LGBTQ+ Teen Health Toolkit

Reaching and Engaging LGBTQ+ Teens in Health Services

by the Teen Health Lab

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Who We Are...



The **Teen Health Lab**, led by Kathryn Macapagal, PhD, focuses on the health of LGBTQ+ teens. We believe teens deserve the resources and education necessary to make informed decisions about their health. Thus, our mission is to improve LGBTQ+ adolescent sexual health and wellbeing through:

1. Interdisciplinary research and interventions that harness media, technology, and creativity to reach teens where they are
2. Partnerships with communities, teens, and like-minded organizations
3. Advocacy and public engagement related to LGBTQ+ adolescent health and wellbeing.

Our work is situated within the Department of Medical Social Sciences and the THRIVE Center at the Impact Institute at Northwestern University in Chicago, IL.

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Why we made this toolkit...

We created this toolkit because many health programs for LGBTQ+ teens show promise in research studies, but can be difficult to sustain in real-world settings. Too often, effective programs are developed without enough attention to how organizations will actually deliver them, how teens will engage with them over time, or how programs, especially those delivered online, will adapt as technology and teen culture change.

Our team also recognized that reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens is uniquely challenging. Teens may not access traditional health services, may rely on constantly changing online platforms to learn about these services, and may have concerns about privacy, trust, or stigma when seeking sexual or mental health information. Organizations trying to support teens often have limited resources and little practical guidance on how to design programs that feel authentic, safe, and relevant to teens' lives.

We also learned through our own work with LGBTQ+ teens that they want their voices represented in programs built for them. Teens often share how impactful it is when adults genuinely listen to them, value their perspectives, and create spaces where they feel safe, respected, and understood. LGBTQ+ teens are not just recipients of health services, but essential partners in designing approaches that are relevant, trustworthy, and engaging.

This toolkit was created to help bridge the gap between research and practice, and share practical strategies for designing, promoting, implementing, and improving health programs and digital innovations for LGBTQ+ teens. Our goal is to help organizations create or adopt health programs that are not only evidence-informed, but also engaging, trustworthy, adaptable, and easier to implement in real-world community settings.



How to use these tools

What's included in each section...

We want this information to be accessible to as many people who need it, while still reflecting the landscape that health program designers and implementers are working in today. We designed this toolkit to offer real-world advice from experts who are on the frontlines of this work, both adults and teens. Each section contains an overview, 1-3 case examples, our expert panelists' recommendations, our YAC's feedback and preferences (when applicable), a workbook, and additional resources/citations.

Text that is bolded and underlined includes terms linked to our **Glossary** (see the Appendix).

Overview

We've included a definition of the toolkit topic with contextual factors, why our process determined that this topic was important, and strategies and determinants we identified to be relevant to the topic. Most terms linked the Glossary are here.

Case Examples

We asked our expert panelists to come up with real-world examples that embed the relevant strategies and determinants into an applicable scenario, illuminating how designers and implementers engage with these factors in concrete settings.

Expert Recommendations

We collected and organized all the advice that experts gave us across the focus groups, surveys, and consensus meeting, and then synthesized them into timelines or grouped them by domains.

Expert Quotes

YAC (Teen) Feedback

We asked our YAC to share their thoughts on and prioritizations of our expert panelists' recommendations, rounding them out with real teen preferences and needs.

Teen Quotes



Workbooks

We developed probing questions and activities which seek to help push forward your organization's conversations regarding these topics. We've also included some supplemental resources that WE have found useful in this work.

Additional Resources and Links

We've collected each link and supplemental resource mentioned across each toolkit in one place for easy reference and print distribution.



Reaching LGBTQ+ Teens

Referral Networks

What does it mean to build strong referral networks?

Building and maintaining referral networks is the process of collaborating with individuals and organizations who can refer teens directly to your **innovation**. These individuals and organizations ideally interact with teens consistently and already have an investment in their health and wellbeing. Examples can include community-based organizations, healthcare providers, educators, counselors, parents, and even other teens. It is important to remember that these relationships need to be built through outreach and education, but also maintained through consistent communication to keep individuals and organizations invested in your innovation. Furthermore, a well thought out referral system or "pipeline" is necessary for this approach to have a significant yield.

Why is this important?

This **strategy** leverages the trust that individuals and organizations have already built with the teens you are trying to reach. When teens learn about your innovation and why it is important from a trusted source, they might be more likely to engage with it in a meaningful way. This approach usually requires minimal resources and thus is accessible to most organizations. However, it is important to note that this approach is generally more suited to a local community context or specific geographic area, and might be more challenging to implement nationwide.

An organization's success in building referral networks primarily depends on these factors:

LGBTQ+ teens are savvy and skeptical digital users paying attention to small details such as an organizations profile picture, posting frequency and history, and consistency across platforms.

Concerns about mis/disinformation online in the digital age have decreased trust in online information.

The sociopolitical climate deters teens from engaging with certain platforms (e.g., Elon Musk purchasing Twitter, Meta content moderation policies).

Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1

Cultivating Organic Referral Networks

Setting youth up to share the innovation on their own terms

Who was involved?
Experts working at LGBTQ+ service organizations and pediatric healthcare clinics described how they and their staff support teens by informally equipping them with skills to share information and talk about difficult topics (e.g., sexual and mental health) with their peers. This organically led to informal teen referral networks, as teens would describe their experiences with the clinics or organizations in the context of these discussions (i.e., describe where they were receiving treatment for sexual and/or mental health), which would lead to teens linking interested peers with the organization.

What did they actually do?
Conversations between staff, providers, and teens included how to think critically about information youth encounter related to LGBTQ+ health and healthcare, myth busting, and how to have online and offline discussions about difficult topics with their peers.

Where did it happen?
In-person at healthcare clinics and community centers

When did it happen?
These conversations occurred at variable times, such as within the context of clinical encounters or during teen-oriented programming associated with the clinics.

Why was this strategy used?
Experts described how offering scaffolding to improve teens' social skills, confidence, and self-awareness was later helpful in these teens' sharing resources and information at the clinic with their peers, which then drove referrals/visits to these clinics that required parental involvement, and increased utilization of ancillary services that did not require parental involvement (e.g., peer support groups, health education). Although encouraging adaptive communication skills was not explicitly intended to create peer-to-peer referral networks, in these settings, adult investment in supporting teen's communication skills and critical thinking enabled them to serve as trusted role models for their peers, which then fostered an informal referral network.

How was it carried out?
Experts emphasized that although some teens may be "natural leaders," it is important to identify other teens who could possibly benefit more from these skills and invest in them as well; ultimately, these teens may also foster connections with different peer networks. Further, experts recommended providing teens with social support, skills training, and leadership opportunities, which confers trust in the organization/provider, and allows teens to feel more comfortable recommending their peers to that organization. Tracking referral sources to both clinical services and ancillary services can help identify whether and which teens refer their peers. Experts also recommended asking teens about how to best foster peer-to-peer referral networks. Experts stated that the greatest cost of this strategy was their time and effort in mentoring teens, with other costs (e.g., fliers, QR codes, etc) as relatively minimal.

Case Example #2

Tapping into Local Networks

Taking advantage of existing community ties

Who was involved?
A local community-based organization that has programming specifically for LGBTQ+ teens within a large urban area.

What did they actually do?
The organization recruited LGBTQ+ teens to participate in their afterschool social, recreational, cultural, and educational programs through a school-based referral network.

Where did it happen?
Since programming was primarily in-person, the organization focused on recruiting teens that could feasibly travel to the organization's physical location. This required careful attention to not only the distance between the organization's physical location and the teens, but also the transit networks that the teens would potentially be relying on.

When did it happen?
Outreach activities occurred continuously throughout the year to produce a consistent flow of teens into the program

Why was this strategy used?
Referral networks can be particularly useful when recruiting within a specific geographical area. Educational institutions already have a "captive audience" of teens that could benefit from programming. Furthermore, the organization is in a large urban area with a prominent LGBTQ+ population, LGBTQ+ friendly policies, and affirming institutions that are willing to collaborate.

How was it carried out?
The organization created an exhaustive list of schools within a specific geographic area. The organization then prioritized this list based on how accessible their center would be to the students at the school in terms of distance and transit options. Schools that had pre-existing resources for LGBTQ+ students (e.g. Gender-Sexuality Alliances [GSAs]) were also prioritized as these were more likely to have shared goals and specific spaces for teens that could benefit from their programs. The organization systematically conducted outreach to the schools and established relationships with those that agreed to collaborate. The organization primarily relied on site visits to the schools to recruit teens as they could speak directly to students about their program.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Referral Sources to Facilitate Teen Referral Networks

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

CBOs can be great assets as they already have trust, cultural competence, and established relationships with teens which cannot be replicated overnight. Furthermore, community organizations generally have established methods to reach their specific communities, creating rapid transmission from community leadership to the community members they serve. There are several aspects to this approach that are important to consider:

- Partnerships with community organizations are strongest when there are shared and/or complementary goals and priorities. As such, it is important to be strategic in the partnerships you seek out. Prioritize organizations whose values, mission, and served population most closely align or synergize with your own.
- Community organizations are often overwhelmed by the demands of meeting grant requirements and addressing the pressing needs of the communities they serve with less-than-optimal resources. Be conscious of not overburdening community organizations and recognize that partnerships might not yield immediate success. Focus on pursuing authentic, long-term partnerships strategically and gradually.
- It can be easier to create partnerships than to maintain them. Continued communication, planning, and goal setting may be a way to create more active and long-lasting partnerships. Community organizations might also be more likely to invest in a long-term partnership when you involve them early in the design process and consistently through implementation.

"Formal partnerships with community organizations are essential because they already have the trust, cultural competence, and established relationships that we can't replicate overnight, nor is that our role (at least in my field)."

Educators

Education systems and all those involved, from teachers to parents/caregivers, play a unique role in supporting youth. However, establishing a relationship with these institutions can be challenging and requires regular maintenance:

(*continued*)

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Educators

(continued)

"Working with schools can be challenging and usually requires several touches before establishing a relationship, but it's VERY effective."

- The feasibility of this strategy varies greatly from state to state or even district to district as there can be a lot of "red tape" when trying to form partnerships. This strategy may be more feasible in more liberal/urban areas and "blue states" which are generally more receptive to LGBTQ+ and sexual health resources. Before attempting to build a relationship, make sure to do your research on the unique policies and climates at the school, district, and state level.
- Like CBOs, teachers and school counselors are often overwhelmed and overworked. Be strategic about the individuals and institutions you invest your time into. Institutions with active GSAs or other unique programming that aligns with your mission are more likely to invest in a partnership.
- Similar to CBOs, these partnerships can take considerable time to build and require regular maintenance to produce a significant yield.

Medical & Mental Health Professionals

Teen-serving medical and mental health professionals have frequent opportunities to interface with teens in private spaces, are held to patient confidentiality standards, and are familiar with targeted interventions and disseminating specific resources. This makes them uniquely positioned to refer youth to your innovation:

- Like CBOs and educators, medical and mental healthcare professionals can be overextended. However, given their limited time with patients they might be looking for resources that can offer additional support for their patients. It is important to make it as easy as possible for providers to refer teens to your innovation, so any referral process should be streamlined and frictionless.
- The healthcare system is often fragmented, which can create challenges for reaching and educating providers on your innovation. Consider ways to reach and educate larger groups of providers such as professional conferences or offering continuing education credits.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Teen to Teen

Teens trust their peers' recommendations, so teens who are already engaged in your innovation could help reach other teens. Something communicated by a teen is generally going to connect better to other teens. Empowering teens to be "champions" of your innovation can foster their autonomy and can show them that they can have a tangible impact:

- Some teens will be more willing to engage in these activities than others. Identify teens leaders who are frequently connected to your innovation to reach other teens.
- Teens often require a lot more attention and training to be an effective ambassador. Be prepared to invest a significant amount of time and effort to train youth to be ambassadors for your innovation.
- Teens are more likely to be engaged when they are a part of the process. Find as many ways as possible to hear from teens about what they think will work.

"Identify youth leaders or those who are frequently connected to the service who can get more structured training to effectively disseminate to other youth."

Other Trusted Adults

This group can include parents, extended family, coaches, extracurricular activity instructors, etc. Our experts reported different levels of success with this approach. Here are some considerations:

- These adults don't always exist in the same spaces as the ones used to recruit teens. Facebook (via parents' or educators' groups, for example) can be a good resource to reach a wide network of adults that regularly interact with teens.
- Unfortunately, adults might not always be affirming to LGBTQ+ teens or receptive to health education, especially sexual and reproductive health. "Virtual open houses" where adults can learn more from you about your innovation, why it is important, and can ask questions, can be helpful in addressing this issue.

"Depends on the network of parents and their own social / political beliefs. I'm not a parent but know there are many microcosms of parent groups through schools, programming, sports, etc."

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Referral Models

"I believe referral information is important, but we must go beyond relying solely on physical materials to share it. **Information should also be distributed digitally**. In fact, I would argue that most youth prefer digital formats"

Virtual Tools:

This could be a flyer, graphic, or simple website link that your referral network can distribute through social media, websites, or email. Make sure that these link directly to your innovation so teens can easily get connected. Experts report this is the preferred method to refer youth to services.

Physical Merchandise:

Physical merchandise ideally includes low investment items that are easy to hand out such as stickers, wallet-sized cards, and flyers. Make sure to include a QR code, social media handle, or other method for teens to get connected to your innovation.

"**Gateway" Services**:

These are quick and easy services that teens may seek out such as free condoms. These can serve as an easy entry point to your innovation as it is relevant to the needs of your target population and a low upfront investment from teens. For example, a sticker with information about a sexual health innovation could be placed on a condom, or small bags including condoms, lubricant, and a flyer or card could help introduce teens to your innovation.

Financial Incentives:

Financial incentives can be a powerful tool to motivate and increase buy-in from individuals that refer teens to your innovation. With this model, referrers receive an incentive for each eligible youth who enrolls in your innovation. Be advised that some individuals and organizations might not be able to accept these kinds of incentives based on the specific policies of their organization.

