% heard where to purchase through word-of-mouth marketing.
3. 70% identified the source of knowledge as a friend.
4. 68% the tactics of the seller was important when trying to identify whom to purchase from.

During the drug offender interviews, everyone in the conversation said that the presence of transients were the primary means of location identification [5].

Retired Senior Volunteers in Patrol (RSVP) also conducted a survey with community members. They surveyed residents and businesses in the area.

1. 68% of local residents would rather shop elsewhere.
 - Most cited safety concerns
 - That fear increased with age and length of time in neighborhood
 - Cited condition of the neighborhood
2. 50% reluctantly shop on University Avenue.
 - 90% said it was because of proximity to home

Based on the localized research a new problem statement was developed:

The University Avenue corridor has an inverse image. Citizens and criminals view it as a high intensity drug area where criminals are comfortable and citizens are absent. This inverse image is accentuated by lax business practices and a narcotic enterprise relying on neighborhood deterioration and word-of-mouth marketing. The marketers are transient crack addicts.

Simply put:

The drug dealers are marketing better than the businesses. Essentially, say it loud enough and long enough and people will believe you.

RESPONSE: The Reverse Marketing of University Avenue

The primary objective was to change the perception of University Avenue. University Avenue did not belong to smokers and drug dealers, but to the area residents which vastly outnumbered criminals. We attempted to sell the area through our own joint marketing campaign. The police were marketing to criminals, especially the smoker-facilitators, that University Avenue is the last place in the world they wanted to be. The businesses were to market to residents that University Avenue is a convenient, safe and a great place to shop. The Response was divided into three stages: Operation Hot Pipe, Operation Smokey Haze, and Operation Rehab.

Phase 1: Operation Hot Pipe:

- Goal: Destroy the perceived safe and suitable environment, which attracted cocaine smokers to this location.

Officers created a University Avenue High Intensity Zone (HIZ). Officers diligently marketed to the smokers that they would be arrested for any and all crimes committed in this zone. A concentrated marketing campaign began telling users-facilitators what officers were going to accomplish. Several squads of officers began a systematic campaign of arresting drug users who loitered on University Avenue acting as facilitators.

Early into the response officers recognized that there were three types of cocaine consumers. They are, habitual smokers-facilitators, who were the biggest portion of our problem. Binge users are next. They identify where to buy by looking for group one. These people stayed for several days at a time. They lived on the street smoking rock and scanning for robbery to get

more cocaine. The final group, Partiers, came to buy cocaine and then went home. These people most often had jobs and homes, but used the drug. They too looked for smokers hanging out trying to facilitate. The important link is that the bingers and partiers identified where to buy by looking for group one. Logically, get rid of group one and groups two and three are lost and will have to look elsewhere.

Officers spoke to store owners and used personal knowledge to identify and arrest the facilitators. Officers told prisoners they would be a focus of enforcement as long as they were in the HIZ. In addition, they were given fliers that marketed University Avenue as off limits to cocaine smokers (see attached fliers in appendix). At first the users did not believe officers, however it did not take long before the smoker-facilitators began offering information to get out of arrests. Officers arrested them anyway. One smoker walked into jail and was handed a flier. As the officers left, the prisoner was reading the flier to the rest of the inmates in the tank. Officers capitalized on the same marketing principles that created the mess, "Say it loud enough and long enough and people will believe you."

Fliers were also posted on store fronts, electrical boxes, planters, windows, bus stops almost any place that was identified as a place people bought cocaine and anyplace where the transients would hang out facilitating sales. Each person contacted was told to tell his or her friends that University Avenue was too hot to hang out. Say it loud enough and long enough and people will believe you.

Phase 2: Operation Smokey Haze

- Goal: To destroy the marketing principles of convenience and safety by creating confusion among the buyers and facilitators who operate on University Avenue.

Officers used three tactics to achieve this goal. First they used an undercover reverse sting operation. In this operation officers posed as sellers working University Avenue. When people approached, looking for narcotics they were arrested for solicitation. The result was very successful, however the City Attorney

refused to issue the complaints. The goal was achieved nonetheless. Buyers were confused and became leery of fresh faces selling on University. Officers used informants to spread the word that the operation was continuing even though it had to be scrapped.

