

## Using Media to Fight **OBESITY**

**M**edia greatly influence people's decisions, perceptions, and behaviors. Using refined tools and research, marketers utilize television commercials, school advertisements and posters, product placement in TV shows and movies, and social media to target key demographics. Youth in particular are a susceptible and vulnerable audience that industries, such as the food and beverage industry, target to influence product preferences. Child and adolescent exposure to TV ads for various foods and beverages of minimal nutritional value has rapidly increased from 2007 to 2011 (Dembeck et al. 2012). On average, children ages 2-17 view 12 to 21 TV commercials per day, or between 4,400 to 7,600 commercials a year (Gantz et al. 2007).

Frequent exposure to these ads has profound implications on children's health. Research indicates that product preferences affect children's product purchase requests and that these requests in turn influence what parents buy. Likewise, studies show that exposure to these ads leads to increased consumption of minimally nutritious foods. Efforts to market foods of minimal nutritional value are believed to have significantly exacerbated the obesity epidemic (APA 2004).

Despite the challenges of overcoming these powerful, negative media messages, there have been a number of successful media campaigns, many supported by health funders, which have educated and motivated consumers into taking action. Working together, these consumer communities have influenced how the industry operates, and ultimately helped promote healthier food environments for children and adolescents. This Issue Focus describes research regarding anti-obesity media messaging and provides examples of media campaigns that are providing reliable, healthful information to counteract ads marketing minimally nutritious foods.

### **MESSAGING: KEEP IT POSITIVE**

Promising research has been conducted in the area of obesity-related health messaging, which greatly informs media campaign strategies. A recent study conducted by Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity found that people generally responded poorly to health messages that appeared to stigmatize overweight and obese people, indicating that such messages were least likely to motivate them to alter their behaviors. Conversely, study participants responded more favorably to positive health messages involving increased food and vegetable consumption and general messages involving multiple health behaviors, than to negative messaging. In fact, messages that made no mention of "obesity" and focused on making healthy behavioral changes were most likely to moti-

vate behavior change in study participants (Puhl et al. 2012).

An example that appears to bear out the findings of this study is a new anti-obesity media campaign launched by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. One ad depicts two kids bragging about how much their dads can eat; one of the overweight dads, carrying a tray of burgers and fries, overhears the conversation and is immediately shamed. Another ad depicts an overweight mother pushing a shopping cart full of unhealthy food; she notices her overweight daughter doing the same with a smaller cart and is overcome with shame. While the impact of this campaign's ads has yet to be seen, it has sparked a great deal of negative feedback both locally and nationally (Simmons-Duffin 2012).

### **THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION**

*The Weight of the Nation* is a documentary series and public health campaign that is a collaboration of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO) and the Institute of Medicine, in association with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health, and made in partnership with the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation and Kaiser Permanente. Released in May 2012, the focus of the campaign is four feature films that document the severity of the obesity epidemic in the United States, using case studies, interviews with experts, and the stories of individuals and families struggling with obesity. The films were aired, streamed on-line, and are available for download for free.

The series strives to educate people about the harsh reality our country faces and to provide them with a call to action to engage the issues. This campaign ultimately serves as a tool for individual and community empowerment through education. It also promotes community-level engagement projects and includes a "Pledge for Progress," which asks people to personally commit to reversing the obesity epidemic. As of October 2012, nearly 3,300 people have signed the pledge via Facebook and Twitter (HBO 2012).

### **THE "AWAKENING" CAMPAIGN**

LiveWell Colorado is a state nonprofit organization supported by a partnership of The Colorado Health Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Its mission is to prevent and reduce obesity by promoting healthy eating and active living through policy and social change. As part of its work, LiveWell Colorado sponsored research focused on better gauging people's knowledge and understanding of the issues. The findings indicated

that Coloradans are generally aware of and concerned about the obesity epidemic, but had a difficult time identifying who was overweight and obese.

As a result, LiveWell Colorado launched its “Awakening” Campaign to change perceptions of obesity and to make it a more personal issue. The campaign targeted Coloradans as a whole but specifically concentrated on moms with young children and on at-risk mothers. The campaign used TV ads, social and digital media tools, branded programs, social communities, special events, and strategic partnerships. The statewide TV campaign created over 20 million ad impressions, with women ages 25–49 having viewed the ads 24 times the average viewing frequency. The social media effort resulted in over 13,000 Facebook followers, over 500 Twitter followers, 25 “Mommy” bloggers, and over 500 LiveWell Moms who actively joined the movement (Boyle 2012).

The overall results of the campaign were positive. Among mothers, 53 percent recalled the campaign without prompting and 63 percent recalled it with prompting. Awareness of LiveWell Colorado among Coloradans also increased from 22 percent in 2010 (prior to the campaign) to 44 percent in 2011 (following the campaign). More importantly, the campaign also helped raise Coloradans’ ability to recognize obesity, improving generally by nine percentage points.

#### GET HEALTHY CENLA VIDEO CHALLENGE

The Get Healthy Cenla Video Challenge, sponsored by The Rapides Foundation, was an innovative video contest that engaged 39 schools in nine central Louisiana parishes. The foundation worked with the schools to mobilize high school students to research causes of the obesity epidemic and to design effective and creative 30-second digital video spots to inform their peers about the importance of healthy eating and active living. There were several public on-line voting phases, which generated more than 45,000 visits to the foundation’s Web site from 49 states and 46 countries. More than 49,000 videos were viewed during the contest, and over 17,000 votes cast. The 10 finalists’ videos were screened at a film festival that was streamed live on-line by Louisiana PBS. Contest winners won cash prizes for their schools, and the overall winner of the contest worked with media professionals to turn their video into a multimedia campaign with a social marketing component that is now part of the foundation’s Diet and Physical Activity Initiative.

This contest is innovative on a number of different levels. Rather than attempting to find a message that worked best for reaching adolescents and children, the contest was a vehicle to seek out the target audience to develop that message. The program also engaged and empowered these youth to learn about the issue on their terms and creatively use that knowledge in a meaningful endeavor. By incorporating a strong on-line component and emphasizing the use of commonplace technologies, such as smartphones, the foundation was able to establish an

ongoing rapport with the students from start to finish. The foundation not only found a way to develop a new public health ad for their initiative, but also engaged their target audience, creating a cadre of informed youth who may become community champions on the issue of obesity prevention.

#### CONCLUSION

The obesity epidemic calls for innovative, collaborative, and comprehensive solutions that seek to engage, educate, and empower communities. Media will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping people’s perceptions, decisions, and perspectives on food and other health-related issues. Health funders must therefore be mindful of these powerful tools and, when possible, use them to effect social and behavioral change.

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