Here's what our teens had to say:

- Our youth advisory council reported mostly finding sexual health resources online through social media or a search engine, and some teens reported hearing about resources through school. This suggests the importance of utilizing virtual tools to distribute information through your referral network.
- Our teens reported they would be most likely to share information about a service when prompted directly by a friend, but otherwise not likely to share. This suggests the importance of training and encouraging personal investment when using a teen-to-teen approach.
- The most important factor for teens when deciding to share a resource is the organization's reputation, credibility, and branding. See our branding toolkit for more information on this.

"i agree that i dont really share these resources with my friends, but if i felt inclined to, it would be based on website graphic **design being standout** or if the **information was something i felt like was important to keep in mind**/not as commonly stated."



Workbook

Reflection Questions

What kind of settings (in-person, online) are most applicable for recruitment/delivering the innovation (based on your mission and goals)?

Who is most likely to be invested in your innovation and make referrals?

Workbook

Outreach Plan

Below are some tips to help when inviting mission-aligned organizations into a referral network:

- The goal of reaching out to a new organization is to establish a *relationship* based on shared goals, missions, and values.
- Though it may seem counterintuitive, its not always best to put your program front and center when initially engaging with other organizations:
  - Rather than introducing your innovation from the jump, ground your conversation in the **values, interests, and mission** which aligns your organizations together.
  - Identify overlapping community needs and develop the conversation regarding how your innovation addresses those needs.
- Expected timeline:
  - Identify a list of organizations or potential partners that align with your organization's mission or your specific project goals
  - Send an email introducing yourself, your organization, and your work--look to set up a meeting to explore avenues for collaboration or points of mutual support
  - IF you're unable to get ahold of someone with this method:
    - Never be scared to send a follow up email
    - Try reaching them through a phone call or social media DM
    - Consider any community/professional/industry events that like-aligned people organizations may be attending
      - with the goal of better servicing the community
  - Don't show up empty handed--investigate ways in which your organization can support your collaborator's work
    - With respect to your capacity and resources, make sure you have something to offer to the collaboration
  - Keep your project ask in your back pocket, ready for when an opportune time arrives to weave it into conversations grounded in serving your communities

Digital Advertising

What does it mean to use digital advertising in health innovations for LGBTQ+ teens?

Digital advertising is a marketing **strategy** where organizations and businesses pay to display adson platforms like search engines, social media, and websites to reach their targeted audiences. Online ads on platforms that LGBTQ+ teens use (social media, music/video players, forums, dating applications) are a direct way to reach them with information about your organization and what you offer. Getting teens' feedback on where you advertise and what messaging and visuals resonate with them can ensure you reach and engage them more effectively. Where teens are online (and what platforms they use) changes a lot, so getting their input regularly is important (see Teen Involvement for more information)!

Why is this so important?

Understanding how we can overcome barriers to using paid digital ads is important because censorship and age restrictions limit how content (especially sexual health) is disseminated for LGBTQ+ teens. While social media platforms offer a range of targeting capabilities, these have become more restrictive, and sometimes less effective, as platforms have responded to concerns about inappropriate marketing to minors. The effectiveness of advertisements varies across platforms, with teens likely to pay more attention to some than others. Knowing what your audience prefers is key to effective advertising.

An organization's success in a robust digital marketing strategy primarily depends on these factors:

Our conversations with experts highlighted several factors that affect an organization's ability to use paid digital ads to reach LGBTQ+ teens. Common barriers included limited funding and staff capacity, as digital advertising can be expensive, labor-intensive, and difficult to sustain across platforms. Experts also noted that teens are increasingly skeptical of ads that feel overly promotional or AI-generated, reducing trust and engagement. Additional challenges included ad oversaturation, changing platform policies and censorship, and ethical or access concerns around advertising on certain platforms used by minors.

Experts emphasized that ads are more effective when they feel authentic and community-driven. Using real community images, culturally relevant humor, memes, and platform-specific trends can help build trust and connection. Campaigns that involve trusted community members or influencers with genuine ties to LGBTQ+ teens were seen as especially impactful. Most importantly, experts stressed that ongoing teen involvement and feedback are essential for keeping advertising relevant, credible, and responsive to changing online trends and preferences.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1

From IRL to URL

Translating community engagements into authentic social media content

Who was involved?
Media and outreach staff from a Chicago-based multi-service, grassroots sexual health organization serving LGBTQ+ teens of color. The organization was preparing to launch an arts-activated, sexual health empowerment campaign, and staffers planned to work directly with LGBTQ+ teens of color in content creation during a local community block party.

What did they actually do?
During the local community block party, community members were invited to participate in content creation by posing for photos and appearing in videos (e.g., TikTok challenges, providing testimonials). This content was used in the creation of paid advertising to promote the sexual health empowerment campaign.

Where did it happen?
The resulting materials were later used in paid ad campaigns targeting the Chicagoland area across social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (check them out on the next page).

When did it happen?
The content was strategically collected during the summer of 2023, coinciding with peak season for both community events in the city and LGBTQ+ events (e.g., Pride Fest). The paid campaign ran over the following months, and content from the event continues to be reused in ongoing social media efforts.

Why was this strategy used?
With limited funding and staff capacity, the organization needed an efficient way to support both in-person outreach and digital engagement. This approach allowed them to maximize a single event by simultaneously promoting services, generating authentic campaign content, and involving community members in message development. The use of paid social media advertisements also gave the organization the ability to use targeting methods (e.g., location, sex, user behavior), high control over advertisement budget, and live collection of metrics (e.g., clicks, cost per click) to help optimize the campaign.

How was it carried out?
Content generation was collected by asking community members open-ended prompts such as “What does it mean to be proud?” captured in videos or turned into photos. The organization then tasked a research assistant with experience running paid advertisements to manage the campaigns by launching the campaigns, monitoring performance and budget spend, and making needed edits such as modifying the targeting settings or changing the placement of advertisements (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok) based on performance of each platform.

Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1

From IRL to URL

Translating community engagements into authentic social media content



prep4teens Most of us are back to school - how has it been going for you? Are you talking with your friends about PrEP? Do they know that PrEP is available to them as teens, and that you don't need the consent of a parent or guardian? Curious to hear! ⭐ Our site has lots of great info, tips, and a teen-friendly Chicago-focused PrEP provider list ➡️ PrEP4Teens.com, link in bio.



prep4teens 🩷 ❤️‍🔥 You have options! If you think PrEP is right for you, there are multiple ways to take PrEP. Check out the blog on our PrEP4Teens website (link in bio) for some helpful information about the various pills and injections (shots) you can choose from to prevent HIV. 😀 🌸 Explore your options. Set your boundaries. Be responsible with your freedom. #PrEP4Teens 💙💙💙



prep4teens And don't you forget it. Sometimes the greatest act of rebellion is finding and connecting with people who can understand you and support you the way you need--and you deserve that love!

Finding people who accept you for who you are is just as important--if not more important--for your health as something like PrEP can be.

#prep4teens #chicagocommunity #outandproud



prep4teens There are #PrEP options (pills or shots) for all genders and sexualities - including yours. Explore your #HIVprevention choices at PrEP4Teens.com [link in bio], and check out our listing of teen-friendly PrEP providers in Chicago. 😎 🩷 💙 💙

#PrEP4Teens #healthyteens

Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #2

Tap Into Your Local Community

Collaborating with Local Influencers to reach a broader audience

Who was involved?
The Founder and CEO of a new organization providing healthcare, legal assistance, mental health support, and economic support sought to LGBTQ+ individuals, the CEO of a well-known queer Latiné healthcare organization, a graphic design team, and influencers, including locally relevant influencers.

What did they actually do?
Together, they developed a social media campaign designed to promote sexual health awareness within the specific target communities. The team created a campaign plan and paid influencers to develop videos. Influencers were provided bullet points and key messages to share, with the freedom to relay sexual health messages in their own authentic voices.

Where did it happen?
While the organizations are based in South Florda, the campaign was conducted over Instagram.

When did it happen?
Influencers posted a series of three reels over the course of one month.

Why was this strategy used?
The organizations recognized that influencers and creators within the target communities held trust and credibility within their networks and audiences. Partnering with them was an effective way to share accurate information through familiar and trusted channels, rather than relying on organizational branding.

How was it carried out?
The campaign required funding, influencer partnerships, and creative coordination between organizational teams. The team ensured visuals were authentic, but not overly sexualized to avoid stigmatizing sexual health awareness and maintain a balance between visibility and professionalism. The new LGBTQ+ organization sought to collaborate with established leaders in the community (such as the well-known organization and influencers) to establish their reputation.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Website & Landing Page Organization

- Ensure clear calls-to-action that guide users from point A (e.g., clicking on ad and reaching the website) to point B (e.g., signing up)
- If you are trying to reach multiple audiences, use multiple tailored landing pages–it is easy and inexpensive to duplicate with adjusting images and language
- Keep online presence consistent across platforms, including logos/branding, clarity, and message alignment

Imagery and Visual Strategy

- Avoid stock photos as LGBTQ+ teens may find them inauthentic and off-putting
- Younger teens prefer illustrations, whereas older teens prefer images of real people
- Generative AI images are now easier to spot and may undermine trust
- When available, consider using community—and teens— generated content (e.g., photos, drawings, media)

Content Creation & Staffing

- If funding is available, consider hiring a dedicated social media/content staff member
- When involving teens:
  - Compensate them fairly for their time, efforts, and expertise in the form of lived experience
  - Engage teens in platform selection for paid ads, assessing perceptions of ad legitimacy, and refining messaging

Platform Legitimacy Requirements

- Advertisements that reference HIV or STI testing, PrEP, or any prescription related service may trigger heightened restrictions on main platforms, especially for audiences under 18



Here are our experts' recommendations:

Branding & Online Footprint

- Decide whether to use your existing brand or create a new brand for teen focused innovations.
  - Consider:
    - Teen perceptions of the organization
    - Partnerships
    - Funding structure
- Conduct evaluation tests such as A/B testing (or split testing), an experimental method where different versions of an advertisement with distinct marketing elements (e.g., picture 1 vs picture 2) are compared to determine which performs better.
- Regularly solicit teen input through participatory methods (see Teen Involvement) or feedback invitations to guide your branding and footprint strategy.

Paid Advertisements & Influencer Strategy

- Your other online content must match the tone/quality of your paid ads
- If considering whether to engage influencers in teen-oriented marketing, here are some considerations:
  - Influencers with larger followings may be more costly to work with but reach more people. Influencers with smaller audiences may be more cost effective and reach fewer people, but more targeted or local audiences. Consider whether they reach your desired audience (a good opportunity to engage teens!)
  - Micro-influencers and local figures (e.g., drag performers) may collaborate through cross-promotion or non-monetary value
  - Teen trust in paid advertisements can decline especially if what you are advertising is something they must pay for (e.g., PrEP)

"Young people are savvy social media users...your financial investment is maximized by the rest of your online presence. Paid digital advertising catalyzes the attention you need your full online presence to capture"

Here's what our teens had to say:

Preferred Access Points

"Where do you want to get information about online sexual health programs?"

Teens largely prefer **Instagram** as their source of information but also indicated they would be receptive to receiving this information on long- (**YouTube**) and short- (**TikTok**) form video platforms.



Ad Buy-In

"Which aspects of an Ad make-or-break its chance of catching AND keeping your attention?"



Teens heavily prefer content that uses **unique design** and has **elements specific to their interests and region**. Use of influencers, LGBTQ+ and teen specific branding are less preferred but still acceptable. Use of stock images is discouraged.

Ad Legitimacy

"When you see an ad that interests you, where do you go next to find out if it is real or a scam? How do you decide?"

Teens report that **AI-generated and low-effort content is a major red flag** while connections to a trusted organization like a university is a signal of trust. Teens use **comment sections, online reviews, the organization's website** and forum sites like **Reddit** to analyze trustworthiness. Comment sections and online reviews with **bots are another red flag**.



Workbook

This table presents an LGBTQ+ teen recruitment toolkit adapted from the CAN-DO-IT online recruitment model developed by our study team. Each of the seven steps includes practical recommendations to help select platforms, design content, and implement ethical, developmentally appropriate recruitment strategies

CAN-DO-IT Step	Key Tasks (from original model)	Platform Selection for LGBTQ+ Youth Recruitment
Step 1 Conceptualize scope	• Assess recruitment needs and goals • Assess capacity (time, budget, staffing)	Define age range (e.g., minors vs. 18+), outreach goal (research vs. services), timeline, and advertising budget. Platform feasibility depends on whether minors must be reached and whether paid advertising is required.
Step 2 Acquire expertise	• Identify technical expertise • Identify population or community expertise • Identify expertise about technology use	Ensure team has knowledge of LGBTQ+ youth digital behavior, platform advertising interfaces, and ethical recruitment norms. Lived or advisory-based expertise is recommended for assessing platform appropriateness.
Step 3 Navigate platform and strategy	• Match population and capacity to platforms • Review terms of service and ad policies • Understand platform culture and norms	Select platforms based on documented age policies, advertising restrictions, and cultural norms. For example, platforms differ in whether paid ads can reach minors and how publicly users can interact with ads. These policies evolve to reflect legal requirements, so it is recommended to stay updated on platform specific policies.



Workbook

CAN-DO-IT Step	Key Tasks (from original model)	Platform Selection for LGBTQ+ Youth Recruitment
Step 4 Develop ad content	• Identify intrinsic/extrinsicmotivations • Create NICE (noticeable, intriguing, credible, engaging) content	Tailor content to platform norms (e.g., short-form video vs. static imagery). Avoid "brainwashing", emphasize credibility (e.g., adding logo), privacy (e.g., your data is protected), and relevance (e.g., make it clear who the ad is for).
Step 5 Optimize recruitment-to-enrollment workflow	• Delineate participant and staff behaviors • Streamline user experience	Ensure platform-specific workflows minimize privacy risk (e.g., avoiding public comments when recruiting stigmatized populations). Align click-through experience with youth preferences (mobile-first, brief).
Step 6 Implement campaign	• Target ads • Pilot strategies	Pilot outreach on selected platforms with modest budgets, monitor early performance, and assess whether the platform is yielding eligible and diverse participants rather than raw clicks.
Step 7 Track and respond	• Monitor ROI and enrollment sources • Address feedback • Adjust platforms or content	Track which platforms generate eligible participants using screeners or referral questions. Be prepared to shift platforms as performance, costs, or platform policies change over time.



