

# Chapter 20

## Communities Leveraging the Assets of a National Social Marketing Campaign: Experiences with VERB™. *It's What You Do!*

Marian Huhman and Carrie D. Patnode

### Introduction

The VERB. *It's what you do!* social marketing campaign used mass media, school and community promotions, the Internet, and partnerships with national organizations and local communities to encourage children aged 9–13 years (tweens) to be physically active every day (Wong et al., 2004). In the authorizing legislation for VERB, the US Congress specified that the same communication methods used by the best kids' marketers should be adopted to communicate messages to help children develop healthy lifestyles. CDC chose to focus the campaign on physical activity because of the substantial evidence regarding the physical and psychological benefits to children of being physically active (Strong et al., 2005), including physical activity's role in maintaining a healthy weight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). (See Development and Release of the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans: Children and Adolescents by Wargo, Fulton, & Lee, this volume, Chap. 21). The goal of the campaign was to help establish positive physical activity habits in the tween years in hopes that these habits would continue as the children became adolescents and young adults.

Successfully competing with the vast amount of marketing directed at and viewed daily by this segment of youth required hiring and partnering with a number of creative and media agencies, including those with substantial experience working on popular commercial youth brands and those with insight on ethnic-specific markets. For a full list of agencies that VERB contracted with for advertising, marketing,

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M. Huhman, Ph.D. (✉)

University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

e-mail: mhuhman@illinois.edu

C.D. Patnode, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Kaiser Permanente, Center for Health Research, Portland, OR, USA

public relations, please see Wong et al. (2008). As is true in commercial marketing, developing a media-driven national brand; maintaining an appealing message across geographic, economic, and racial/ethnic groups; and integrating traditional media with more nontraditional forms of marketing require considerable investment. With a cumulative congressional appropriation of \$339 million, VERB was able to use the sophisticated techniques of commercial marketers. This included building the VERB brand (Asbury, Wong, Price, & Nolin, 2008), conducting extensive formative research (Berkowitz, Huhman, Heitzler, et al., 2008), using professional actors and celebrity athletes, and buying media and promotional opportunities to ensure reaching a substantial proportion of the target audience. A largely consistent level of marketing activities was maintained from June 2002 through September 2006, when funding for the campaign ended.

The national presence of VERB through paid advertising on multiple tween-centric media outlets (e.g., television channels such as MTV and Nickelodeon and magazines such as *Sports Illustrated for Kids*) facilitated the penetration of the campaign into communities where tweens could sample the product of physical activity through community and school promotions, community events, and partnerships with other national brands that were conducting their own community tours and promotions. Tweens learned to associate the VERB brand with having fun and trying new ways to be physically active. The VERB campaign, operating at the national level though these multiple communication and marketing activities, was aimed at creating a demand among tweens for physical activity at the community level. In addition, some communities responded by developing their *own* programs for physical activity and using the VERB brand. In using the VERB brand, local community activities could capitalize on the cachet and cool factor associated with the images the tweens were seeing in the national marketing campaign.

In this chapter, we describe strategies that were used in the VERB campaign that brought VERB to communities as part of the CDC-sponsored national campaign and we explain how some communities put their own resources into programs and events to facilitate the uptake of VERB by their local tweens. We also discuss a challenge faced by VERB and one that will be an emerging issue for public health campaigns: helping public health practitioners in local communities use, but not dilute, campaign assets (e.g., branded materials including advertisements) that were being maintained by commercial marketers at the national level. The evaluation methods and results are presented as well as lessons learned and considerations for future communication and marketing activities with both national and community foci.

## Campaign Strategy

National paid advertising, mainly on cable channels popular with the tween segment, was the primary campaign component throughout the life of the campaign. In line with the principles of social marketing (Kotler & Lee, 2008), this advertising served as a vehicle to drive the consumer (tweens) to purchase the product (to engage in physical activity); thus, creating demand. The ads illustrated the positive benefits of

physical activity and tried to motivate tweens to “find their Verb” and invite them to become part of the VERB movement.