Officers casually leaked information in front of smokers about pending drug user sweeps. The first time it was leaked officers followed through with a large smoker sweep. On subsequent leaks no sweep was planned, but the information was spread via smokers at field interviews. Officers also spread word of drug dealers ripping off buyers. On field interviews users were asked for information concerning rip offs and robberies, or information on phantom suspects. The resulting confusion made buying inconvenient and risky. The third tactic involved referring people to a newly formed Drug Court. Those who applied and were eligible were put on Drug Court probation. Under the supervision of the court and a full time police officer the smokers were interviewed at home when they were suspected of being on University Avenue. Many of the initial responders were subsequently arrested and jailed for dirty urine tests, even though they were not on University Avenue at the time. This response compelled users to attend sessions at CRASH, a drug rehabilitation group.

Phase 3: Operation Rehab

- Goal: To change the predominance of marketing from one of a drug corridor to that of a strong business community.

Tom Dizzino and Associates, a private marketing firm, volunteered to assist in the development of a marketing plan for businesses (see attached marketing brochure in appendix). The plan was designed to attract local residents back to the "Global Village." The University Avenue merchants were receptive to using a free marketing plan, but were reluctant to spend money to attract more customers. The plan was finished and presented to the businesses. Officers believed that it was vital to back fill the void created by heavy enforcement with people who would add to the quality of the "Global Village." Residents were the people to do this.

Vital to the project was the constant marketing of CRASH. Every flier handed out and every arrestee was told to call CRASH for help. More importantly every person admitted to the drug court was mandated to attend CRASH. All of those referred finished the program or were sent to jail to serve the maximum length of their sentence.

ASSESSMENT: Evaluating The New Environment

In order to test the newly created environment, the perceptions of businesses and smokers were measured. The tool of choice was a survey administered to business owners and informal interviews with transient cocaine smokers who acted as facilitators.

Perceptions of Business Owners : (See Post Marketing Perceptions in appendix.)

1. 45.1 % of businesses reported that business is up over the past six months.
2. 86 % said that the increase was local resident traffic.
3. 50% said the smokers are less obvious, while 36% said they were gone totally.
4. 81% of owners said they are safer on University Avenue.
5. Most reported seeing more families and shoppers walking University Ave.

Perception of Smoker - Facilitators:

1. All said they were aware of increased enforcement on University Avenue. One said he thought it would go away after the Superbowl. It did not go away. It intensified.
2. All knew of a person who was arrested on University Avenue.
3. All reported seeing or tearing down marketing fliers.
4. All stated that you could still find cocaine, but it was more difficult.

Incidental Evidence:

1. HIZ enforcement area reduced the number of street robberies (see Street 211 cases vs. 11150HS Arrests in appendix).
2. 20 facilitators, who were identified as facilitators, were gone from the street.
3. Complaints at the weekly problem-solving meeting concerning rock cocaine sales on University Avenue ceased, a decrease of over 90%.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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REFERENCES

- [1] Cracks Decline: Some Surprises Across U.S. Cities by Andrew Lang Golub and Bruce Johnson, National Institute of Justice, Research in Brief, July 1997.
- [2] Adult Patterns of Criminal Behavior by Julie Homey, D. Wayne Osgood and Ineke Hean Marshall, National Institute of Justice, Research in Brief, 1996.
- [3] San Diego Union Tribune, Sunday, March 8, 1998, New York Times Service.
- [4] Subject to Debate by Malcom Gladwell, October 1996, Volume 10, Number 10.
- [5] Interviews with drug offenders, 20 people in two groups, 10 on the street and 10 in rehab. 75% were between 31 and 38 years old.

NOTES

1. Patrol officers worked this problem solving effort in addition to their normal patrol duties.

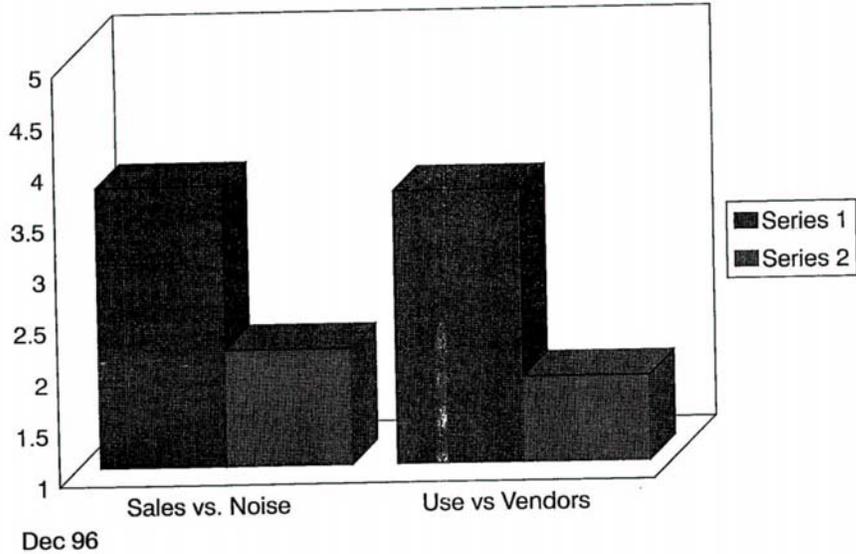
2. Each officer has received at least eight hours of formal problem solving training and ongoing inter squad training.

