



Nutrition for Family Living

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November, 2006 Topics

Food-Related Advertising on Preschool Television: Building Brand Recognition in Young Viewers

Insights from focus group research has implications for intergenerational and learner-centered nutrition education

Food-Related Advertising on Preschool Television: Building Brand Recognition in Young Viewers

By Gayle Coleman

A study exploring television targeted at toddlers and preschool audiences found that food-related advertisements used the appeals of fun and happiness or excitement and energy in product promotions. These appeals were used in association with product branding such as licensed characters, logos and slogans. These branding techniques are designed to create lifelong customer preferences rather than sell a particular product. Promotions targeted children as young as 2 years, and were on both advertisement-supported networks (Nickelodeon) and sponsor-supported networks (Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and Disney). The results of this study are significant because preschool-age children have trouble distinguishing among television programs, commercials, and reality, making them uniquely susceptible to advertising.

Researchers examined four randomly-selected 4-hour blocks (9 AM to 1 PM) of television on three networks, PBS, Disney and Nickelodeon in May 2005. These blocks represented Nickelodeon Jr., PBS Kids and Playhouse Disney, with programs targeted at toddlers and preschool-age children. There were 130 food-related advertisements (82 on Nickelodeon, 39 on PBS and 9 on Disney) during this 48 hours of television programming (1.353 food advertisements per half-hour.) The majority of the advertisements targeted to children was for fast food chains (50 advertisements) or sweetened cereal (18 advertisements.) Although PBS and Disney promote themselves as commercial-free because they are sponsor-supported rather than advertisement-supported, sponsors used strategies similar to ads on advertisement-supported stations such as children having fun with a licensed character to build brand recognition.

In the food-related advertisements, the most widely used appeals were fun such as laughing, smiling and playing (82% of advertisements) and action such as children running, jumping or playing sports (57% of advertisements). Forty-three of Nickelodeon's child-oriented food advertisements also used a taste appeal, which was usually sweetness. In keeping with the idea of creating lifelong customers, rather than selling a particular product, none of the child-oriented food advertisements on Disney or PBS, all of which were for fast-food chains, showed food or referred to any food product.

The researchers expressed concern over the marketing methods used with increasingly younger children because other studies indicate that on an average day, 58% of children less than 2 years of age and 70% of children between the ages of 4 and 6 years watch television and brand recognition begins as early as 2 years of age. They also raised concern that even though this advertising approach might appear gentler than hard-sell advertisements it should not be considered harmless.



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Implications for Extension Educators: “Freeze your screen” and other programs to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent child obesity recommend limiting TV and other “screen time” to 2 hours per day or less, and no screen time for infants. This study adds evidence to the importance of this concept for parenting and nutrition education programs for parents and caregivers of young children.

References:

Connor S. Food-related Advertising on Preschool Television: Building Brand Recognition in Young Viewers. *Pediatrics* 2006;118:1478-1485.

Wisconsin Nutrition Education Network. Freeze your screen lesson plan and resources available at: <http://www.nutrisci.wisc.edu/nutrinet/SU/pfreeze.htm>.



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Insights from focus group research has implications for intergenerational and learner-centered nutrition education

By Gayle Coleman

Extensive research reveals that family members, especially parents, strongly influence children's eating practices. There also is evidence that family communication dynamics shape how children select, prepare and consume food. Most nutrition educational sessions are designed to reach only mono-generational audiences (parents or children). In this type of educational session, a lesson for children might include information that is sent home to share with other family members, but the family members do not actively participate in the educational sessions.

A recent study explored how families communicate issues related to healthful eating as a first step to informing nutrition educators about ways to help family members communicate effectively and constructively to reach a more healthful diet for the entire family. The researchers conducted 3 intergenerational (children, parents and grandparents) focus groups in sites affiliated with the Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Program. Forty-four individuals from 17 families (21 children ranging in age from 10 to 13 years, 16 parents or primary caretakers, and 7 grandparents) participated. The majority of the individuals was low income, and 41% were Caucasian, 41% African American and 17% Hispanic.

Results of the study indicated that families have a good knowledge base related to healthful eating. For example, there was extensive evidence that all generations:

- Know the basics of what it means to “eat healthfully,” and are aware of healthful food choices (lower-fat foods such as skim milk and chicken), and poor food choices (high-sugar foods such as soda, sweets, and sugary cereals).
- Believe that the food people eat affects their future health (pointed to family members with diabetes, heart disease, weight problems).
- Are aware of the consequences of behaviors such as overeating, undereating, “junk food,” and constant dieting.

However this knowledge was not always translated into healthful behaviors. For example, one child stated, “I mean I know it’s not healthy (skipping breakfast), but I still do it.”

Conversations related to eating provided insights into why some parents and children do not change their behavior related to healthful eating. Parents and grandparents frequently expressed anguish over their inability to help their children eat more healthfully (for example, children refuse certain foods or children prefer less healthful foods). They also expressed frustration with limited time and financial resources, and struggles with differences in opinion concerning food portions.

The study found that among families with ineffective communication strategies (for example, conflict in or disengagement from communication), it was hard for family members to understand and negotiate food preferences, agree on appropriate food portions, collaborate on food selection decisions and figure out ways to eat family meals together. Families with effective communication strategies (for example, have food-related conversations with children) avoided conflict in their food-related discussions and actively involved children in the process of meal planning, food shopping and meal preparation.

When asked how families need to communicate eating healthfully and how that communication should be prompted, participants in this study unanimously suggested using the focus group venue they experienced as part of the study. They said they would be willing to continue meeting



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together monthly. According to them, the discussion format provided them with opportunities to hear other people's ideas and perspectives, learn from members within the family, learn in an environment where they felt comfortable expressing themselves, and realize they are not alone in food-related challenges. They suggested using multigenerational gatherings designed to facilitate sharing and support among learners in expanding their knowledge and increasing their motivation to adopt more healthful eating practices. In addition, families with ineffective communication strategies wanted nutrition educators to help facilitate communication about eating healthfully within families.

Implications for Extension: Engaging parents in nutrition education for children is clearly an important approach to include in programming. The interaction between parents and children around food decisions is a key component to helping families modify their nutrition behaviors. These study participants requested further opportunities for group discussion as a way to help them learn and process their nutrition behaviors. This highlights the value of using learner-centered approaches in nutrition education, with educators serving as facilitators of group participants' learning through interaction with each other.

Reference:

Kaplan M, Kiernan NE, James L. Intergenerational Family Conversations and Decision Making about Eating Healthfully. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. 2006; 38(5):298-306.