Workbook

While online recruitment may be advantageous for reaching teens, there is always the risk of attracting fraudulent participants. Fraudulent participants are real people faking eligibility or programming bots to participate in online innovations (often research studies) to gain monetary compensation (e.g., online gift cards). This webinar led by the Teen Health Lab at Northwestern University, shares strategies to prevent and detect fraudulent participation.

Additional Resources and Links

CAN-DO-IT Model:
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7380648/

Teen Health Lab - Imposter Participants Webinar:
https://trialinnovationnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/GMT20250804-160354_Recording_1920x1080.mp4

Engaging LGBTQ+ Teens

Innovation Design

What should go into designing a health innovation for LGBTQ+ teens?

Designing an **innovation** involves the intentional planning of all features, content, and processes that teens will encounter. For digital innovations, this includes not only what the innovation does, but how it looks, feels, and functions from the user's perspective.

Teens form initial judgements about whether the innovation is trustworthy, relevant, and worth their time at the first point of contact (e.g. homepage, landing page, etc.). It continues throughout their experience as they engage with content and decide whether to return. Even after their final interaction, design leaves a lasting impression that can influence future engagement or sharing within their networks.

Innovation design will vary significantly depending on the goals, needs, and resource constraints of a given context. Some innovations are time-limited or sequenced whereas others are open and universally accessible. Some involve more direct staff engagement to deliver content, whereas others can be completely "self-service," with staff only available for technical support and crisis management. Despite these differences, core design principles apply across digital innovations serving LGBTQ+ teens. This toolkit focuses on recommendations that generally apply to all digital innovations built for LGBTQ+ teens.

Why is this so important?

The design of an innovation strongly dictates how a teen experiences it (the sights, sounds, interactivity, usability, etc.) and can directly affect when, where, how, and why they use or don't use it. A well-designed innovation that engenders trust and aligns with teens' lives and contexts is much more likely to promote uptake and ongoing engagement throughout delivery.

An organization's success in designing effective innovations primarily depends on these factors:

There is a clear need for safe, affirming resources that offer support to LGBTQ+ teens, and a well-designed innovation that is tailored to their needs is central to digital health interventions.

A crucial barrier to consider is privacy. LGBTQ+ teens are hyper aware of data privacy concerns and might be hesitant to share their information. Requiring more disclosure of identifiable information creates a heavier burden and may dissuade some from participating. Relatedly, the need for parental consent is a major barrier for teens, especially for those who are not out; knowing under what circumstances you can opt out is critical.

Communication preferences are another key consideration. Today's teens are often less willing to communicate via phone calls or email, and are more likely to prefer text or social media.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1
Co-designing with Teens
Development of a Sex-Ed game and podcast

Who was involved?
An organization focused on providing services for teens.

What did they actually do?
The organization observed a common issue, which was that both teens and the teen-serving professionals do not have adequate knowledge or skills to have supportive conversations about sexual and mental health. To address this, they co-designed two innovative activities with teens and professionals: a sex education game and a podcast. They used an iterative design process that started with focus groups and key informant interviews to first identify the problem and then factors that might contribute to it. They then generated solutions with the teens and used an online platform to rank the designs by feasibility and impact. The winning designs were developed with teens as paid advisors into prototypes. These were iterated until the final products were achieved.

Where did it happen?
When practical, the organization held co-design meetings in person. They also reached teens and professionals online and used online tools like Mural to facilitate the process.

When did it happen?
The organization used this process for each problem they identified. The time period from first identifying a problem through brainstorming with teens to first prototyping the solutions was around 9 months, with check-ins along the way.

Why was this strategy used?
Although it the organization first identified the problem they wanted to solve, they used the expertise of teens themselves and teen-serving professionals to understand the problem, its underlying causes, and to brainstorm solutions. Together, they generated dozens to hundreds of ideas, which they could not have done alone. The teens and professionals also selected the most feasible and impactful ideas and contributed to the content of the sex ed game and podcast, bolstering their relevance and attractiveness to other teens.

How was it carried out?
The organization received training in human-centered design and resources via idea incubator and accelerator grants. They were able to have paid teen advisors as well as teens serving on ad hoc review committees to bring in those perspectives.

Case Example #2

Co-Designing a Mental Health Resource with LGBTQ+ Teens

One step back, two steps forward

Who was involved?
A team of 3-5 staff members from a foundation of 28 people focused on improving the health and wellbeing of teens and young adults through science-based technologies. The organization's staff has a mix of design, research, psychology, and social work backgrounds and experience partnering with university and community-based organizations.

What did they actually do?
The foundation originally wanted to develop a positive psychology chatbot for LGBTQ+ teens, adapted from another project focused on young cancer survivors. They partnered with a large LGBTQ+ community-based association that connects LGBTQ+ centers and teens across the country. However, the teens did not respond well to the positive psychology intervention, so the foundation took a step back and asked teens what they wanted. They said it was important to address minority stress such as experiences of LGBTQ+ discrimination. The foundation then co-designed ideas with teens, settling on curated guides in the voice of young people. All artwork and content was created by LGBTQ+ teens, who also managed the project's social media presence. Teens additionally helped shape the platform's design and functionality, expressing a preference for a web app rather than a traditional text-based website. The resulting product was a publicly available web-based application that offers mental health information and resources for LGBTQ+ teens.

Where did it happen?
The co-design took place in LGBTQ+ centers across the US as well as online. The work was conducted by the foundation in partnership with a large organization that provides resources to LGBTQ+ centers nationwide. Once the product was developed, they gave it to another national LGBTQ+ serving organization focused on youth to implement and sustain it.

When did it happen?
The resource was officially launched in June of 2022, coinciding with national Pride Month.

Why was this strategy used?
The foundation's original idea of a positive psychology chatbot was well-intentioned but not acceptable to LGBTQ+ teens, exemplifying the importance of engaging teens as early as possible before expending many resources. The resulting product was tested in a randomized controlled trial of 270 teens and found to be effective at reducing stress, further supporting the idea that co-designed products work better. The innovation is still active today.

How was it carried out?
When teens initially dismissed the idea of the chatbot, the foundation team went back to them to ask about what would be important. They worked closely with teens on every aspect of the design process, including the content, visual style, user experience, and social media strategy. Teens were compensated for their contributions.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Teen-Centered (User-Centered) Design

A central principle of effective innovation design is user-centered design. This approach prioritizes integrating teen's wants, needs, and lived experiences in developing an innovation's content and design rather than relying on adult's assumptions on how it "should" be. Teen-centered design is central to effective implementation of digital health interventions with LGBTQ+ teens, since teens will generally know their peers' preferences and needs more than adults. This approach recognizes that teens are active decision-makers who can ensure innovations are engaging, accessible, and meaningful. Here are some key points to consider when implementing user-centered design:

- Narrow down who you want to reach and identify your demographic base.
- Don't reinvent the wheel, there are many existing products that you can build from.
- Collect initial and ongoing feedback from a diverse set of teens using as many facets of diversity within your target demographic (urban/rural, race and ethnicity, sexual and gender identity).
- Design WITH not just FOR teens – make sure they're involved and have real influence in the decision-making process.
- Make sure you have data (qualitative or quantitative) to back up all of your decisions.
- Use prototyping to get richer feedback – there's a difference in what people think, say, feel, and do when there is something to react to.
- Ensure content and features support autonomy, choice, and self-expression (e.g., adding names, pronouns, flexible identity options, customization/personalization).

For more information on how to effectively involve LGBTQ+ teens in your innovation design, please see Teen Involvement.

Privacy

Designing your innovation to protect user's privacy is a key aspect of working with LGBTQ+ teens. LGBTQ+ teens often have concerns about how their family, friends, and community may react to their identity and the information they are seeking out online. As such they might be worried about their engagement with online resources for LGBTQ+ teens being disclosed to others. Our experts emphasize designing your innovation in a way that minimizes the "digital footprint" created by users that can potentially be traced back to them. Here are some recommendations from our experts regarding the protection of user's privacy:

- Provide safety and privacy features such as quick escape, time out, and opt-out options for certain features.

(continued)

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Privacy

(continued)

- Ensure tech platforms are compliant with **HIPAA**/teen privacy laws. This may require more specialized legal expertise during the initial design of your innovation. Afterwards, it is important to stay up to date with policy changes that can lead to changes in your innovation. If you are utilizing external software services, these also need to be vetted for HIPAA compliance and other relevant privacy policies.
- Consider when and why parental consent is required, since asking for parental permission, especially for innovations about sensitive topics (e.g., LGBTQ+ health), may deter teens from participating. When safe and possible, it can be important to engage parents and supportive adults. However, parental consent may require legal expertise and vary by state/municipality. In cases where parental consent is required in some capacity, implementing an "opt-out" system for certain topics vs. "all or nothing" can allow more teens to engage.
- Limit the amount of identifiable information required to engage with your innovation. Requiring LGBTQ+ teens to set up an account not only creates privacy concerns but also an additional burden that may dissuade them from engaging. This may be unavoidable for certain innovations but unnecessary for others.
- Prioritize the development of a web-based application before a mobile application option. Mobile apps create a less concealable digital footprint by requiring users to download from Apple or Android stores, placing a heavier burden on teens that can dissuade them from engaging. Web-based applications are generally easier to build and more accessible. Furthermore, if your organization chooses to implement a mobile app in the future, an existing web application can make this process much easier.

Communication

Communication with teens is another key aspect of digital health interventions for teens. Effective communication that is teen-informed can improve the accessibility of your innovation and teen engagement. Here are some considerations from our experts regarding communication:

- Offer personalized communication options when applicable. This can include methods of communication (i.e. text, email, phone call), frequency of communication, as well as chosen name and pronouns.
- Ensure consistency of communication with teens. Ideally, there should be a communication sent with every "action" by the user (i.e. sign up, survey completion, program completion, etc.) provided the user has consented to this. Consider automating these communications for efficiency if possible.



Here are our experts' recommendations:

Communication

- Include opportunities for teens to communicate with the innovation deliverer. Even if this is a simple email or phone number, it is important that users have a way to contact someone at the organization if needed. Even while using innovative and automated approaches, such as AI, showing teens that there are real people behind the innovation can improve engagement.
- Ensure the innovation's language is casual, friendly, brief, and jargon free. This approach meets teens where they are at and is most effective when informed by direct teen feedback (see Teen-Centered Design).

Here's what our teens had to say:

Teen Involvement with Innovation Design

Teens are most willing to contribute to innovation design when they receive financial compensation, it is a minimal time investment, and they have the opportunity to work with other LGBTQ+ teens. They are generally willing to contribute to most parts of building and implementing digital health interventions with a slight preference for lower effort tasks such as prototype testing and surveys. Teens show a strong preference for engaging via paid youth advisory group but would also accept an unpaid internship or volunteer opportunity.

Design Preferences

Teens generally value appealing aesthetic features and ease of use. LGBTQ+ teens prefer to have both content related to their specific identities as well as more general information. Here are some examples of existing digital health interventions our teens liked:

- imi.guide
- Trevor Project
- Itgetsbetter
- Beloved Arise
- Scarleteen
- queertransproject.org

Workbook

Consider the following reflection questions when designing your innovation:

What privacy features could be implemented that are applicable and relevant to your innovation?

What is the minimum amount of information needed to engage with your innovation?

Does your innovation require parental consent for youth under 18 to engage? If yes, how might you structure an “opt-out” system to avoid “all or nothing” outcomes?

How might you be able to allow youth to personalize their experience with your innovation?

What are some technical terms/jargon commonly used by your team and in your field? How might you explain, simplify or remove these from your content and communications?



Branding

What does it mean to have inclusive and authentic branding?

When communicating with teens, it's essential to use an authentic, casual, and organic communication style across written, verbal, and visual media. This looks like avoiding overly scripted content, technical language, tokenization, and "selling" your program or resources too hard. Focus on your mission to reach or serve teens, allow teens to speak for themselves (quotes or testimonials sharing their experiences with you, for example), and promote teen choice and autonomy wherever you can.

Keep in mind that many teens are still developing their LGBTQ+ identity. Branding should keep in mind teens who are out and not, and those who are drawn to LGBTQ+ imagery and those who may shy away from it.

Why is this so important?

Branding is one way organizations can promote trust among LGBTQ+ teens. Your media presence is often teens' first exposure to you and what you do. Make it count.

An organization's success in developing inclusive and authentic branding primarily depends on these factors:

Teens still exploring their sexual orientation and gender identity may not self-select into interventions or programming marketed for the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ teens are savvy and skeptical digital users (e.g., paying attention to how often organization change their profile picture, monitoring posting frequency and history, consistency across platforms).

Concerns about mis/disinformation online in the digital age decreases trust of online information.



Case Example #1

Creating a Brand Identity

"Branding Bible" for Consistent and Inclusive Messaging

Who was involved?
The founder and executive director of a youth sexual health education and advocacy program led the process with support from their all-volunteer team. A professional in marketing and graphic design, who initially connected through board members and offered to volunteer, joined to guide the effort.

What did they actually do?
Together, the team reimagined their branding to better represent the values and energy of their organization. They collaborated on choosing fonts, colors, and imagery that reflected inclusivity, accessibility, and authenticity. The graphic designer helped the team translate these ideas into a cohesive visual identity and formal brand toolkit, which became their "branding bible."

Where did it happen?
Work took place both online and in person, with design discussions and feedback sessions with youth across Philadelphia and New York.

When did it happen?
The full process took about three to four months, moving from initial brainstorming to the completion of the finalized brand toolkit.

Why was this strategy used?
The organization wanted their branding to reflect the diversity and values of the communities they serve. They hadn't been seeking design help but realized the importance of clear, intentional branding once the volunteer designer joined the team.

How was it carried out?
The team developed detailed brand guidelines that included specific hex codes, rules for color combinations, and accessibility standards for font size and contrast. They also incorporated published accessibility resources (e.g., for image descriptions and font readability). This toolkit ensured everyone, from staff to volunteers, used consistent and inclusive visuals across platforms.

Now, what do these principles look like in practice?

Case Example #2
National Rebrand
Refreshing an LGBTQ+ Relationship Advice App

Who was involved?
The co-founder/executive director of a national digital mental health service led the rebranding process with input from their team, users, board members, and design professionals. The organization ultimately partnered with a creative agency after initial collaborations with independent contractors.