While VERB continued to use traditional (national) advertising channels throughout the campaign, implementation of locally designed activities to provide tweens with opportunities to experience the brand (VERB) and sample of the product (physical activity) on an interactive basis became critically important once brand awareness was established. This product sampling approach is an example of the shift in contemporary advertising from strictly traditional forms of advertising which are designed to reach large audiences with small personal involvement (e.g., broadcast media like television, radio, and print) to forms of “experiential” marketing designed to reach smaller audiences and offer more personal involvement (Heitzler, Asbury, & Kusner, 2008). In this case, experiential marketing through local implementation and community involvement was designed to increase the supply of physical activity opportunities (targeting both the “place” and “price” of social marketing). This included highlighting existing community programs and facilities and increasing the quality and quantity of such opportunities. (Bretthauer-Mueller et al., 2008).

Strategies for engaging communities included both a “top-down” (or community-placed) approach and a “bottom-up” (or community-based”) approach. Partners at the national and local level were essential in executing activities within both approaches. The *top-down* approach involved engaging community organizations and local outlets to disseminate marketing and promotional activities developed by the campaign. In this scenario, communities and local experts had very little input on the structure, format, and timing of the activities. That is, materials were conceptualized and developed internally by the campaign creative staff and were sent to community groups and organizations to disseminate and implement through programs in their respective communities.

On the other hand, the *bottom-up* approach involved supporting communities to capitalize on the VERB brand assets to develop programs and events tailored according to the resources and needs of their community. In this situation, local experts and/or existing coalitions approached VERB directly (often times through personal and professional contacts) about initiating their own VERB-related promotions in their communities. VERB fully engaged communities as campaign partners by helping them assess their needs, build capacity, and customize VERB-related materials and activities to meet those needs. Selected examples of community involvement at both levels are described below.

## Highlighted Community Examples

*Top-down approach.* Campaign planners used experiential marketing tactics as a chance for tweens to interact with VERB and experience what the VERB brand was all about: engaging in active play. The main goals of these community-placed activities were to: (1) reinforce VERB messages that were already reaching tweens through traditional media channels operating at the national level; (2) provide trial

opportunities for tweens to engage in physical activity; (3) offer on-site incentives for participating in physical activity; and (4) raise awareness of local opportunities for children to be physically active (Heitzler et al., 2008). These activities took the form of mobile tours and guerrilla marketing, event sponsorships, and the distribution of promotional kits to schools and community organizations.

Mobile and guerrilla marketing involved going directly to VERB's target audience—to interact with tweens face-to-face in usually a short-term encounter. Guerrilla marketing involves unconventional methods of promotional activities, for example through “street teams”. VERB's street teams were composed of energetic, engaging young adults who were hired to catch the attention of tweens and interact with them at sporting events, malls, parks, or other recreational outlets. Typically the street team members had performance skills that would hold the interest of tweens such as juggling, walking on stilts, or break dancing.

Mobile tours, such as the VERB *Anytour*, featured six custom trucks that were wrapped with colorful figures and designs that traveled throughout the country spreading the VERB messages and engaging tweens along the way. The *Anytour* stopped at nearly 1,000 events across approximately 80 US communities, spanning about 9 months, and reaching an estimated 1,340,000 tweens. *Anytour* played off the national advertising platform at the time, “Anytime, Anywhere” that communicated the message that tweens can engage in physical activity anytime and anywhere. The young adults who were hired to execute the mobile and guerrilla marketing were ambassadors of the VERB message and became the face of the campaign. These ambassadors would reinforce physical activity the tweens were already doing and would encourage them to try new activities. The trucks stayed in a local area for about one week, setting up activity areas with equipment carried on the trucks—basketball hoops, set ups for street hockey and Dance Dance revolution, and jump rope areas—and invite tweens to play.

Event sponsorships were opportunities to further advance the young brand of VERB and its messages and to build affinity for the brand by associating with brands or celebrities that were well known among tweens. For example, VERB cosponsored with Nickelodeon to bring the Wild & Crazy Kids (WACK) show to over 14,000 tweens in nine cities. Other events sponsored or cosponsored by VERB were the Asian-oriented Harvest Moon Festival in Los Angeles and the Calle Ocho Street Festival in Miami.

