

Lessons from VERB: A Case for Branding in Nutrition Education

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INTRODUCTION

The VERB campaign was launched in 2002 by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a mass media campaign based on social marketing principles and designed to increase physical activity levels among children 9 to 13 years of age (“tweens”).¹ Messages were designed to empower tweens to become more physically active by communicating benefits unique to different segments of the audience (i.e., fun for younger children, accessibility for children from families in lower socioeconomic levels, increased sociability for girls). Ultimately, the campaign encouraged tweens to “find their verb” and demonstrated that physical activity was an integral and cool part of all tweens’ lives. This message was embodied by the tag line “VERB: It’s what you do.”

The campaign achieved significant success based on awareness goals and level of impact. Awareness goals of 40% were surpassed within the first 6 months of the campaign and soared to over 70% within the first year. Although behavior change was not expected during the first phase, significant increases were seen (+20% in reported free-time activity versus baseline) in activity levels among several of the more at-risk segments during this time.² Furthermore, year two results show a substantial positive im-

pact across the entire population of children targeted by the campaign. In fact, the more often children were exposed to VERB messages, the more physically active they were.³

VERB has not only changed the lives of more than 17 million children reached by the campaign, but also changed the way public health messages are communicated. The success of the VERB campaign can be attributed to significant marketing differences versus traditional public health campaigns.

DISCUSSION

VERB was the benefactor of an innovative congressional appropriation approach that allowed the CDC and its contractors to act as any company in the private sector with a comparable budget would when marketing to the “tween” audience, starting with buying media time rather than depending on public service announcements. A growing list of public health media campaigns, designed to effect behavior change, have used this approach to great advantage.² The VERB campaign was able to succeed by employing the best practices of private sector kids marketing. Four strategies were critical to the success of the campaign.

- *VERB is first and foremost a brand.* The campaign applies similar marketing strategies and tactics that brands like Nike or Nickelodeon use to create cool, fun relationships with its audience.
- The brand offered something *beyond rational benefits to create an emotional affinity* between the product (physical activity) and the target. A connection with children was created that empowered them to be physically active, presumably not because they have to but because they love to.
- *For kids by kids* was at the heart of

all brand activities. Every aspect of the campaign was made stronger by talking with and listening to tweens during the development of the brand, before and after creating the messages, and in determining the channels through which they would be most receptive to hearing from developers of the campaign.

- *Be where the opportunity is.* It is not sufficient to reach children through traditional media alone. It was critical to engage children at all key places and times when they might be receptive to the brand, especially when they were prone to being inactive (i.e., the after school period from 3 PM to 6 PM). By identifying these strategically defined “Points of Passivity,” the opportunities were expanded when VERB should be interacting with tweens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

These paid media campaigns should serve as the model for future campaigns designed to affect public health on a national level. If public health campaigns are expected to affect attitudes and behaviors, then it is critical that they be allowed to compete equally in the marketplace of messages and ideas.

The authors believe many important lessons can be learned from VERB that should be considered when developing public health campaigns focused on diet and nutrition.

- *Create brands that address barriers.* A critical reason why the VERB brand resonated so well with tweens is because barriers that were preventing them from being physically active were clearly identified and understood. Different populations have different challenges, and many of these barriers were addressed

through messaging and partnerships. For example, it was critical to demonstrate for children from lower socioeconomic levels that physical activity could be accessible, regardless of circumstance. As such, communications and programs were created that gave children ideas on how to engage in physical activity in their own homes with little investment.

- *Use persuasion beyond education.* Too often, public health communication tactics use a rational, cognitive approach to effect behavior change. In the formative research, the investigators found positive messaging that inspires to be a more persuasive route to long-term behavior change. Emotion is king in the world of brands. This may be a difficult premise for a field traditionally steeped in imparting knowledge and scientific facts.
- *Employ the best of the best.* It is important to employ experts in the field of marketing. Tap into the most creative people and allow them to do what they do best. Public health communicators must reach out from the comforts of traditional public health communication strategies and bring in the best marketing talent in the country to help create the brand and its messages.
- *Partner with the "competition."* VERB planners wrestled with the quandary of needing to partner with companies who were facilitating the physical inactivity of tweens, namely media

companies. However, we acknowledged early that these companies were critical to VERB's success and the companies' role was leveraged to great benefit. Partnerships can potentially lead to innovative strategies for disseminating healthful nutrition messages and influencing positive behavior change.

- *Maximize impact through pooled investments.* It is estimated that more than 300 different federally funded campaigns exist, with average budgets of \$2 million or less. Each campaign may be having a difficult time making an impact, but collectively, they represent a significant investment in our public health.⁴ Unfortunately, the true potential of this investment has not been harnessed. A tremendous opportunity exists to pool resources and better coordinate messages. In so doing, economies of scale would be realized that would create a national framework from which to build powerful public health brands. The first step must be to determine where the proper leadership of a centralized strategy would reside and ensure that it is as well informed in the areas of branding and marketing as the most successful companies in the private sector. One potential model worthy of consideration is the one employed in the United Kingdom, where a Central Office of Information (COI) presides over all government-funded campaigns, allowing not only for improved effi-

ciencies but also for greater sharing of best practices. This method would include providing consistent standards of evaluation that would help take the politics out of public health campaigns and ensure the continuation of campaigns proven to be successful in affecting attitudes and effecting behavior change.

Although a strong case has been made for the continuation of the VERB campaign, funding is set to expire in September 2006, in accordance with its original 5-year appropriation. And whereas there are efforts underway to determine how this brand may continue to make tweens throughout this country more physically active, its lasting legacy may not only be the changes we hope to see among this generation of children, but the changes it also inspires in future public health campaigns.

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