What did they actually do?
About two years after launch, the organization recognized their original branding no longer reflected the organization's identity or audience. The early branding had been created quickly by a team member without design experience due to a funding deadline. To redesign, the organization conducted a survey asking teens to describe the organization in three words and imagine what it would be if it were an object (for example, "a park bench where you sit and talk with a friend"). These insights helped define the emotional experience and brand "vibe."

Where did it happen?
The process was carried out primarily online, with collaborative design sessions between staff, contractors, and the design agency.

When did it happen?
The rebranding began about two years after launch and took place over several months, including multiple design rounds and feedback cycles.

Why was this strategy used?
The organization felt their initial branding looked outdated and didn't visually represent the supportive, youth-centered tone of their work. They wanted a look and feel that matched the experience of talking to someone trustworthy and approachable online.

How was it carried out?
With funding from an accelerator program that supported early-stage digital innovations, the organization hired three independent contractors to develop mock-ups and then selected one full agency at a reduced rate. The agency created several design rounds informed by feedback from the organization's users, board, and external experts. The final brand guide included color palettes, fonts, patterns, shapes, and a set of custom emojis that conveyed warmth and approachability without feeling overly serious. The team independently developed brand guidelines for writing style and tone, ensuring consistency across communications.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Creating a brand that resonates with LGBTQ+ teens requires authenticity, accessibility, and meaningful youth involvement throughout the design process. Experts emphasized the importance of developing clear and consistent messaging, building collaborative partnerships, and continuously incorporating feedback from teens.

Authentic & Accesible Design

Experts emphasized that messaging for LGBTQ+ teens should feel approachable, genuine, and easy to understand. Key recommendations included:

- Develop communication guidelines that define tone, voice, and writing style
- Keep language simple, clear, and conversational
- Avoid overusing slang or trying too hard to sound "trendy," which may feel inauthentic to teens
- Consider how branding will appear across websites, social media, advertisements, presentations, and printed materials
- Use thoughtful visual design choices, including readable fonts, clear layouts, and accessible color combinations

These recommendations can also inform the creation of a branding guide with standard colors, fonts, messaging examples, and sample materials to support consistency and accessibility.

"In addition to the visual aspects of your brand, develop guidelines on what your brand's voice is- do you use emotive language? are you conversational? are you academic? what does it look like when it's 'Right' ?"

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Youth Feedback

Experts strongly recommended involving LGBTQ+ teens throughout the branding process rather than only at the end. Suggestions included:

- Presenting multiple branding concepts to teens before finalizing designs
- Including at least one round of revisions based on user input
- Maintaining ongoing opportunities for feedback through user testing, surveys, or informal input

Experts emphasized that continuous youth engagement helps ensure branding remains relevant, authentic, and responsive to the needs of LGBTQ+ teens over time (see Teen Involvement for more information).

Partnerships

Organizations with the resources to do so may consider contracting with graphic designers or branding consultants. Experts recommended the following considerations when using this strategy:

- Use Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to define roles, responsibilities, and deliverables
- Interview multiple designers or branding consultants and review portfolios before making a decision
- Clearly communicate how you want users to feel when interacting with the innovation and describe the desired overall style (e.g., playful, supportive, casual, empowering)

Experts noted that branding professionals produce stronger results when they understand the project's mission, audience, and desired tone.



Here's what our teens had to say:

"brands on tiktok trying to be hip and like appeal to gen z with the marketing and verbiage. it's corny like you're a multi million dollar corporation not my friend"

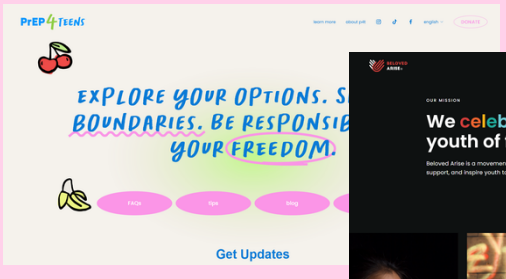
Branding Preferences

Teens report a strong preference for a unique and professional aesthetic that reflects the diversity within LGBTQ+ communities. They also reported a preference for content that is not "rainbow washed", is informed by LGBTQ+ teens, with consistency across platforms and accessibility features.

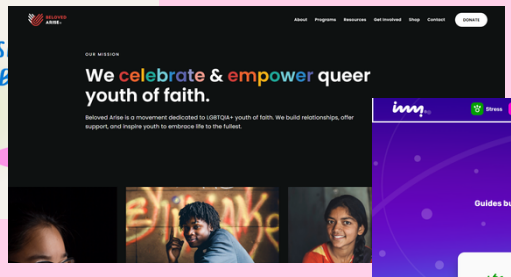
"I am not sure of a specific brand, but I think one method of branding that could be cringy is the overuse of 'Gen Z' language in an attempt to lighten the mood or connect better. I just don't think it comes across the way they might think it would. Keeping the language professional but not overly serious would suffice."

Branding Examples

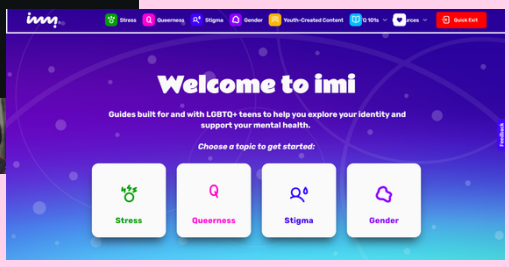
Teens value platforms that feel professional but not overly serious or busy, are easy to navigate, and have clear signals of LGBTQ+ teen involvement. Teens report a strong preference against branding that overuses gen z language as it feels inauthentic.



PrEP4Teens



Beloved Arise



imi guide

Workbook

Consider the following reflection questions when planning the future steps for your branding:

How might your current branding (visuals, tone, content) signal to LGBTQ+ teens, especially those still exploring their identity, that your organization is a safe and trustworthy space?

How do you balance being relatable and authentic in your communication style without coming across as overly casual, performative, or using slang that might feel forced?

What steps can you take to ensure your brand design process (e.g., visual identity, messaging) is inclusive, accessible, and informed by the communities you serve?

***Additionally**, here is a link to a toolkit by the Recruitment Innovation Center that offers added insight into how to develop and maintain inclusive and authentic branding.*



Additional Resources and Links

Recruitment Innovation Center Social Media Outreach and Recruitment Toolkit: https://trialinnovationnetwork.org/material-details/?ID=205

PrEP4Teens: https://prep4teens.com/

Beloved Arise: https://www.belovedarise.org/

imi: https://imi.guide/

ProTech Care: https://protechcare.org

Aguilar Salud: https://aguilarsalud.com



Partnering with Legacy Organizations

What does it mean to impactfully collaborate with a legacy organization?

Sometimes your brand is new, small, or lesser known. Associating your organization or your **innovation** with "legacy" organizations who have already built a trusted reputation among LGBTQ+ teens can confer a trusted reputation on YOUR organization, increase teens' awareness of your organization, and increase the legacy organization's awareness of what you do. Partnering with or being endorsed by larger organizations can be mutually beneficial for both parties.

Why is this so important?

In their search for information, LGBTQ+ teens rely heavily on the internet and pay close attention to an organization's online reputation and digital presence as key indicators of credibility. Affiliation with trusted legacy groups can help build credibility, allowing organizations to connect teens with resources they already recognize and trust. However, affiliation requires buy-in, and not all organizations are equally willing or resourced to collaborate. Plus, not all teens who access LGBTQ+ resources are "out" or personally identify as LGBTQ+, so non-LGBTQ+-specific partners may also be desirable. Partnering with one or more organizations can bridge this gap. Finally, the sociopolitical climate and organizations' public stances influence whether LGBTQ+ teens and their communities see these affiliations as safe and trustworthy.

An organization's success in partnering with legacy organizations primarily depends on these factors:

LGBTQ+ teens, like many people, have significant concerns about misinformation and disinformation online. This is an increasingly normalized experience in the digital age and is a primary driver of decreased trust in information found online. LGBTQ+ teens today have grown up in this environment and thus are often highly skeptical digital consumers. Furthermore, they often evaluate very small details such as posting frequency on social media, branding consistency across platforms, and who an organization is affiliated with to determine whether an organization is a trustworthy source. LGBTQ+ teens' perception of an organization or innovation as trustworthy and credible is one of the most important factors for reaching and engaging them according to our experts.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example: Legacy Organization x Local Community-Based Organization

When a legacy organization takes the lead

Who was involved?
Leaders from a local LGBTQ+ serving community organization and from a large, nationwide legacy organization with significant name recognition providing mental health support to LGBTQ+ teens.

What did they actually do?
The legacy organization sponsored an event for the local community organization to launch a sexual health program for LGBTQ+ teens. The legacy organization was able to take photos of the event to use in their own materials and establish connections within the local organizations network. The community organization leveraged the legacy organization's name recognition to establish credibility and market the event.

Where did it happen?
At a local community event in a rural area in the Southern United States.

When did it happen?
During the launch of a new program for LGBTQ+ teens run by a local community organization.

Why was this strategy used?
This collaboration offered something both organizations were in need of and provided a mutual benefit. The legacy organization was trying to reach a new area they were not very connected to, and the local organization had strong ties in this community and could help the legacy organizations make connections with the right people. The community organization had an innovation that appealed to the base of the legacy organization but was unique and offered something the legacy organization did not already have.

How was it carried out?
In this case, the legacy organization sought out a connection with the local community organization to collaborate. This shows how even smaller organizations can have assets to offer that they might not completely be aware of. The local organization used the legacy organization's name in their marketing materials and advertised their event through the legacy organization's channels (i.e. newsletter, website etc.). By collaborating with a legacy organization, the local organization was able to not only reach more youth but engage them as well due to the trust and credibility associated with the legacy organization.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Before getting started

- **Have clarity on your mission**:
  - Don't reshape your work to match what you think a legacy organization wants; stay grounded in your own mission and maintain authenticity.

- **Tap into your existing network:**
  - Connecting with legacy organizations through existing networks is more effective than cold calling. Any previously established relationship or level of name recognition can help establish your credibility when reaching out. Talk to your existing network to find out who might know someone (or knows someone who knows someone) at the organization and find out if they are willing to make a connection.

> "There are so many bad actors in the space right now... if we don't know who you are, it makes responding too risky."

- **Show up**:
  - Attend conferences, respond to the legacy organization's surveys, be "on the scene."

- **Identify your value:**
  - A key component of partnering with legacy organizations is having a clear potential for mutual benefits (i.e., knowing what your organization has to offer and a gap you could potentially fill).
    - **Avoid**: *"We do exactly what the other organization does, but better."* Reaching out to tell a legacy organization how they should invest in you to fix what they are doing is rarely going to appeal to them and is an ineffective way to build a relationship.
    - **Do**: Develop an understanding of the potential weaknesses of a legacy organization, and how you might be able to help address this through collaboration.

- **Stay current with teen and parent perspectives**:
  - It's common for public opinion on different organizations to evolve over time or for new critiques to emerge. This is especially important to LGBTQ+ youth who are cautious about brand authenticity and ensuring support for all members within the community. Parents turn to organizations for different reasons than youth, which can influence the impact of associating with legacy organizations. It also takes a lot of effort to develop and maintain these relationships–making sure the collaboration is meaningful for youth and families ensures the effort will pay off.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Building Relationships

Be Specific:

When you are reaching out to an organization for the first time, clearly communicate the potential for mutual benefit and the specific project you want to collaborate on. Simply describing your appreciation for their work and requesting a conversation without specifics does not communicate to the legacy organization that it is worth their time to respond.

Respect the Organization:

Take time to tailor your presentation materials to the legacy organization. While a standard slide deck provides a strong foundation, making the extra effort to reflect an understanding of and respect for the organization you are engaging with helps reinforce the potential for mutual benefit.

Start Early:

It is rare for one organization to trumpet an innovation by another organization without a deeper investment in its outcome. If possible, connect with the organization early and involve them in the design process of your innovation. There may be key features or content that would make your innovation more appealing to them.

Keep Trying:

Even if the initial attempt to build a connection does not manifest, continue to maintain the relationship. Future opportunities may arise, and staying fresh on the mind of the legacy organization can help you stay at the top of the list.

Pay attention:

If you have a second meeting, make sure it reflects what you learned and what was shared in earlier conversations. Failing to do so can reflect poorly, especially when working with youth, where listening carefully is essential.

Here's what our teens had to say:

Our teens reported that trust and credibility are crucial factors when vetting sources of information and support. Furthermore, when asked who they view as trustworthy, they typically mention big legacy organizations such as The Trevor Project and Scarleteen. This suggests that having the support of these names can have a huge impact on teens' willingness to engage with your innovation.

Workbook

Consider the following reflection questions when planning your future relationships with legacy organizations

Identify legacy organizations in your space:

What weaknesses or gaps in these organizations' capabilities might your organization or innovation be able to address?

What strengths and capabilities does your organization or innovation possess that can be offered for a mutual benefit?

What existing connections might you be able to leverage in building a relationship?

Where might you be able to find and connect with individuals at these organizations?



Online Presence

What does it mean to have a consistent and visible online presence?

Having a regular, recognizable presence in digital spaces with a consistent "voice" across your organization's digital spaces can 1) reach more young people where they spend much of their time, 2) build trust, and 3) make you stand apart from other groups. This can include:

- Organic marketing, including long-term **strategies** like search engine optimization (SEO; improving a website link's visibility, traffic, and rankings on search engines like Google) and content creation, help build brand authority and trust over time
- Prioritizing posting regularly (e.g., using social media scheduling tools)
  - Creating social media content that someone shares with someone else (e.g., from a "For You" page on TikTok) is a way for LGBTQ+ teens to discover your brand
- Interacting with social media accounts of like-minded organizations that have shared values (e.g., follow, like/comment on posts, share posts/brand collaboration), or partnering on shared posts to expand reach
- Having consistent team members who oversee your online presence and interact with teens and other online audience members

Why is this so important?

Online spaces are as much a part of teenagers' lives as in-person spaces, and many LGBTQ+ teens feel more comfortable interacting online! Being comfortable navigating these spaces can be a significant asset to groups wanting to reach and engage LGBTQ+ teens who could benefit from your programs or innovations. Teens also use online presence to help them decide whether an organization is trustworthy and worth engaging with.