VERB also developed and disseminated school and community programs, particularly in years 2 through 4. These promotions typically involved a turn-key kit containing the materials and instructions needed for a teacher or recreational leader to engage a classroom or group of tweens in an entertaining and physically active experience. One such example was VERB *Anytime Doubletime*. The *Anytime Doubletime* promotion involved encouraging tweens to make two games into one. National distributors (e.g., Scholastic) were hired by the campaign to disseminate the materials (at no cost) to schools within their portfolio. Schools and community organizations could also request these materials directly by completing an online request form with the CDC. Typically, these promotions were used in the schools or

community organizations for 2 to 6 weeks. Over the course of the campaign, VERB implemented four school-directed promotions, each reaching 2,000–3,000 elementary or middle schools. Additionally, the same promotions used for the schools plus two additional promotions were implemented with 20,000 ready-to-use kits delivered to youth-serving recreational centers (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs), community- and faith-based organizations. We estimated that the school- and community-based organizations together reached more than 1 million children.

Another example was the partnership with the Girl Scouts of America. This partnership began with the co-branding of *Anytime Doubletime* kits for distribution to troops and councils. The campaign was invited to consult with the Girl Scout organization as they considered a healthy lifestyles initiative to be delivered across its membership. In addition to the opportunity to incorporate VERB messages into their already existing programs and to deliver physical activity in using VERB approaches, the invitation generated conversations about a VERB patch or badge program, and an opportunity to work with the Girl Scouts' new, hipper branch, Studio 2B, to conduct audience-research or implement street-marketing activities in the campaign's next phase. VERB was provided complimentary space at the national Girl Scouts conference held in Atlanta in 2005, and the national office encouraged all councils across the country to embrace VERB in the promotion of physical activity. CDC provided each council with additional resources to generate excitement and keep their interest high.

Besides these national programs that were delivered to hundreds of communities, in its first 2 years, VERB embarked on a somewhat different approach to engage targeted communities in a more concentrated fashion. Nine communities were initially selected to receive augmented marketing activities; six of these evolved into what VERB planners called "high-dose communities," receiving supplemental advertising and promotions and assessment of the outcomes (Berkowitz, Huhman, & Nolin, 2008). Advertising on traditional media channels (TV, radio, and print, out of home) was increased by 50% in these communities over the overall national media buy and relationships with existing community coalitions were sought to partner with them to copresent VERB promotions in their communities.

In selecting the set of high dose communities, VERB planners sought to balance factors of geography (seeking representation of broad areas of the country), population size (a range of large to small was desired), racial and ethnic diversity, and very importantly, the size and cost of the media market for the city. For example, New York City has a large population and media market and offered rich ethnic and racial diversity, but the cost of the New York City media market was much more expensive than Los Angeles, which is comparable in terms of population size and diversity. Therefore, Los Angeles was selected.

The distinctive feature of this high-dose effort was the partnering of the community groups and coalitions with the creative agencies and affiliated media organizations that were developing the VERB brand and advertising. The CDC VERB team negotiated the needs of the creative agencies to maximize efficiency with putting on a major promotion such as the WACK show and the needs of the

community groups who had preferences about logistics of the event such as dates, venue, and transportation methods.

*Bottom-up approach.* After the VERB brand was established and partners learned about the importance of brand protection (i.e., maintaining the personality and meaning of the brand), a strategy evolved that found communities using the VERB brand to develop materials for their community that featured the VERB logo, bringing VERB's cachet to the community's efforts. VERB also provided many of the previously mentioned activity toolkits for schools and organizations to use with tweens. CDC consulted with community partners to ensure consistent messages with the national campaign through a set of brand guidelines by helping them (1) reframe their physical activity programs as fun and exciting and avoid a *should do, good for you* message; (2) connect the VERB brand to the point of purchase; and (3) drive tweens to the opportunities, places, and programs where they could "purchase" the product of physical activity (Bretthauer-Mueller et al., 2008).

One of the most comprehensive and successful bottom up community programs was VERB Summer Scorecard, which Lexington, KY first implemented in the summer of 2004 and continued for several summers. A high-functioning coalition of more than 50 members from businesses, schools, health services, recreation centers, parents, coaches, and the transportation system decided to focus its efforts on youth physical activity. The centerpiece of VERB Summer Scorecard was the actual scorecard, a wallet-sized card with 24 squares on it; each square represented one hour of physical activity. Participating businesses and recreational outlets stamped the cards and gave tweens discounts on physical activities and events, such as free swimming at community pools and reduced admission prices to skating rinks and sports clinics.

