The Power of Positive Marketing

As advertising executives are fully aware, marketing in electronic media is powerful and can shape behaviors of children and youth. The challenge for those interested in promoting children’s healthy development, therefore, is to present positive marketing messages. The negative and positive effects of marketing through electronic media were recently reviewed in The Future of Children, “Children and Electronic Media.”

On the negative side, research has documented associations between exposure to television and negative outcomes in terms of a number of children’s risky behaviors. Adolescents who watched more than five hours of TV a day, for instance, were almost six times more likely to start smoking than those who watched two hours or less a day. Researchers have also found that for each extra hour of TV viewing a day, the risk of adolescents starting to drink over the next eighteen months increased an average of 9 percent; for each extra hour a day of viewing music videos, the risk increased an average of 31 percent. Similarly, a variety of research studies have begun to find some modest associations between obesity and TV viewing, while a National Academies panel concluded that television food advertisements affect children’s food preferences, food requests, and short-term eating habits. Meanwhile, marketing may also contribute to children’s consumerism and to family conflict, as one review of research revealed a causal relationship between children’s viewing of television commercials and their pestering their parents in the grocery store. Based on this evidence, it seems obvious that television exposure can be related to certain negative consequences in terms of children’s behavior.

On the positive side, however, research examining social marketing campaigns suggests that media can also be a powerful tool in promoting healthy behavior and preventing risky behavior among children and adolescents. Recent reviews indicate that social marketing through television, radio, outdoor and print advertising, and the Internet is effective in changing health behaviors on a population level. In general, these studies show that social marketing has successfully changed health behavior such as smoking, physical activity, and condom use, as well as behavioral mediators such as knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs related to these behaviors.

The success of the truth campaign in preventing smoking among young people, for example, has been well documented. This effort, supported by the American Legacy Foundation, tapped into adolescents’ need for independence, rebellion, and personal control by presenting appealing social images of a nonsmoking lifestyle-cool kids living without tobacco. According to research, the decline in youth smoking attributable to this campaign equates to some 300,000 fewer youth smokers and thus millions of added life years as well as tremendous reductions in health care and social costs. An analysis of a smaller state-funded anti-smoking campaign in Massachusetts found that adolescents who
were aged twelve to thirteen years at the study’s outset and who reported exposure to television antismoking advertisements were significantly less likely to progress to established smoking than their peers who did not report exposure.

Other health-related campaigns that have documented success include the 1% or Less campaign and the KNOW HIV/AIDS public education program. The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness (CANFit) program found that after its 1% or Less campaign in East Los Angeles, whole milk purchases dropped from 66 percent to 24 percent of overall sales and that the share of all low-fat milk sold had more than doubled. The KNOW HIV/AIDS campaign, a public education effort in 2003, which built on the existing partnership between the Kaiser Family Foundation and Black Entertainment Television has also reported successful results. In a 2004 survey of African Americans reported by Victoria Rideout, 82 percent of all respondents and 94 percent of young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four recalled at least one KNOW HIV/AIDS campaign advertisement or program component, and 70 percent recalled seeing two specific advertisements. Respondents who reported exposure to one or more campaign component said that the campaign had influenced their plans for the future, including visiting a doctor or getting tested for HIV, and were more likely than respondents who were not aware of campaign components to indicate they planned to engage in these behaviors.

Other examples of social marketing campaigns that have been launched more recently include:

- The TV Boss Campaign, sponsored by the Ad Council, utilizes traditional public service announcements and is designed to give parents the tools and information they need to guide their child’s exposure to television.
  
  www.thetvboss.org/

- The 5-4-3-2-1-Go Campaign, developed by the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago, is a multi-channel, mixed community, and media-based effort aimed at improving family food choices and increasing physical activity.
  
  www.clocc.net/partners/54321GO/

- The Parents Speak Up Campaign is a national multimedia effort on the part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services designed to promote delayed sexual activity on the part of teenagers by encouraging communication within families.
  
  www.4parents.gov/

By evaluating the relative success of the various elements of these campaigns and others like them, researchers will be able to analyze the degree to which social marketing campaigns may be able to further contribute to children’s positive behaviors and inform the creation of future campaigns.

*Specific Chapters Referenced Include:*


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