An organization's success in maintaining a consistent online presence primarily depends on these factors:

LGBTQ+ teens are often savvy and skeptical digital users (e.g., paying attention to how often organizations change their profile picture, monitoring posting frequency and history, consistency across platforms).

Concerns about mis/disinformation online in the digital age can decrease teens' trust in online information.

The sociopolitical climate can deter teens from engaging with certain platforms (e.g., Elon Musk purchasing Twitter, Meta content moderation policies).



Now, what do these principles look like in practice?

Case Example #1

Queer Sex Ed Community Curriculum

Maintaining an Online Presence through Community-Generated Content

Who was involved?
The founder and director of the organization Queer Sex Ed Community Curriculum led the initiative together with long-term volunteers, including college students earning course credit and community members interested in gender and sexual health education.

What did they actually do?
As a fully volunteer-run collective with limited capacity, the team sought ways to remain consistent in posting educational content on their website, including engaging the broader community through crowdsourcing content. They created an open submission form that allowed anyone to contribute educational materials, blog posts, or vlogs to the website. To ensure alignment with the organization's values, they developed detailed content guidelines document outlining standards such as being antiracist, gender-inclusive, and avoiding banned terms. Check them out at **here**.

Where did it happen?
All activities took place online, primarily through their website and digital platforms.

When did it happen?
Initially, when the organization launched in Fall 2020, content creation was handled internally or through collaborations with like-minded organizations. The team opened submissions to the public in Fall 2024 after recognizing that sharing authorship opportunities with the community could help sustain a regular posting frequency.

Why was this strategy used?
As a small, volunteer-based collective, maintaining a steady stream of high-quality content was challenging. Opening submissions to community contributors allowed the organization to stay visible, expand reach, and model inclusivity while staying true to their educational mission.

How was it carried out?
The team used a transparent, content-only vetting process. They reviewed submissions based on alignment with the mission rather than on the contributor's identity or credentials. Approved pieces were edited collaboratively, and the team always contacted contributors before posting to confirm details such as name spelling, contact preferences, and consent for publication. This open-yet-structured system helped the organization maintain consistency, visibility, and integrity despite limited resources.

Case Example #2

The Youth Sexpert Program

Sustaining an online presence through interns

Who was involved?
The Youth Sexpert Program operates largely through volunteers, many of whom are college students or interns interested in sexual health education and communication. The social media efforts are led by the founder, whose background is in social media and freelance sex education, alongside two long-term volunteers and rotating interns.

What did they actually do?
Recognizing that volunteer capacity often comes in waves, the team developed a flexible system where new interns and volunteers take on social media responsibilities as part of their learning experience. The founder and experienced volunteers provide mentorship and guidance, helping new contributors bridge content gaps when engagement slows.

Where did it happen?
The organization's online presence is managed across social media platforms.

When did it happen?
This approach evolved organically over time as volunteer cycles changed, ensuring continuity even as individual contributors moved on from the organization.

Why was this strategy used?
With limited staff and funding, the program needed a sustainable way to keep content active and consistent. Empowering interns and volunteers to take leadership roles allowed the organization to maintain visibility while supporting hands-on learning opportunities for emerging sex educators. **Check them out at here**

How was it carried out?
The team created an informal system of peer mentorship and content handoff between outgoing and incoming volunteers. The founder provides oversight and helps maintain a cohesive tone and style across posts, ensuring the organization's message remains authentic and aligned with its mission even as contributors rotate.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Experts emphasized that successful social media engagement with LGBTQ+ teens requires intentional planning, ongoing adaptability, and consistent community involvement. Recommendations focused on creating relevant content that is responsive to changing online trends and policies, maintaining engagement, and collaboration with likeminded organizations and individuals.

Before Getting Started

- Think about what content will be engaging and shareable for your audience by asking questions, conducting surveys, or gathering informal feedback from teens (see "Teen Involvement")
- Develop categories for posts (e.g., educational content, testimonials, trends, announcements) to support content planning throughout the year
- Create visual templates aligned with your branding so content can be produced quickly and consistently
- Develop stock outreach materials, such as email templates or collaboration messages, to streamline communication efforts
- Learn about policies and legislation that may impact LGBTQ+ content online, including censorship concerns and age-verification laws
- Prepare for challenges that may arise online, including harassment or trolling, which can be particularly common in LGBTQ+ youth spaces

Collaboration & Community Engagement

- Conduct ongoing outreach to like-minded organizations or creators for potential collaborations
- Use collaborative posts, shared campaigns, or cross-promotion opportunities to reach new audiences
- Regularly research organizations with aligned missions and values to identify future partnership opportunities



Here are our experts' recommendations:

Maintaining Engagement

- Ensure that the mission and goals of the organization are clearly reflected in social media content and strategy
- Plan posts in advance when possible, especially during busier times of year
- Monitor trends, news, and cultural conversations that may be relevant to LGBTQ+ teens
- Involve young people in content creation or in identifying topics that are currently important to teens
- Prioritize content formats that platforms are actively promoting, such as short-form video or new platform features
- Stay informed about evolving platform algorithms and engagement strategies (e.g., hashtags, keywords, reels, or story features)
- Engage directly with users through comments, direct messages, and interactive platform tools

Experts also noted that maintaining a consistent social media presence can be difficult for a single person. They recommended involving multiple contributors, such as interns, youth advisors, or community members, to help sustain engagement over time.

Here's what our teens had to say:

Preferred Content

"What type of content from LGBTQ+ organizations do you actually want to see in your feed?"

Teens favor content about **LGBTQ+ rights and issues**, as well as **mental and sexual health education**. Teens prefer more **informal content** using humor and sharing other **LGBTQ+ teens' stories.**



Involvement Preferences

"If an organization wanted YOU to help create their social mediate content, what role sounds most appealing?"



Teens said they would be willing to perform a variety of tasks, including **giving feedback** on posts before they go live, **sharing ideas** for what to post about, and **filming short videos** (like Reels or TikToks).

Digital Presence Examples

"How did you discover the LGBTQ+ organization you currently follow or use online (whether for social media, virtual healthcare, programs, etc.)? What makes an organization "visible" and easy to discover vs hard to find?"

They reported locating organizations through content showed to them via their social media algorithm or through online search. They suggest keeping a consistent branding package and an easy route to get involved. Teens also suggest leveraging social media trends and using multiple methods for posting to increase reach.

Teens prefer branding with a **consistent "vibe" or artistic style** (using words like cozy, calm, fun, bright, eccentric, silly, funny), with a **distinct purpose**, and that strive to create **a sense of community**.



Workbook

Consider the following reflection questions when considering the future steps for your branding:

Who on your staff has the time, capacity, or skill to manage your organizations' social media? If you cannot identify current staff (including yourself), draft a plan for hiring, or recruiting volunteers/interns.

What if any legislation exists that restricts or permits youth online activities in your state? Check out this map.

Additional Resources and Links

Free Speech Coalition Health Access Map:
https://action.freespeechcoalition.com/age-verification-bills/

Queer Sex Ed Community Curriculum:
https://queersexedcc.com

Youth Sexpert Program:
https://www.theyouthsexpertprogram.org/

Recruitment Innovation Center Social Media Outreach and Recruitment Toolkit:
https://trialinnovationnetwork.org/material-details/?ID=205

Strengthening Your Organization



Teen Involvement

What does it mean to have teen involvement in the development of digital sexual health interventions?

Teens are often excluded from the research, development, and implementation of innovations that are intended for them. To reflect teens' needs, wants, and priorities, engaging LGBTQ+ teens in participatory methods throughout this process can help meaningfully guide what you do. This can range from consulting with teens on a one-time basis, forming a youth advisory structure (e.g., a board or council) to get more regular feedback, hiring teens as interns or employees, or working with students. However, when involving teens it's important to meet them where they are at, rather than expecting teens to perform like working adults. This might require more time socializing them to your expectations, using software they are more accustomed to, etc. Finally, when teens are involved, it is also important to ensure their work (e.g., social media posts) aligns with your organization's mission and values.

Why is this so important?

In an environment of mis/disinformation and lack of LGBTQ+ inclusive information, LGBTQ+ teens need trustworthy sexual health information in an accessible and affirming way. Content tends to feel more genuine when teens are part of creating it. Their perspectives naturally reflect what resonates with their peers, adding a level of authenticity that's hard to replicate otherwise. Yet despite this insight, young people are often left out of decisions about how innovations are designed and presented.

An organization's success in meaningfully involving teens primarily depends on these factors:

LBGTQ+ teens seek authentic, trustworthy, credible sources for sexual health information.

Teen involvement in the development of the innovation increases credibility and trustworthiness.

Teen engagement promotes an organizational culture that has shared values, beliefs, and norms around caring, supporting and addressing the needs and welfare of LGBTQ+ teens, as well as respecting their contributions.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1
Youth Ambassador Program
Encouraging Teen Leadership

Who was involved?
A Youth Ambassador Program involved 8-10 young people from across the country who were interested in engaging with queer youth mental health research, between the ages of 14-20. They were supervised primarily by one adult member of an organization's staff, but engaged with multiple members in the organization depending on program tasks.

What did they actually do?
Staff attempted to cater activities for each youth ambassador that were relevant to their specific interests (social media, creative design, writing, video production, etc.) Youth ambassadors were given opportunities to lead conferences, film short form video content for social media dissemination, offer interviews for news outlets, creating and disseminating digital zines, leading workshops, writing articles/op eds for publications, and receive/provide mentorship.

Where did it happen?
This organization's ambassadorship program was conducted completely remotely. When funding allowed, they were able to have 2 to 3 in-person sessions (retreats) where they offered travel/lodging, workshops, and were able to do a photoshoot with ambassadors.

When did it happen?
The first cohort of ambassadors lasted one year, but after noticing participant drop-off at around the 5 month mark, the next cohort was scheduled around a 5 month schedule, two cohorts a year.

Why was this strategy used?
This program aimed to empower and uplift Queer youth voices in the research/dissemination which affected them and their communities. Youth leadership positions which allow them to spearhead projects which interest them (with valuable support and scaffolding from staff) ensures that your outputs are grounded in the experience of their target audience.

How was it carried out?
Funding for the in-person event; putting out application requests in beginning; connecting with comm partners to get word out and build out the workshops.

Case Example #2

Youth Advisory Board

Keeping your work teen-centered

Who was involved?
Between 10-15 teens were selected for a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) run by an alliance aiming to promote safety, support, and healthy development for LGBTQ+ students in Illinois Public Schools

What did they actually do?
YAB members were asked to provide feedback on or generate workshop topic ideas, materials, and activities, were given opportunities to attend conferences, and were tasked with leading a summer retreat

Where did it happen?
The retreat took place in Chicago, while the YAB was conducted both online and in person

When did it happen?
The YAB ran through the school year (Sept – May), and time was spent during the summer to prepare for the 5-day camping retreat

Why was this strategy used?
Materials, workshop topics, and activities were generated by the YAB in order to ensure that all materials were youth centered; additionally, leadership and conference attendance opportunities were offered to provide professional development to members of the YAB

How was it carried out?
YAB members identify and develop topics for conference presentations, workshops, social events, and the summer retreat. They are given the leadership opportunities in the form of designing and running workshops, presenting at and organizing conferences, and serving as youth leaders at a 5-day youth-led camping retreat held over the summer.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Mutual Benefit

Make sure teens receive meaningful value in exchange for their time and effort—this can be a deciding factor in whether they choose to participate. If you are offering financial compensation, consider the amount of time they will spend on the project and use your state's minimum wage as a baseline for determining fair payment. Even when financial compensation is available, it's important to also provide non-financial benefits that support teens' personal and professional growth. If your organization cannot provide payment, these benefits become especially important. Examples include:

- Professional development support (resume and cover letter review, school applications, essay feedback, mock interviews, etc.)
- Leadership opportunities and hands-on experience
- Certificates of participation or achievement
- Letters of recommendation

Relationship Building

Communicate and establish rapport with your teens–avoid being a faceless entity that engages with them from afar:

- Avoid anonymized platforms
- Add language to guidelines about balancing privacy, allowing them to show up as they'd like.
- Ensure you are as transparent as possible to teens about processes like selection, participation, payment, etc.
    - Regularly communicating the outcomes/products of teen feedback offers legitimacy to their time and effort and confirms that their ideas are being implemented in the work/products.
- Engage alumni: maintain relationships with program alumni, they can be valuable resources by providing retrospective feedback and can be an aid/resource (or mentor!) for current members.

Structure

Develop infrastructure, support, and scaffolding that amplifies teen voices and leadership:

- Ensure there are clear roles/expectations for involvement that aligns with shared goals and values
- Acknowledge the role of power and who has the final say in decision-making
    - While there are many resources for youth engagement, we like Roger Hart's ladder of youth participation as a tool to promote discussion and shared accountability
- Ensuring an organized, consistent agenda to allow teens to better fit extracurricular work into their busy schedule and engage more meaningfully
    - It shows that you take their time as seriously as you take your own
- Promote flexibility: be open to adapting and evolving the structure to better meet the needs and hopes of teens. This helps them feel that it is their space, and they will feel more empowered and invested in.



Here's what our teens had to say:

*"i'd be very likely to do it if it didn't take more than **15-20 mins if unpaid,** and would be willing in general **up to an hour** (but its just the most likely within that previous timeframe). if it was like a collaborative thing where other teens were providing feedback alongside me and it **could be more like a discussion** that would also increase my interest."*

Involvement Preferences

- Teens indicated they would be willing to perform a variety of tasks regarding content creation with a preference for lower effort tasks, such as providing feedback or ideas.
- Teens are generally willing to contribute to most parts of building and implementing innovations with a slight preference for lower effort tasks. Teens show a strong preference for engaging via paid opportunities but would also accept an unpaid internship or volunteer opportunity.



Teens felt the most important aspect was centering their voices. This means allowing them to direct what was discussed rather than just asking their opinion on something adults already created. Teens also endorsed a sense of purpose for the group, meaning they were actively learning and contributing to something. A lack of inclusivity, purpose, communication, and inefficient use of time were mentioned as negatives.