The coalition used a planning and implementation approach called "community-based prevention marketing," developed by the Florida Prevention Research Center. With assistance from the Prevention Research Center, the coalition quickly developed a "marketing mind-set" and worked to develop the "places" for tweens to be active at the right "price," and even negotiated with the transportation system that a Scorecard could be used as bus fare—thus removing an important barrier for tweens getting to their preferred places to be active.

CDC's VERB team helped keep program development costs low for the coalition by providing the extensive audience research about tweens and parents that had been done by CDC to develop the VERB brand and messages. CDC's team supported the Lexington coalition's efforts through consultation on the brand guidelines and local marketing strategies. In addition, CDC provided guidance on the coalition's plans for evaluation. By the end of 2006, 17 other communities in several states (e.g., Indiana, Iowa, and Florida) had adapted the Lexington VERB Scorecard program for their community. VERB Summer Scorecard in Sarasota, FL closely modeled the Lexington, KY program and was also evaluated through a partnership with the Florida Prevention Research Center (McDermott et al., 2009). Some other US communities had programs planned for 2012, 6 years after VERB's national funding ended.

## Evaluation Results

The VERB campaign was evaluated extensively. Process evaluation, which assesses whether a program is implemented as planned, included monitoring the reach and frequency of the advertising, conducting a national tracking survey to monitor the likeability of the VERB brand (Huhman, Price, & Potter, 2008), and assessing the number of promotions and events, attendance at events, and receptiveness of tweens to the promotional events.

VERB also conducted an annual outcome evaluation through nationally representative telephone surveys (Potter, Judkins, Nolin, & Huhman, 2008). The evaluation surveyed tweens and parents regarding their attitudes and behaviors related to physical activity. The survey tool, the Youth Media Campaign Longitudinal Survey (YMCLS), was developed specifically for VERB and included measures for the awareness and understanding of the VERB brand and messages, psychosocial measures known to influence physical activity, and measures of physical activity sessions in nonschool hours in the past 7 days and on the day prior to the survey. The YMCLS was found to be reliable and valid in measuring tweens physical activity (Welk et al., 2007).

The YMCLS included three scales that assessed psychosocial dimensions of physical activity: (1) outcome expectations—child's beliefs about the benefits of participating in physical activities; (2) self-efficacy—child's confidence to overcome barriers to engaging in physical activities; and (3) social influences—positive norms for physical activity held by peers. The physical activity measures were divided into organized sessions of physical activity (with a coach or leader) and free-time sessions (done in their free time, alone, or with friends). The outcome evaluation showed that after year one of the campaign 74% of US tweens were aware of VERB, and 90% of those who were aware, understood at least one of the key messages. Subgroups of tweens (e.g., girls, younger tweens) who were aware of the campaign did significantly more physical activity than tweens who were not aware (Huhman et al., 2005). After 2 years of the campaign, the psychosocial measure of outcome expectations and the physical activity measures of free-time sessions in the past 7 days and physical activity done on the day prior to the survey showed total population-level effects (meaning no significant differences across gender, age, race, SES groups). After controlling for baseline levels of physical activity, tweens who were aware of VERB reported more physical activity sessions in their free time than tweens who were not aware of the campaign (Huhman et al., 2007). After 4 years of the campaign, the final outcome analysis showed continuing effects, and a dose–response analysis found that increasing amounts of VERB exposure resulted in stronger attitude and behavioral effects. Some positive VERB effects were sustained as tweens aged into their later teen years (Huhman et al., 2010).

The VERB Summer Scorecard in Lexington, KY was also assessed with process and outcome measures. In 2004, tweens redeemed more than 350 completed *VERB Scorecards* that reported more than 8,400 h of physical activity during the 13-week community campaign. They redeemed more than twice as many completed *VERB Scorecards* in 2005 and 2006. Scorecard participants were more

likely to be physically active than tweens who did not participate. In addition to the individual-level variables, the efforts in Lexington led to changes in macro-level variables, strengthening the local health department's relationship with local media, making changes in public transportation, and building new relationships between public health and local businesses (Bryant et al., 2010). For example, the bus system agreed to accept the VERB Scorecards as bus tickets, giving children free transportation to sites where they could be physically active.