3. Those actively involved in the project were rewarded with a commendation and a discretionary day off, not to mention their sergeant's undying gratitude.

APPENDIX

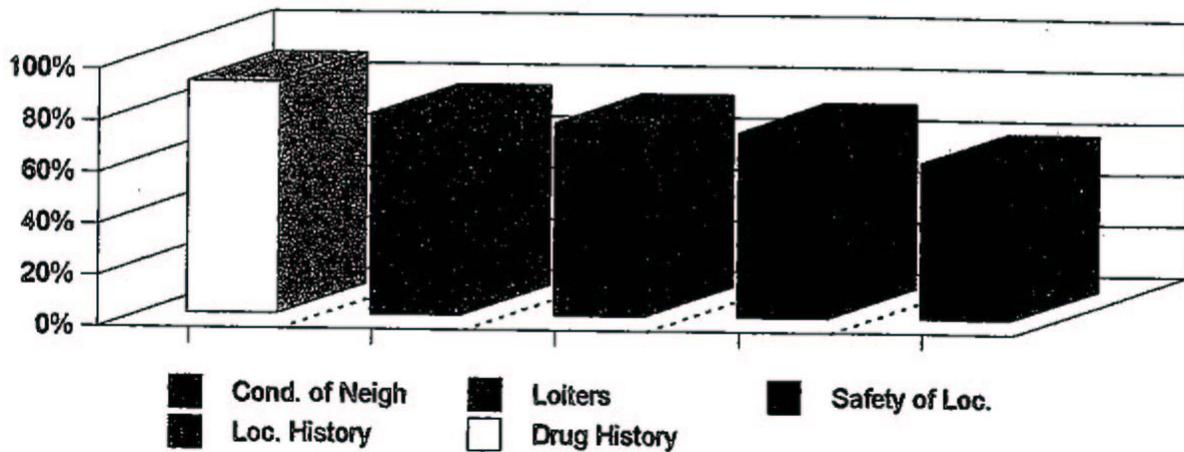
Neighborhood Survey

Selected Comparisons



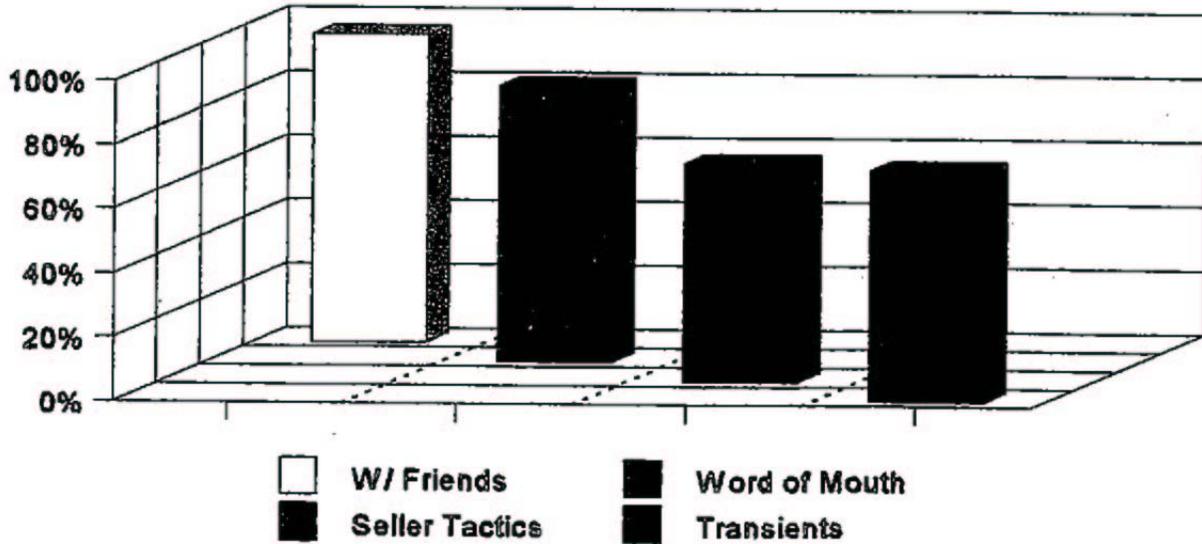
Best Conditions

Selected Traits



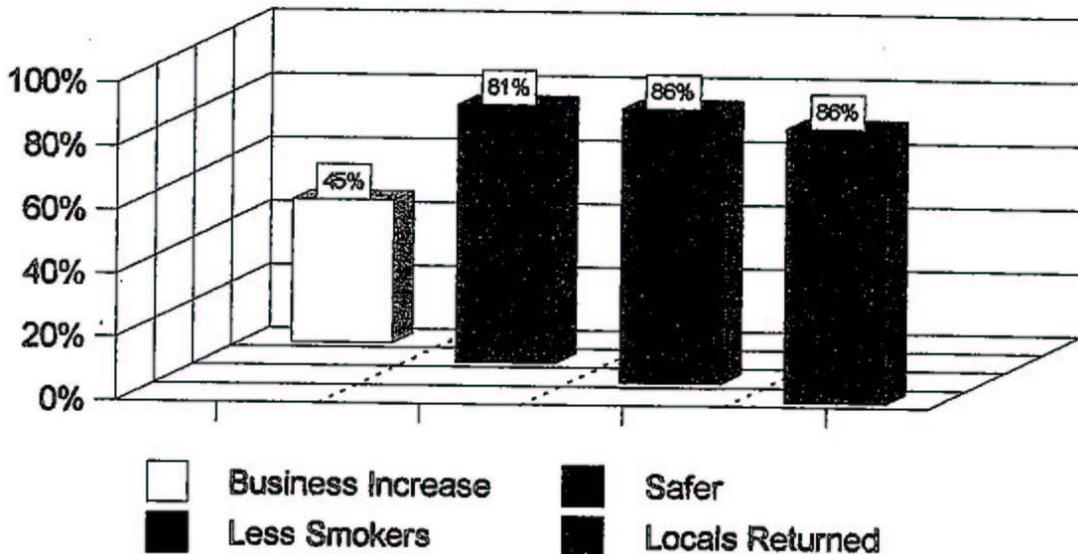
Marketing Tactics