Willingness to Participate in Design

- Teens are most willing to contribute when they get paid, it is a minimal time investment, and they can work with other LGBTQ+ teens. *Anonymity and organizational reputation are less important.*
- Teens highly endorsed:
  - Transparency with how their information is used and protected
  - Clear programmatic structure
  - Alignment of program with their interests and priorities
  - Opportunity to work outside of school hours
  - Report-backs and alumni opportunities
  - *Alignment with the academic calendar and opportunities for presentation, social interaction, and leadership are less important.*
- Teens report that incentives and personal interest are the biggest motivators, in addition to an opportunity to help their community and professional development; an opportunity to build community and find other like-minded people was the least motivating.

Workbook

Here are some resources that you may find useful in meaningfully involving teens in your work:

Hart's Ladder of Participation - Here is a guide developed at Cornell University that will let you know how to scaffold teen involvement according to their age group, including when to go "hands off."

UNICEF and the Youth Engagement Network have downloadable materials with more information, tools, and resources to support your work for meaningful youth engagement.

Act for Youth - Principles of Positive Youth Development - Here are some principles that can help ground your engagement with teens.

Below is a guide our lab has developed for catering research questions to our Youth Advisory Council. We hope this guide will direct your team on how to offer the proper context and background to effectively solicit insight from teen advisors:

STEP 1: Decide What You Want Feedback On

Start by clearly identifying **what teens will be reacting to**. This should be something they will see, read, hear, or use.

Examples:

- Social media posts or videos
- Ads or recruitment materials
- App or website design (colors, layout, navigation)
- The words and tone used in health content
- How health information is explained
- Interactive features (quizzes, reminders, messages)

Ask yourself: Is this something teens actually experience? If not, it may not be the right thing to ask them about.

STEP 2: Narrow It Down to One Clear Focus

Get specific about what you want to learn from teens. This helps keep questions focused and useful.

Examples:

- Do teens understand this content?
- Does it feel relatable or meant for people like them?
- Is anything confusing or off-putting?
- Does it make them want to engage?

This step helps avoid questions that are too broad or unclear.



Workbook

STEP 3: Break the Topic into Smaller Pieces

Think about the **exact type of feedback** you need. These smaller pieces will guide your questions.

Common areas to ask about:

- What is clear or unclear
- What stands out
- How it makes them feel
- Whether it feels useful or relevant
- What works well
- What doesn't work
- What could be improved
- Whether the language feels inclusive and respectful

Tip: If you don't know how you would use the feedback, the question may be too vague.

STEP 4: Give Youth Enough Context

Before asking questions, make sure youth understand **what they're looking at and why**.

Ways to give context:

- Briefly explain what the content is for
- Show the actual content (image, text, video, mock-up)
- Explain where it would appear (for example, Instagram, an app, a website)
- Example: "This post would be shown on social media to introduce a mental health app for teens."

Clear context helps youth give more helpful and specific feedback.

STEP 5: Ask Clear, Focused Questions

Write questions that are **easy to understand and encourage honest feedback**.

- **Good questions**:
  - Focus on one idea at a time
  - Use everyday language
  - Invite teens to share their thoughts in their own words
  - Examples:
    - "What do you notice first when you see this?"
    - "Is anything confusing or hard to understand?"
    - "How does this make you feel?"
    - "What would you change to make this better for you or people your age?"
- **Avoid**:
  - Very general questions like "What do you think?"
  - Yes/no questions without follow-ups
  - Complicated or technical wording



Workbook

STEP 6: Ask Follow-Up Questions

Follow-up questions help you understand youth responses more clearly and get deeper feedback.

Examples:

- "Can you explain what you mean?"
- "What makes you feel that way?"
- "Can you give an example?"
- "What would you prefer instead?"

Let youth guide the conversation when possible.

STEP 7: Make Space for Anything Else

Always give teens a chance to share **feedback you didn't ask about**.

Examples:

- "Is there anything else you want to share?"
- "Did we miss anything important?"
- "Any other thoughts or suggestions?"

This helps capture ideas you may not have expected.

Final Check Before Using Your Questions

Before you ask youth for feedback, check:

1. **Are the questions easy to understand?**
2. **Can teens answer based on their own experience?**
3. **Will the answers help improve the program or content?**
4. **Do the questions feel respectful and teen-centered?**

Additional Resources and Links

Hart's Ladder of Participation: https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/lessons/program-tools/planning-organizing/effective-youth-engagement/harts-ladder-of-participation/

UNICEF: https://www.unicef.org/youthledaction/resources-meaningful-youth-engagement

Youth Engagement Network: https://www.etr.org/yen/resources/youth-engagement/

Act for Youth - Principles of Positive Youth Development: https://actforyouth.org/pyd/



Financing

What does it mean to finance innovations for LGBTQ+ teens?

While there may be available funding to support research and development of health **innovations** (e.g., through the National Institutes of Health), funding to implement them long-term can be hard to come by. This requires organizations to get creative by using **collaborative funding models**, **cost-sharing models**, and **blended and braided funding**—from government, foundation, investor, and donations—to support an organization's work. Collaborative and cost-sharing models with strategic partners can conserve funds while providing a mutual benefit (e.g., cross-posting ads and other shared efforts to reach similar populations).

Why is this important?

The financial resources available often determine whether organizations can scale and sustain innovations long-term. Grant funding has become increasingly competitive, and because youth-focused work is not often revenue-generating, organizations must look for alternate funding streams. Moreover, there are ongoing challenges with donors such as shifting priorities and more groups competing for the same funding. This leads to limited ability to fairly compensate employees (and in turn retain them) and a heavier reliance on a revolving door of volunteers.

An organization's success in financing their innovation primarily depends on these factors:

Funding opportunities often prioritize direct services (e.g., innovation delivery) over supportive efforts such as communications and marketing. This can create challenges in funding the activities that promote reach and engagement with LGBTQ+ teens. Organizations are most successful when they secure funding for the innovation itself as well as implementation efforts like marketing, social media management, recruitment, and staff training.

Human resources are typically the largest expense for organizations implementing digital innovations. Overreliance on a single funding source creates a high risk of layoffs if that particular source of funding is lost. Given the volatility of political and social climates, it is important to diversify funding streams as much as possible to minimize this risk.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1
School District Funding

Setting up convenient and clear chances to donate can streamline contributions

Who was involved?
A youth-serving healthcare organization partnered with a school district for programming. Donations were collected through a fundraising website hosted by the school district partner.

What did they actually do?
The partnering school hosted the fundraising page for donations. Additionally, they would tie some fundraising initiatives to tangible products the organization will support with the donations (e.g., $20 donation would fund a pride flag; $500 donation would fund food for a youth-inclusive gathering).

Where did it happen?
The fundraising webpage lived primarily on the partnering school district website. The link and related QR code were posted any- and everywhere to maximize donation opportunities.

When did it happen?
The fundraising webpage was active at all times. Additionally, the organization had success by intentionally eliciting donations around specific events (e.g., Pride Month; Awareness Week, etc.).

Why was this strategy used?
The initiative brought in unrestricted money, so the organization could spend it wherever it was most needed (not tied to a specific innovation). It supplemented bigger fundraising campaigns by focusing on smaller donors, rather than relying only on large gifts. It also built relationships with the community by giving people a chance to contribute and feel involved in supporting how the funds are used.

How was it carried out?
The fundraising webpage was interwoven into the organization's typical processes and day-to-day tasks. All links and related QR codes were made to be easily accessible.

Case Example #2

Sponsorship Packet

Bundling support opportunities can give sponsors a bigger bang for their buck

Who was involved?
Staff + youth partners, queer person of color-owned businesses, local universities

What did they actually do?
The organization first created a list of potential sponsoring businesses to contact and prioritized businesses they had existing relationships with. The sponsorship package started with 3-5 levels of sponsorship where supporting businesses would receive different benefits based on their level of support; for example, if a company donated $50, they would receive a handwritten letter from youth (de-identified) speaking to the impact of the support. Another example was the opportunity for the business to attend an event or workshop for free that was hosted by the organization. A bonus for participating businesses was that it provided exposure of their particular company.

Where did it happen?
While most outreach efforts were virtual (e.g., email), staff also set up in-person meetings for the donating businesses to meet the staff or visited local businesses they had existing relationships with.

When did it happen?
After initial kickoff, the website with the donation feature was always active. Additionally, the organization aligned their outreach efforts with specific holidays and dates.

Why was this strategy used?
Typically, funding was tied to specific projects or very restrictive in the way it could be used; thus, funds from the sponsorship model were more flexible and could be allocated to where the organization needed support at the time. Youth found it important to reach out to local businesses as they had negative experiences with larger businesses sponsoring them in the past (e.g., businesses tokenizing the partnership).

How was it carried out?
Several preparatory meetings were held to finalize the details of the sponsorship model, such as defining the levels of sponsorship, deciding which businesses to reach out to first, and allocation of finances to supporting the initiative. Fortunately, there were not many things they had to spend money on given that most materials (e.g., graphics; online donation form) were virtual. The organization also divided up into teams, where teens came up with the ideas that staff could execute. For their overall efforts and attendance of bimonthly meetings, teens were provided a stipend (e.g., $110/month, received via virtual gift cards). One way to overcome the challenge of balancing teen participation and protecting their identity was making the letters from teens anonymous, only signed by the staff. Another way to protect teens' identity was to hire artists to illustrate the concept or activity the sponsorship supported, as opposed to having identifying photographs taken of the teens.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Grant Funding

Grant funding can be found through state and federal agencies, non- and for-profit companies, and foundations. This type of funding is often designated for a specific goal that aligns with the entity's priorities. As mentioned before, this type of funding is increasingly difficult to obtain and often subject to the volatility of political climates, particularly for government agencies. Furthermore, grant funding is usually geared towards the development and delivery of a service and may be less likely to support implementation efforts such as marketing. It is important to seek out funding opportunities that align your organization's goals with entities that have shared priorities. Furthermore, having formal evaluation data to provide evidence of efficacy is crucial to securing grant funding (see Evaluation for more information).

Donations

Donations can come from individuals, businesses, and foundations. In comparison with grants, this type of funding generally offers more flexibility in how it is spent and thus can be used for all activities associated with implementing an innovation. Here are some specific recommendations from our experts on how to fundraise via donations:

1. Create a donate + action campaign where participants sign a petition, complete a challenge (e.g., "ice-bucket challenge"), spread awareness, etc.
2. Share success stories with potential donors while protecting participating teen's identity. Examples include anonymizing quotes or having an artist create illustrations rather than directly photographing participating teens.
3. Create a fundraising campaign where participants or volunteers can compete to raise funds.
4. Strategically engage donors on key dates (e.g. National Coming Out Day, Bi Awareness Week, Trans Day of Visibility, etc.)
5. Creating a sponsorship packet that can be sent out to potential donors
6. Create a fundraising team that can take the lead on strategy development
7. Create a "donate" page or button on your website or social media accounts to allow individuals to donate regardless of current fundraising activities

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Revenue Generating Activities

As an LGBTQ+ serving organization you have a specific set of expertise that is likely of value to others. Offering trainings or other services, such as access to your larger network or opportunities to network (e.g., Career Day), can generate revenue which can be used to support your innovation. The innovation itself might also be of value to other organizations. Another way to generate revenue is to create a licensing model where the innovation is purchased and used by external organizations; experts emphasized an important caveat that adequate demand is necessary for this strategy to be effective.

Cost-sharing Partnerships

Partnerships with academic institutions, tech companies, and other community-based organizations can help fill gaps in a resource constrained environment. Partnerships can be used for a variety of activities associated with implementing digital health interventions such as social media presence, brand development, advertising campaigns, evaluation, and more. Again, these partnerships work best when collaborating organizations have shared goals and priorities.

Workbook

The following sources host updated lists of opportunities for funding that might be a good fit for your organization:

- AAMC Center for Health Justice
- American Psychological Association
- Chicago Department of Mental Health

Workbook

Use the following questions to explore the different funding opportunities available to your organization:

What kinds of businesses or organizations might have an interest in sponsoring your innovation?

What expertise or skills does your organization hold that can be leveraged for revenue generating activities, such as trainings?

What are some gaps in your organization's capacity that could be addressed with partnerships? What organizations or individuals could help address these gaps?



Additional Resources and Links

AAMC Center for Health Justice:
https://www.aamchealthjustice.org/career-development/funding

American Psychological Association:
https://www.apa.org/research-practice/funding

Chicago Department of Mental Health:
https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/cdph/provdrs/cdph_administration/svcs/rfps-and-grants.html



Staffing

What does staffing look like when you are trying to engage LGBTQ+ teens in health innovations?

Building a team to operate a health intervention or program involves both looking for specific skills and attributes in the hiring process as well as training to ensure competency. Working with teens requires not only cultural competency (i.e., the ability to understand, appreciate, and interact effectively with LGBTQ+ teens), but also digital competency, meaning having curiosity and comfort with technology and social media. If you know what digital environments teens are in, you know where to reach and engage them. Therefore, your staff will need to be adaptable to the changing cultural and digital landscapes, curious to learn what language teens use, which platforms they're on, and be comfortable using different types of technologies. While you should do your best to hire individuals with relevant skills, don't assume people are culturally or digitally competent even if they share identities with your population. This involves identifying gaps in training and developing processes to address them. There are additional considerations to consider when your health innovation has digital components (e.g., website, app). Digital health **innovations** generally require a range of expertise from technology, marketing, and patient-facing communications. There are several solutions to filling these needs such as outsourcing or contracting, internships, volunteers, and traditional paid employees.

Why is this so important?

There is a need for affirming, high-quality care for LGBTQ+ teens across all touchpoints. Being inclusive of LGBTQ+ teens might require adults to go out of their comfort zone and be aware of how factors like age, power, expertise, changes in culture, technology, and society impact their work with teens. Since there can be high turnover in nonprofit work, small teams must be flexible and competent.

An organization's success in securing effective and competent staffing primarily depends on these factors:

Staff are most effective when they have the interpersonal competence, knowledge, and skills to work with LGBTQ+ teens and are motivated and enthusiastic to deliver health innovations to these teens.

Widespread attitudes that shape "cancel culture" creates high risk for damaging an organization's reputation, meaning it is important to ensure staff are culturally competent with LGBTQ+ teens.

Staff sometimes do not have dedicated time to support reaching LGBTQ+ teens beyond their other responsibilities.