The Sarasota County program evaluators used a post only comparison group design to evaluate their 2005 Summer Scorecard program (Debate et al., 2009). They found that tweens who participated in the intervention were more likely to be physically active than tweens in the comparison group and more physically active than youth in the intervention community who did not participate in Scorecard. Sarasota evaluators also used their Scorecard experiences to study community capacity to implement and sustain health interventions and to form partnerships among the community, the school district, and the university. (Debate et al., 2009; McDermott et al., 2009). Across the Sarasota and Lexington initiatives, community capacity building included training adult and youth members of the coalition to conduct focus groups (Lexington), schooling coalition groups in both communities in how to “think like marketers” and apply a systematic process of prevention marketing to their work, and sponsoring team members to attend national conferences on social marketing.

## **Lessons Learned: Future Endeavors**

As a public health effort, VERB planners at CDC were eager to involve communities in the campaign. We know that supporting communities to develop solutions that fit their unique needs increase the likelihood of success by giving ownership and responsibility to the entities that can sustain the efforts while building community capacity. Despite our commitment to these values, community engagement was one of the most challenging aspects of the VERB campaign. Both pathways—top down to communities from the national campaign and bottom up in helping communities that came to VERB to design their own campaign activities—posed challenges but also produced notable successes and offered many lessons learned.

The initial attempts to reach out to the campaign's designated “high-dose” communities included working with local coalition members and VERB champions to assemble the audience for the WACK show being staged by the national media agencies. Because the WACK event occurred during the school day, community coalition leaders or public health agency members chose which schools would participate, obtained parent consent for participation, and arranged transportation of the tweens to the event. CDC brought the tour to the community while the community partner identified and transported tweens to the VERB-sponsored events that were scheduled on specific days and time. Transporting hundreds of children to the VERB events was complicated, expensive, and resource-intensive for our community partners and was stressful for some of the coalition groups.



Hosting a professional, expensive, and highly rehearsed event like the WACK show fairly quickly exposed the divergent views between the private sector marketing entities and the community members. The community members were excited to host these celebrity-driven events and offered informed opinions on the venue, how to involve the schools, and transport the children to the event. However, the creative agencies were not used to accommodating community input on business decisions or tailoring campaign activities and schedules for individual communities. The values of the creative agencies and media partners from the private sector centered on cost-efficient and timely delivery of edgy, attention-getting concepts and products to as many tweens as possible. Communities did not understand initially that in-market activities such as WACK were owned by VERB's media organization partners who controlled the decisions that affected their own programs; CDC nor the creative agencies hired by CDC had control over these issues.

Thus, for the first 2 years, VERB planners and communities grappled with the best way to partner with each other. Communities were ready to partner, but VERB was cautious until the brand was firmly established and campaign products were developed that were appropriate for communities to use. Plus, the CDC creative team and the creative agencies were very concerned that all communications to the target audience were "on brand". That is, they worried that the introduction of materials and events that may not be seen as cool or relevant to tweens, even though well intentioned, could dilute the assets of the young VERB brand.

From this experience, CDC and the creative agencies learned that a better strategy was to implement the experiential marketing and promotional activities nationally as described above and across multiple communities instead of in-market events, such as the Nickelodeon Wild and Crazy Kids show. In the words of VERB director, Faye Wong, "The change in strategy brought *VERB to tweens* instead of *tweens to VERB*" (Wong, Greenwell, Gates, & Berkowitz, 2008, S181).

As VERB was developing strategies to engage tweens in multiple US communities through experiential marketing, communities continued to be interested in monetary and nonmonetary support from VERB for promotion of their own programs. However, direct monetary support was prohibited by the Congressional guidelines that specified that VERB could not directly fund community activities or programs. Nonmonetary assets were supplied, such as the turn key kits to schools and youth-oriented programs and written materials like tip sheets for parents on how to make physical activity a fun family event. We also could not give communities VERB TV ads to air on their local stations, as some communities had hoped, because of restrictions on using ads that had been developed and paid for by the media agencies. The gap between what VERB could support and provide in communities and what communities wanted proved frustrating for both CDC and communities.