Selected Responses

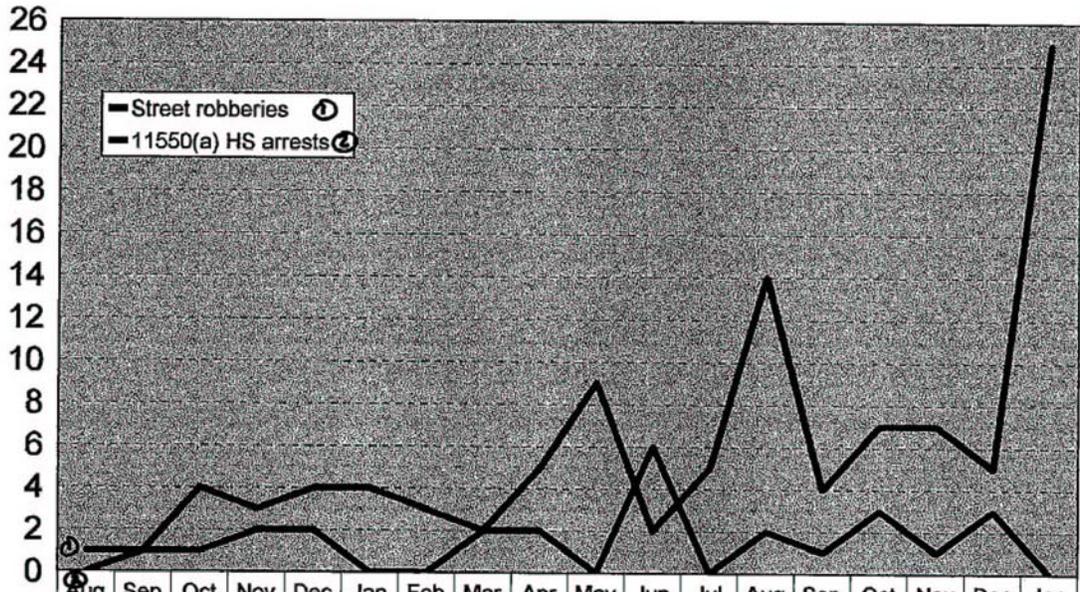


Post Marketing Perceptions

Business Survey



**Street 211 Cases and 11550HS Arrests Along 3300-3900 University Av
Aug 1996 through Jan 1998**



	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Street robberies	1	1	1	2	2	0	0	2	2	0	6	0	2	1	3	1	3	0
11550(a) HS arrests	0	1	4	3	4	4	3	2	5	9	2	5	14	4	7	7	5	25