Nonprofit and LGBTQ+ serving organizations tend to have high staff turnover rates creating challenges.



Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1

Medical Residents and Fellows

Providing a one-time basic training to medical providers

Who was involved?
Medical residents and fellows employed at a community health clinic

What did they actually do?
A one-time training that covers basic information about LGBTQ+ communities, health, and terminology with a focus on adolescents.

Where did it happen?
In-person, virtual, or hybrid

When did it happen?
During onboarding or early in an employee's time at the organization

Why was this strategy used?
Medical residents and fellows were selected if they indicated either experience working with LGBTQ+ teens or a desire to work with this population. However the desire to work with LGBTQ+ teens or having a shared identity can lead to harm (i.e., assuming teens use certain identity labels or projecting experiences onto teens). Furthermore, a single training does not lead to cultural competence; opportunities to observe interactions and co-facilitate groups are essential to gaining comfort with working with LGBTQ+ teens. These opportunities help ensure that adults who work with teens are supported during trainings and encouraged to improve, rather than being met with punitive responses or assumptions of malice when mistakes occur. Encouraging self-correction and accountability when mistakes are made is also critical to building competency and supporting ongoing learning.

How was it carried out?
The training took care to de-pathologize behaviors and experiences that are often stigmatized. It encouraged providers to be self-reflective and humble in their interactions with teens. Providers were urged to remain curious and open to learning rather than experts on teens' cultures and lives, and to consider when a situation might warrant a conversation with a teen rather than an immediate intervention. The trainings incorporated skills practice and were ongoing to reflect changes (e.g., new interventions offered, different populations served, cultural changes).

Here are our experts' recommendations:

When it comes to Hiring...

Paid Employees

Experts generally recommend traditional employees for the majority of tasks if an organization has the resources to use this approach. Paid staff are generally more responsive and provide more consistent outcomes than alternative sources of labor (e.g., volunteers, students, etc.). Furthermore, they are generally best for teen-facing roles that involve ongoing and skilled relationship building.

Volunteers

Experts generally don't recommend relying on volunteers for the majority of tasks. However, there are certain roles that volunteers can be well suited for such as with networking and fundraising events. Furthermore, volunteers might be the best option for "passion project" organizations with limited to no financial resources.

> "It matters what you are wanting these folks to do. Volunteers can help identify a tech or marketing firm or with fundraising, while paid employees might be better at ongoing deep, skilled relationship building with young people."

Outsourcing

Contracting outside individuals or businesses can be useful for certain tasks when an organization has the resources to do so. These tasks are often highly specialized, such as technology or marketing, and don't have to be sustained over a long period of time. Examples include developing a website or branding package. Outsourcing these tasks allows you to access a deeper set of skills without committing to a paid employee.

> "It also matters what your resources are at different stages. Some folks' innovations arise through already staffed organizations/institutions, while others are coming from a passionate person who is basically a volunteer with limited resources, so **engaging other passionate volunteers could be more successful,** at least initially."

Interns

Internships can be an accessible way to bring people on your team even with limited resources. Students in relevant fields such as public health, education, or life-science communication are often looking for experience or practicums to build their careers. When using this approach, make sure that an intern's tasks are valuable to their growth such as content creation, teen-facing communications, and dissemination.



Here are our experts' recommendations:

Attributes of Experienced & Informed Staff

The following list of priorities recommended by our experts are mostly applicable for individuals interacting directly with LGBTQ+ teens but could also have value for anyone you bring on the team or contract:

- Prioritize hiring staff who represent, look like, and/or have shared experiences with the communities being served by the innovation (e.g., Black LGBTQ+, immigrant LGBTQ+, transgender and nonbinary).
- Prioritize hiring staff with knowledge and experience working with LGBTQ+ teens. Even for individuals who are members of our community, this experience will ensure that they can effectively serve all teens and not just the ones who share their identities.
- Hire "near-peers" who can provide guidance on tailoring the innovation and strategies to reach LGBTQ+ teens.

When it comes to Training...

Our experts note that staff training should always be linked to the mission of your innovation and promote engagement and enthusiasm. The worlds of LGBTQ+ teens and the digital landscape change rapidly. As such, training should be seen as an ongoing, iterative endeavor informed both by the needs and challenges of staff as well as the needs of the teens you are serving. Below are some specific considerations for training staff to work effectively with LGBTQ+ teens and within digital environments. While the majority are most relevant to staff working directly with teens, your organization can benefit from training staff at all levels with the following competencies:

- Train staff to be familiar with and operate comfortably in whatever environment the program is delivered in (digital or in-person). Digital environments may have different norms or "rules of engagement" than traditional in-person environments, so it is important to make sure staff are comfortable and confident in virtual spaces when communicating with teens through those channels.

(continued)



When it comes to Training...

(continued)

- Staff who work with teens should be trained to talk about online spaces. This can include where teens spend their time online, their experiences, and what role online spaces/relationships play in their life. Overlooking teens' online experiences will likely overlook a significant "third space" where many teens engage in typical developmental experiences (e.g., socializing, flirting, dating, identity exploration) as well as experiences that may be concerning (e.g., interactions with bad actors).
- Train staff in cultural competence when working with LGBTQ+ teens like using empowering, inclusive, gender affirming language; a casual approach that is not patronizing; and being mindful of neurodiversity and the higher rate of traumatic or adverse experiences among this group.
- Encourage curiosity when staff speak with LGBTQ+ teens. Staff should have the capacity to be curious, humble, and thick-skinned in order to elicit and receive feedback from teens to improve service provision.
- It might be necessary for some organizations to train staff in multiple roles, such as an outreach specialist that can also serve as a mental health first responder.
- Invest in staff with ongoing professional development opportunities. This is especially important to combat high turnover rates by showing that the organization is invested in their future.

"You'll never cover everything and things change quickly, so training should include cultural humility and building a culture of continuous learning."

Here's what our teens had to say:

Preferred Skills and Competencies

Our council most valued staff with an understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences such as intersectionality, microaggressions, and relationships who can also point them to helpful resources. Knowledge of LGBTQ+ mental health and policy are also somewhat valued.

Our youth reported that adults can often be nervous about "saying the wrong thing" rather than speaking to them like they would other teens regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. They prefer working with adults that are able to ask informed questions about LGBTQ+ language, identity and experiences. Our teens also reported that adults sometimes put all LGBTQ+ identities into a "box" and don't have a good understanding of the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community.

"like i'd rather you say the "wrong" thing than act weird about it and try to sidestep what im talking about"



Workbook

Sample Interview Guide

Questions to ask potential staff members/clinicians to assess readiness to work with LGBTQ+ youth

- What makes you want to work with LGBTQ+ teens at our organization?
- What experiences do you have that are relevant to working with LGBTQ+ teens?
- (*For people with experience*) Can you give me an example of when something in your direct work with LGBTQ+ teens didn't go the way you expected and how you addressed it?
- How might you handle a situation where a teen knows more than you about a particular issue or topic, based on their expertise or lived experience?

Workbook

Training Areas

Digital Competency

Are Staff familiar with:

- The platforms commonly used by teens (social media, dating apps, online media)?
- Expectations/norms of engaging online with teens: teens often have strong preference for texting over calling; some teens may not check their email frequently; some teens may need multiple prompts to respond.
- Slang, abbreviations used by teens in online spaces?

Discussing Digital Environments with Teens

- What are staff's assumptions about digital environments and teens' behavior on different platforms?
- How might staff approach questions about teens' online behavior in a safe, supportive way, and express concerns (if any) appropriately?

Cultural Competency with LGBTQ+ Teens

Find resources to help build your staff's cultural competency, like this sheet:

Culturally Competent Care for LGBTQ Youth

Fostering an Environment of Curiosity and Continuous Learning

If staff have room to grow regarding any of the above, to what extent are they open to learning more (e.g., through self-learning, asking their supervisors, coworkers).

Individual Development Plan

This is an example drawn from the field of higher education that enables a staff member and mentor or employer to be on the same page about the employee's areas of career growth, how growth will be achieved over time, and when. There are many forms of IDPs, so this simply offers a starting point and IDPs can be customized as needed.



Name: _____

Individual Development Plan

The Individualized Development Plan (IDP) provides a blueprint for your professional development activities during each year of employment in the Teen Health Lab. The IDP will be developed in collaboration with your supervisor and identified mentor(s) who will support you in reaching your goals. This IDP will be reviewed at least everything six months.

Start Date: _____ 6-Mo Review Date: _____ 12-Mo Review Date: _____

Supervisor/Mentor(s): _____

Long-term Goals

In a few sentences, briefly summarize your long-term professional goal(s). Add or remove goals as necessary.

Goal 1: _____

_____

Goal 2: _____

_____

Where are you along the pathway toward achieving your overall professional goals? Include the type(s) of training you previously have had, other essential experiences (e.g., project management, awards), skills (e.g., outreach), and other strengths you have accomplished.

Short-term Goals

List the training goals that you anticipate accomplishing during the next year to achieve your long-term professional goals. Here it can be helpful to focus on SMART goals – Specific (clearly defined), Measurable (progresscan be tracked), Achievable (with THL support), Relevant (goal aligned), and Time-bound (the next year).

Goal 1: _____

Add or remove goals as necessary.

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____



Activities

In this section, describe the various activities (e.g., trainings, conferences, mentorship meetings, project assignments, shadowing opportunities, community engagement, leadership experiences, or self-directed learning) that will support your short-term training goals. Activities can apply to one or multiple goals. Examples listed are illustrative and not required nor comprehensive. If one of the skill development domains does not apply to your goals, list N/A.

LGBTQ+ Youth Engagement & Cultural Competence
Trainings, workshops, and learning experiences in LGBTQ+ health, gender affirming care, trauma-informed care, and youth engagement and empowerment.

Program Delivery & Client Services
Health education and facilitation skills, case management/service navigation training, crisis response training

Communication, Marketing & Community Engagement
Outreach/recruitment, social media/digital communications training, public speaking/presentations, partnership building, development of educational or promotional materials

Leadership & Supervision
Supervising intern(s), leadership development

Evaluation & Continuous Improvement
Trainings, workshops, and learning experiences in data collection/reporting, quality improvement, program evaluation

Other
Committees, internal workgroups, networking, collaboration, etc.



Mentor Commitments

Please describe how each of your identified mentors will support you in completing these activities. These commitments should be developed with mentor input, and can include recurring individual or group meetings, contributing to manuscripts/presentations/grants, connecting you with colleagues, etc. Add or remove mentors as needed.

Mentor 1: _____

_____

Mentor 2: _____

_____

Mentor 3: _____

_____

6 & 12 – Month Review Instructions

Review your identified activities and indicate any progress made to date for each activity. Note any barriers you've encountered over the past six months and make amendments to goals & activities as needed. Schedule a meeting with your mentor(s) to discuss your progress, identify potential solutions to any identified barrier(s) and review and refine their mentoring commitments.

Additional Resources and Links

Culturally Competent Care for LGBTQ Youth:
https://sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/lgbtq_keypoints.pdf



Evaluation

What does it mean to evaluate innovations for LGBTQ+ teens?

Evaluation of **innovations** involves the use of flexible, low-burden methods to track engagement, improve content and programming, and understand if the innovation is making its intended impact in real time. This can include informal methods such as monitoring comments and direct messages on social media, getting feedback from teens, and using interest forms to understand how teens are interacting with the innovation. This can also include more formal methods using “off-the-shelf" tools like Google Analytics, dashboards from advertising services, and social media performance insights (Meta insights, TikTok for Business, etc.) to evaluate website traffic, participation metrics, and social media interaction trends. In combination, informal and formal methods of evaluation provide practical, flexible ways to monitor teen engagement and identify opportunities for quality improvement.

Why is this so important?

Organizations need data on reach and engagement of their innovation(s) to know if they are accomplishing their goals. Formal data are often necessary to grow and acquire funding from agencies or investors. Furthermore, teen feedback is crucial not only for evaluating the impact of an innovation on LGBTQ+ teens but also to keep up with the ever-changing landscape of technology and teen culture.

An organization’s success in evaluating innovations primarily depends on these factors:

The ability to evaluate the *priorities, preferences, and needs of LGBTQ+ teens* to guide the implementation and delivery of the innovation.

The ability to collect and utilize quantitative and qualitative data to improve *reach and engagement performance*.

The ability to collect and utilize quantitative and qualitative data to improve *innovation delivery*.

Now, what do these principles look like in practice...

Case Example #1
Academic-Community Partnership to Design and Evaluate an AI-Powered Sexual Health Chatbot

Who was involved?
The Digital Products team at a national sexual and reproductive health organization in partnership with a research team at a university

What did they actually do?
In partnership with academic researchers, the team developed an AI chatbot made to answer sexual health questions from youth. The researchers built a machine learning model to train the chatbot to accurately respond to user queries, as well as evaluation frameworks to assess the chatbot prototype's performance. After its launch, the organization partnered with a different academic research team to implement the chatbot as part of a digital health innovation for LGBTQ+ teens. This partnership enabled the organization to get evaluation data about the chatbot's acceptability, interface, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Where did it happen?
Virtually/remote

When did it happen?
At different stages of development (e.g., ideation, prototyping, testing) and implementation of the AI sexual health chatbot.

Why was this strategy used?
Because the organization is primarily focused on health services, its Digital Products team had limited internal capacity for extensive research and development. Partnering with academic institutions created mutual benefits across organizations. For example, the collaboration with the academic research team allowed the organization to gather in-depth feedback from a youth advisory board, which improved the chatbot's usability, inclusivity, and performance. At the same time, academic partners were able to address their own research goals and create research and training opportunities for students interested in digital health innovations.

How was it carried out?
The organization and its academic partners began by identifying shared goals, priorities, and complementary areas of expertise (e.g., what capacity for evaluation and research did the academic institution have that the organization did not). For example, the researchers helped evaluate how the chatbot responded to different ways that teens might phrase questions, including slang or informal language that the Digital Products team did not have capacity to systematically test. Later, the researchers presented the chatbot to an LGBTQ+ youth advisory board, where teens used the tool and provided detailed feedback about its usability, inclusivity, and content relevance. This feedback directly informed revisions that the organization later implemented in the chatbot.

