

Social Media and Nutrition Education: The Food Hero Experience

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ABSTRACT

Social media can be a quick, low-cost, direct way for nutrition educators to broaden the scope of their targeted programs. The authors' viewpoint is that for social media to be effective, strategies for its use should follow "best practices" guidelines. This viewpoint suggests social media best practices based on experience gained from the Food Hero social marketing campaign. Understanding of how nutrition educators can take advantage of social media as a new mechanism for reaching their target audience is needed, including best practices for implementation, management, and evaluation.

Key Words: Internet, social marketing, low-income, health communication, social networks (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:128-133.)

INTRODUCTION

Social media can be a quick, low-cost, direct way for nutrition educators to broaden the scope of their targeted programs. However, the authors' viewpoint is that for social media to be effectively used within nutrition education, it should follow some "best practices" guidelines to ensure that educators are successful and the educational venue of social media is truly vetted.¹ This viewpoint suggests social media best practices based on experience gained from the Food Hero social marketing campaign.

Visit any popular social media site, such as Facebook or Twitter, and search for "nutrition." The number of responses will be overwhelming. This level of interest and following makes it is easy to see why social media is appealing to nutrition educators. However, to use this resource effectively, it is important to understand how to provide timely and evidence-based nutrition and health information to the public.

First, this viewpoint will give an overview of social media, describing

users and giving examples of how social media is used to promote health. Second, 5 practice-based suggestions are provided on how to effectively create and manage a social media project; these suggestions are taken from the Food Hero social marketing campaign experience.

Social Media Overview

Social media is a fast-growing medium, yet it still lacks a common definition. In general, social media is a method of communication used to facilitate social interaction on Internet-based sites, including mobile sites. Ahlqvist et al define social media as "a means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks."² Currently, 3 of the most popular social media sites, all free of cost, are Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest (Table 1).

Social media requires access to the Internet. In the US, online usage depends primarily on age (eg, being ≤ 65 y old), followed by level of edu-

cation (eg, at least a high school degree), and household income.^{7,8} Currently, gaps in each of these categories are shrinking. For example, for US adults with a household income of $< \$30,000/y$, the percentage who are online has grown from 28% in 2000 to 67% in 2012 and was reported to be 76% in 2013.⁷⁻⁹ In contrast, 79% of US adults with a household income of $> \$75,000/y$ were online in 2000 compared with 96% in 2013.^{8,9} Finally, researchers now report that language preferences may also be predictors of online usage (eg, those who prefer survey interviews in English vs Spanish).⁸

Overall, 67% of US adults who are online use social networking sites.⁹ For low-income households, Facebook is the most popular social media site (68%), followed by Twitter (16%) and Pinterest (10%); these numbers are similar for adults of higher income levels, at 67%, 16%, and 15%, respectively.³ Those segments of the population found to be using social networking sites the most include adults < 50 y (77%–83%), those with a household income $< \$30,000/y$ (72%), and women (71%).³

Research indicates that between 55% and 67% of US adults go online for health and wellness information, and half of all online health inquiries are made on behalf of someone else.¹⁰⁻¹² In addition, social media is used by 20%–34% of those searching for health-related topics.^{10,13} Public health professionals and health care providers are using social media in a number of ways. Social media is

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Table 1. Description of 3 Popular Social Media Sites

Social Media Platform	Description	Active Users	Top User Demographics ³	US Adults Using Site (%) ³
Facebook	Users share and interact with stories, images and video	845 million users, resulting in 100 billion friendships ⁴	Women, especially ages 18–29 y	67
Pinterest	Online pinboards on which users collect and group photos of interest, each of which links to the Web site source	48.7 million ⁵	Women, adults under 50 y, whites, those with some college education	15
Twitter	Microblogging: users send messages of ≤ 140 characters	555 million; 40% do not tweet themselves but watch others tweet ⁶	18- to 29-year-olds, African Americans, urban residents	16

being used by care professionals to improve delivery and availability of health care and to communicate with peers. For example, it is used to facilitate social support groups, deliver educational programs, recruit for services, train students, and help with communication between other health care professionals through workplaces, coalitions, and organizations.^{14–18} Public health professionals also use social media for similar functions, including electronic-based education and communication for the public; recruitment to programming; training students; and tracking and analyzing data on the group or population of interest.^{19–26}

Food Hero Social Media Project: Background for the Authors' Best Practice Recommendations

Food Hero is a multichannel social marketing campaign created in 2009 by the Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Nutrition Education Program (NEP) to increase the amount and variety of vegetables and fruit consumed by Oregonians. Thus, Food Hero is delivered to the target audience through a number of different ways (eg, channels) that are strategically interrelated, yet focused on meeting behavioral goals. At the initiation of this campaign, only 26% of Oregonians consumed 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.²⁷ The target audience is limited-income mothers with young children living in the home, who speak English

and/or Spanish, and who use the Internet. Their children are a secondary audience. The goal of Food Hero is to distribute evidence-based research using a learner-centered focus and to provide actionable messages through multiple channels and partners. Core campaign topics include meal planning, shopping, cooking, and safely storing food, and campaign channels include a Web site, community programming kits, purchased media, and a monthly message package within the Food Hero project. A primary objective of Food Hero, beyond the target audience and their family eating more vegetables and fruit, is to empower the targeted audience to share information and champion Food Hero messages within their networks of family and friends. This objective is promoted via all Food Hero channels, including social media. Social media is also used by the Food Hero development team to engage with NEP educators and encourage them to be Food Hero champions.

THE AUTHORS' VIEW ON BEST PRACTICES

Current technology makes it easy to host a social media site. Simply visit a social media site, register for an account, and begin connecting with others. This simple strategy may be successful, but it may not lead to optimal results. Food Hero created a successful social media campaign by collecting and incorporating participant feedback into the project and

searching the research literature to see what has worked for others. Below are 5 key practice-based suggestions learned from the Food Hero experience.

Practice Suggestion #1: Conduct a Needs Assessment

Food Hero was first funded to create a social marketing campaign to increase fruit and vegetable intake within the limited-income population of Oregon. As with any nutrition education intervention, the first step of this process was an extensive needs assessment, including a careful examination of the relevant research literature. This step was followed by collecting data from the target audience using 8 focus groups (n = 50) and a phone survey (n = 1498). Each of these steps informed the campaign channels employed, including the social media project.

A major finding from the focus groups was that participants valued recipes and cooking information and used online resources to get this information. The focus groups also selected the logo and helped identify and settle on the term "Food Hero" as a way to empower mothers and their children (Figure). The phone survey, which asked to survey the person in the household who does most of the grocery shopping and cooking, provided a more specific picture of the target audience's needs. Results showed that 86% were female, they wanted information via the Internet about health and eating (53%), and

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