

Branding a School-Based Campaign Combining Healthy Eating and Eco-friendliness

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To develop a branding strategy for a campaign to improve the quality of foods children bring from home to school, using a combined healthy eating and eco-friendly approach and for a control campaign focusing solely on nutrition.

Methods: Formative research was conducted with third- and fourth-grade students in lower- and middle-income schools in Greater Boston and their parents. Phase I included concept development focus groups. Phase II included concept testing focus groups. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify key themes.

Results: In phase I, the combined nutrition and eco-friendly messages resonated; child preference emerged as a key factor affecting food from home. In phase II, key themes included fun with food and an element of mystery. Themes were translated into a concept featuring food face characters.

Conclusions and Implications: Iterative formative research provided information necessary to create a brand that appealed to a specified target audience.

Key Words: child nutrition, nutrition communication, formative research, focus groups, branding (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017; ■:1-10.)

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INTRODUCTION

Children's diets are largely determined by their caretakers,^{1,2} but advertising influences their preferences and purchase requests.^{3,4} A 2012 federal report estimated that \$1.79 billion was spent annually in the US to market foods to children.⁵ This figure included branding, a powerful tool that influences children's food preferences.⁶⁻⁸ Successful branding explains the gap between what children consume and age-appropriate dietary recommendations.⁹⁻¹³ The Institute of Medicine called for social marketing campaigns to promote healthier diets and counter

industry messaging that promotes energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and drinks.³ If such campaigns are to succeed, they must compete with commercial messaging, which typically draws on extensive market research and employs branding tactics such as fun, humor, and familiar characters to attract children's attention and generate purchase requests.^{4,6,14-16}

A potential communication strategy to increase the persuasiveness of nutrition messages is to connect food choices with social values. Highly processed, packaged foods can contribute excess saturated fat, sugar, and salt to the diet¹⁷ and are less environmentally

friendly than whole foods.^{17,18} The overlap between foods that are considered better for the consumer and better for the planet offers a unique opportunity to link dietary behaviors to the powerful motivators of altruism and concern for the environment. Elementary school-aged children are able to understand how human activities affect the environment and are often eager to take action to protect it¹⁹⁻²² and transmit environmental knowledge to their parents.^{23,24} Therefore the study hypothesis was that environmental motivators could improve the quality of the foods children bring from home to school.

An estimated 40% of US elementary schoolchildren bring their lunch to school²⁵ and 45% consume a snack at school that typically is brought from home. These foods were found to be less nutritious than those provided through the *National School Lunch Program* and frequently included sugar-sweetened beverages and snack foods high in added sugar and fats,^{13,26-29} which were likely directly influenced by marketing.^{30,31}

To determine whether elementary schoolchildren would be motivated

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by a combination of healthy eating and eco-friendliness, a nutrition-eco campaign was developed for this study that linked dietary messaging to messaging about the environmental benefits of choosing more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and water, and fewer highly processed packaged snack foods, beverages, and desserts. For comparison, a more traditional campaign was also developed that focused solely on nutrition (nutrition-only), similar to other school-based interventions that showed significant but small effect sizes.³² The nutrition-only campaign featured the same dietary messaging without reference to the environmental benefits of these choices. Both campaigns included a 22-lesson curriculum, a color workbook with in-class and family activities, and campaign kits with reusable food containers. Parents received a packing guide and monthly newsletters. Other campaign elements were a school-wide poster contest and presentations to parents at school events. These campaign strate-

gies were evaluated in a randomized, controlled trial described elsewhere.³³

A critical component of the strategy was to create a brand identity for each campaign that would unify all aspects of communications and create an ongoing relationship with children and families to sustain throughout the school year.³⁴ As an example for practitioners seeking to brand a health communication campaign, this article describes the brand development for the nutrition-eco and nutrition-only campaigns.

METHODS

The branding strategy for the campaigns evolved from 2 phases of formative research³⁴ (Table 1). The goals of the first phase were to inform the development of several branding concepts and identify barriers to and facilitators of the promoted behaviors. The goal of the second phase was to test the preliminary branding concepts. The Institutional Review Board at Tufts

University approved the protocols and study materials for all phases.

Phase I: Developing Branding Concepts

In phase I, focus groups were conducted with children and parents to explore the resonance of the nutrition-eco approach, barriers to the desired behaviors, and ways in which the target audience talked about foods sent from home to school. This information would be used to create branding concepts to be tested in phase II.

The focus groups were conducted in 2 schools similar to those targeted for the campaigns. To test the intervention, the researchers sought schools with economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Middle-income communities were chosen in which 20% to 40% of children were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This choice was made to ensure generalizability of results to a variety of settings in which children brought lunches but parents

Table 1. Formative Research With Third- and Fourth-Grade Children and Parents, Conducted in 4 Boston-Area Communities, November, 2010 to March, 2011

Audience	Phase I: Developing Branding Concepts and Assessing Barriers and Facilitators to Packing Healthy, Eco-friendly Foods	Phase II: Testing Branding Concepts	Groups and Participants
Children	4 focus groups/17 children total: Explore attitudes and practices regarding nutritious and eco-friendly foods Explore how children understand links between food and environment Explore attitudes toward foods and packaging to be promoted (using real foods)	12 focus groups/56 children total: Testing of two sets (nutrition-only & nutrition-eco) of campaign concepts presented as posters, with respect to each concept's overall impact, headline and tagline, images, and key promises	16 focus groups/73 children total
Parents	2 focus groups/17 parents total: Explore attitudes and practices regarding nutritious and eco-friendly foods Explore attitudes toward foods and packaging to be promoted (using real foods) Determine motivations for and barriers to sending healthful foods in eco-friendly packaging Obtain information about kinds of food and packing information parents or caregivers would want in intervention materials	Not applicable	2 focus groups/17 parents total

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