Case Example #2
Integrating Low-Friction Evaluation Tools into an LGBTQ+ Youth Resource Website

Who was involved?
A LGBTQ+ teen-focused social innovation lab and a software development team that managed their LGBTQ+ youth mental health resource website.

What did they actually do?
On every page of the website, a button was added to prompt feedback from viewers (e.g., I like this, I don't like this, I have a question, I have feedback).

Where did it happen?
Within their team, on their website.

When did it happen?
This addition occurred after the team completed a randomized controlled trial and launched the site for the public.

Why was this strategy used?
Although the insights gained from the randomized controlled trial were useful, the trial was very resource intensive. During the implementation phase (after the research was complete), the lab was primarily interested in feedback from real users coming across the site.

How was it carried out?
It was important for data collection to be voluntary and low-friction for site users, as the organization valued feedback to improve the site. Implementing the feedback feature cost a little money, but it yielded important, ongoing feedback and was perceived to be a net benefit to the organization and website. To gain further insights, a pop-up optional survey asked website users for their demographic information and prompted users to go back to the website to look at the feedback options. In exchange, users received a fun incentive (a poster designed by queer artist available as a digital download). The lab used off-the-shelf tools to make this feasible within their staffing and resource constraints.

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Evaluation seeks to understand how users are responding to your innovation and how well the innovation is making the intended impact. It can be formal (more regimented, protocolized, comprehensive) or informal (more pragmatic, ongoing) depending on your needs). You can also use both in tandem.

Before deciding on an approach or investing in any evaluation tools, first identify what information you absolutely want/need in order to understand what is happening with your innovation, take any action (e.g., making changes), and communicate with external interest holders and funders. Then, brainstorm different potential data sources that can meet those needs, keeping in mind that imperfect data may sometimes be good enough. Knowing the story you would like to tell up front will help you decide what data you need to measure.

Informal Evaluation

Informal evaluation involves primarily collecting qualitative data through user feedback, social media comments, and direct messages from clients or users. It is usually conducted as needed to explore a question or provide preliminary insights, which may inform more formal evaluation. While informal evaluation data may be considered "softer" than formal evaluation data, experts reported incorporating these data into their applications to funding agencies to provide flavor.

- Participant narratives can be more nuanced, compelling, and persuasive and can capture information that numbers can't convey on their own.
- Experts recommend looking for success stories and personal testimonials. Attaching a narrative to performance metrics can lead to a better impact when seeking funding.

Formal Evaluation

Formal evaluation generally involves collecting quantitative (sometimes alongside qualitative) data and using structured, regimented methods like pre–post program assessments and data tracking dashboards. The goals are usually bigger and longer-term, like understanding who an innovation has reached or how it has changed their behavior.

(continued)



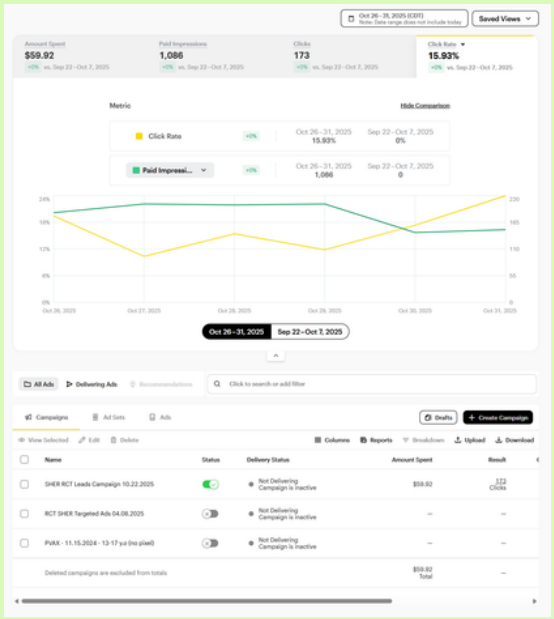
Here are our experts' recommendations:

Formal Evaluation

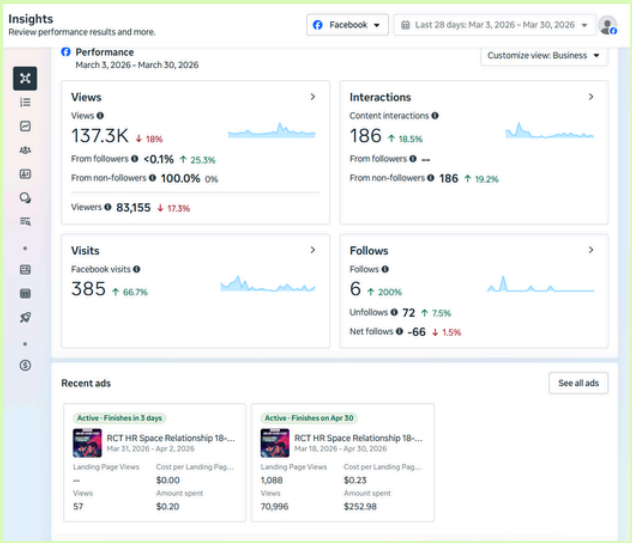
(continued)

Our experts said that this approach can be difficult and costly, but it is beneficial for acquiring funding from agencies to support and grow their programming. This approach might also require specialized expertise. Depending on the resources available to an organization, students (local colleges may have field work or practicum requirements), volunteers, contractors, or full-time staff could support evaluation (see Staffing for more information). For more sophisticated evaluations, consider partnering with academic institutions on a research project (see "Research Partnerships" below). When leading a formal evaluation yourself, here are some recommendations from our experts on how to assess the success of your innovation:

- Use Google Analytics, engagement dashboards provided by (paid) advertising services (Meta, Snapchat, etc.), and built-in (free) social media tools (e.g., Instagram's post "Insights") to evaluate marketing efforts such as views, link clicks, and website traffic.



Snapchat Ad Insights



Meta Business Suite

- These tools can often give you a sense for the demographics (e.g., age, gender) and location of people you have reached. However, they often do not provide data on people under the age of 18.

(continued)

Here are our experts' recommendations:

Formal Evaluation

(continued)

- If necessary and feasible, custom performance dashboards (that give you detailed information about how users are moving through your innovation – e.g., time spent on an activity) can be created by a contractor and maintained/utilized in-house.
  - This approach may be more appropriate for a research partnership with an academic partner that has the resources to create such a tool.
- When asking users to complete surveys, offering an incentive can help boost participation.
- Incentives do not have to be financial. Other examples include physical merchandise, art, or raffles.
- Reduce the amount of effort required for someone to participate. Try to minimize extraneous steps, text, clicks, etc., that are not absolutely necessary.
- Ensure that all data serves a specific purpose, and you are not asking for anything you do not absolutely need.
  - Be transparent about what the data will be used for, who will have access, and anonymity of personal information.

Research Partnerships

Partnerships with researchers can be an effective strategy for evaluating your innovation's reach, engagement, and impact. Researchers are experts at collecting data and using it to answer specific questions. Here are some key considerations for this approach:

- Ensure that the researchers you are working with are knowledgeable and experienced with (or willing to learn about) your target population.
- Develop a mutual understanding of each of your priorities, timelines, and expectations for the partnership. Clear and transparent communication early and often can ensure that you get off on the right foot. What do each of you hope to gain, and how can you mutually benefit from the partnership?
- The formal research process can be slow. Be prepared for a long-term commitment. It can also be costly, but you can negotiate ways to exchange information, resources, and/or time so that it is equitable. You and the academic partner bring different perspectives and strengths to the relationship; play to those strengths so that you complement each other.

Workbook

Use the following questions to assess your plan for evaluating your innovation:

How do you plan to evaluate your innovations success with reaching your target population?

How do you plan to evaluate users engagement with the innovation?

How do you plan to evaluate your innovation's impact on users?

How do you plan to evaluate how users are responding to your innovation?

What other metrics are important for your organization to measure, and how might you collect that information in a way that is low-friction and low-burden?



Appendices



Our Experts

In order to collect the most relevant and effective information for reaching and engaging teens, our team assembled a team of experts across LGBTQ+ health, adolescent health, HIV prevention, sexual health, digital health, digital marketing, and other relevant fields. With the help of our expert panelists, we developed a toolkit we believe will be helpful for researchers, educators, advocates, and health prevention specialists alike, with mental and sexual health education, prevention, and promotion in mind.



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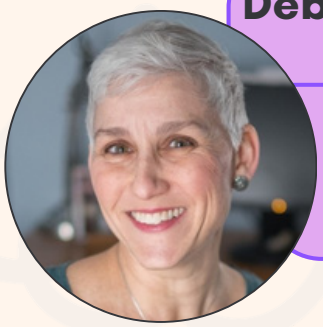
Our Experts



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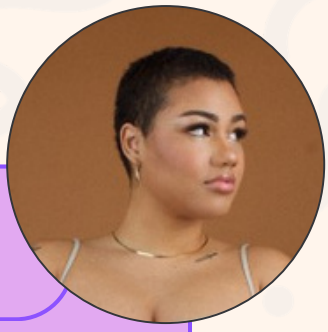

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What We Did...

How does the Delphi process work?

From March 2025 through September 2025, we used a research approach called the Delphi method to systematically collect our experts' recommendations. The Delphi method is a structured consensus-building process that gathers expert opinions through multiple rounds of data collection. It serves as a bridge between research findings and practical application, helping to define standards, set priorities, and develop actionable guidelines.

STEP 1: Recruitment + Preliminary Survey

We recruited our 18 interdisciplinary experts to offer comprehensive and informed recommendations for reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens.

We asked our expert panelists via a preliminary survey what their experiences have been regarding LGBTQ+ digital sexual health, particularly what in their work they identified as determining factors and the strategies they used to respond to those factors. We wanted to know:

- What were some of the most successful ways they had reached and engaged LGBTQ+ teens in their programs
- What had gotten in the way of successfully reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens
- What had made it easier to successfully reach and engage LGBTQ+ teens

What We Did...

STEP 2: Focus Groups

Responses from the preliminary survey were used to schedule and guide focus groups of 3-5 experts identifying strategies for reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens in digital sexual health interventions. Panelists were asked to explain the rationale or justification for using specific strategies, allowing us to identify common barriers and facilitators (determinants) addressed by the strategy. Follow-up questions identified additional details such as the actors who execute the strategy, specific actions taken, and how the strategy is carried out.

STEP 3: Content Analysis

Next, we conducted a directed content analysis of the focus group transcripts and notes to generate a preliminary list of strategies and determinants. We extracted an exhaustive list of all reach and engagement strategies, barriers, and facilitators identified during the focus group sessions. Afterwards, conceptually similar items were consolidated to produce a final list of 65 strategies and 43 determinants. Strategies were further organized into 11 unique domains across 3 broad purpose categories.

STEP 4: Ranking Survey

Next, panelists completed a survey to rate each strategy's importance and feasibility on a 10-point scale (1 = least, 10 = most) and each determinant's level of impact on reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens (small, medium, or large). Optional open-ended responses allowed panelists to explain their ratings. Strategy ratings were summed and averaged, then categorized as low (≤7), medium (>7 to 8), or high (>8) importance/feasibility to support prioritization.

What We Did...

STEP 5: Panelist Convention

The final activity of the modified Delphi process was a 4-hour virtual meeting attended by 17 of the 18 expert panelists. Panelists first reviewed and provided feedback on the study findings to date, including the organized list of strategy domains, determinants, and prioritization results. They then participated in breakout groups of 3–4 panelists, organized by area of expertise, to develop case examples and additional implementation guidance for two assigned strategy domains using Mural, a visual workspace. After breakout activities, panelists had the opportunity to review and comment on all domains. One panelist who could not attend completed a condensed version of the meeting, and their feedback was incorporated into the Mural activities.

Teens are the experts on their own experiences...so we wanted to make sure that they had a say in these recommendations, especially whenever it came to topics that directly involve them. Our team runs an asynchronous Youth Advisory Council (YAC) over Discord, with about 20 LGBTQ+ teens ages 13-18 lending their insight and supporting our projects. Our team believes that creating teen-centered resources means giving teens a seat at the table whenever we develop guidance and tools designed specifically for them.

Step 6: Youth Advisory Council

Following the panelist convention, our team engaged our YAC to provide feedback on 7 of the 11 domains which were seen as relevant to adolescent experiences. Questions focused on verifying recommendations provided by experts as well as gathering additional information on identified strategies for reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens.

Glossary

To support a shared understanding of the concepts discussed throughout this toolkit, we have included definitions of key terms that may have specific meanings within the context of this work.

Strategy:
The specific, planned action, approach, or method used to integrate innovations into real-world practice settings. Each section of this toolkit represents a strategy or cluster of strategies for reaching and engaging LGBTQ+ teens in health innovations.

Innovation:
A new idea, method, or device that creates practical value. When we are referring to digital and/or health innovations, we mean the intervention, program, or “thing” being implemented (i.e., the new idea, method, or device being put into practice).

Determinant:
A deciding factor that establishes, controls, or defines that outcome of an innovation. We often describe these as barriers (factors that hinder progress toward our goals) and facilitators (factors that help promote or accomplish our goals). We describe determinants to implementation for each strategy in the outline of each section.

Feasibility:
How practical and achievable a strategy is to implement and sustain given an organization's available resources, time, staffing, and capacity.

Glossary

HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act):
A U.S. law that protects the privacy and security of individuals' health information and regulates how covered organizations can collect, use, and share that information.

Braided funding:
a financial strategy that coordinates multiple funding sources to support a program while keeping each source distinct and trackable.

Blended funding:
The combination of multiple funding sources into a single pool to support a common goal, where individual funding streams lose their separate identity.

Collaborative funding:
A funding method that pools resources from multiple donors or organizations to support a shared goal or portfolio of projects, emphasizing collective risk-sharing and systemic change.

Cost-sharing:
A funding method that divides the specific expenses of a predetermined project, good, or service among participants based on agreed-upon ratios or in-kind contributions.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the expert panelists and Youth Advisory Council (YAC) members for their invaluable input, feedback, and guidance throughout the development of this toolkit. We are especially grateful to Kara Toll and Julianna Lorenzo for their collaboration in working with the YAC. We also acknowledge the support of the THRIVE Center, the Impact Institute, and Northwestern University for fostering an environment that makes this work possible.

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