The main nonmonetary asset that VERB could offer communities was the VERB brand. This was challenging because establishing a new brand requires maintaining control over all the messages and images associated with the brand to keep the brand clear and consistent in the minds of the target audience. Again, the creative agencies feared erosion of VERB brand affinity if locally produced events and programs were VERB branded but turned out to be off message, adult-centric, or in some other way

unappealing to the tween audience. Thus, we were asking communities with little marketing experience to match the sophistication of professional marketers. Our solution was to provide communities with ready-to-use communication and marketing materials (e.g., press releases for events being hosted by the community) as well as campaign art work, and clear guidelines on how to use the brand. If a community coalition was not already working with a social marketing or community prevention marketing approach, CDC's partnership team worked with the coalition members to learn to "think like a marketer." Having a marketing mind-set (e.g., putting the tween's motivations and barriers at the center of the plan) was highly instrumental in facilitating communication between VERB planners and community partners. A shared understanding aided CDC's efforts to help communities stage events that would be appealing to tweens and most importantly be on message: that physical activity was fun, cool, and a way to be social with friends.

We learned from working with communities that presenting to community partners what they will gain from being a part of the partnership increases the chance they will come on board and make meaningful contributions. For example, the police department may be more likely to help if the offer is framed as a way for them to interact with disadvantaged youth in a nonthreatening manner. Local transit companies can be encouraged to offer free bus rides to youth participants as a way to initiate them to become more regular bus riders.

Another lesson is the importance of checking in with community partners throughout the campaign, allowing organizers to see what is going well and what needs to be adjusted. The best laid plans can be altered in ways that planners never anticipated, especially when multiple community partners are involved. For example, on regular site visits, the Lexington team found that some signage was not well placed or placed at all. Some staff members were giving misinformation to the public and confusion about transportation was keeping some youth from participating. Communicating regularly through site visits, phone calls, and email strengthens implementation and allows for mid-course adjustments, heading off problems at an early stage. Communities can also use low cost resources for monitoring the implementation of program events, such as sending graduate students or volunteers to activities to observe and write detailed field notes as feedback for organizers.

We feel that the communication strategy to establish a brand as a platform for the VERB messages was the right decision given the goal of implementing a national campaign and given the resources that VERB had. Establishing a national presence of the brand through the work of the commercial marketers while establishing relationships with communities can give time for the campaign to develop marketing and communication materials for the communities.

If targeting specific communities, we would suggest that communities be chosen based on their readiness to engage with the campaign rather than on our criteria for the high dose communities (e.g., geography, size, and diversity). Readiness to engage would include factors such as: (1) an existing coalition or community network that can facilitate access to the supply of physical activity opportunities in the community; (2) a champion within the network who can provide leadership and ensure follow through; (3) its own funding (including donated media time and space) to support community-wide campaigns or promotional events; (4) a willingness to adopt marketing mind-set.

As in all cases of a massive undertaking like the VERB campaign, attention to defining roles and responsibilities early on can reduce disagreement and tensions down the road. In VERB's case, we did not know how the intersections with communities would play out. We made decisions on roles and responsibilities as they evolved. The fast pace of a commercial marketing venture meant little time to help communities with their learning curves for framing physical activity from a marketing perspective for tweens in their communities.

We would suggest that future endeavors evaluate more rigorously the outcomes of community-based initiatives and compare these efforts to the outcomes that are being measured by national level evaluations. Although some of the members of the CDC team feared that community-based activities would dilute the VERB assets for the tweens in the communities implementing their own VERB events, we assessed, albeit anecdotally, that the VERB brand was not diminished in these communities. This information would be important to inform future campaigns.

A final suggestion for future planning would be to engage stakeholders in communities earlier and strategically to be champions for the national campaign. As a federal agency, CDC could not officially advocate for continuing the VERB campaign. Plus, our primary constituents, tweens, were not in a position to "lobby" for us. Thus, community partners could have been encouraged to voice their support for the campaign, especially since VERB was moving toward more integration with communities as part of sustaining VERB—by keeping VERB as an inspiration to tweens to be physically active in the places where they lived and played.

## Conclusion

CDC was charged by Congress to use the sophisticated tactics of the best kid marketers to essentially "sell" physical activity to children. The outcome of that charge, VERB. *It's what you do!*, demonstrated that a combination of strong media, national promotions, and local, often experiential activities can help children to be more physically active, thus, addressing an important aspect of the problem of childhood obesity. We believe that communities played a vital role in the success of this marketing and communication approach. Whereas the advertising created buzz about the brand itself and conveyed empowering messages about adopting and maintaining active lifestyles, local implementation and community engagement gave tweens the opportunity to "sample the product" and be active in the "places" that they live—their own communities.

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