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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine a childhood obesity initiative that successfully used strategic brand management as a fundamental aspect of its mission and goal to promote physical activity through sport, fitness, and education. Using the case study approach, we evaluated Fit University, Inc. (Fit U) in order to identify brand-related characteristics of a successful public health initiative using sport, fitness and education to reduce childhood obesity. The researchers and creators of the initiative used existing sport and fitness-related branding literature to create brand awareness and brand associations (i.e., brand equity) among the program participants and sponsors. Moreover, the researchers implemented brand development components such as brand 1) positioning, 2) brand personality, and 3) brand execution in order to connect with the target audience. In the context of this case study, we examined how university researchers in the areas of public health policy, sport, and fitness partnered with Ronald McDonald House of Charities and the Indianapolis Colts NFL Play 60 campaign to create and administer a six-week branded fast food education and physical activity school-based initiative. We conclude that the use of commercial marketing strategies such as brand management might prove to be effective in engaging and promoting physical activity, sport participation, and nutrition among adolescent children. As per our findings, more than 80% of participants strongly agreed that the program was effective.

Key Words: Public Health Initiatives, Fitness Branding, Sport marketing.
Approximately 17%, or 12.5 million, children and adolescents aged 2-19 years old in the United States are obese (Fryar, Carrol, & Ogden, 2012). Since 1980, the prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents has almost tripled. County obesity rates vary within states, but even states with the lowest prevalence of obesity have counties where many low-income children are obese and at risk for chronic disease. Research has shown that the two primary factors that lead to obesity are overconsumption of calories and physical inactivity. In response to the growing obesity epidemic, local, state and the federal governments have adopted legislation to address the problem. Further, public health organizations and stakeholders have developed social marketing programs geared toward Generation Y to combat the prevalence of childhood obesity.

Previous scholars have defined social marketing as the use of marketing to design and implement programs that promote social behavior change (Grier & Bryant, 2005). Moreover, it is the design and implementation of programs meant to influence the behaviors of an target audience to enhance their personal welfare and that of society. To this end, social marketing involves the consideration of product planning, pricing, promotion and distribution of the program. Public health organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have used social marketing to promote healthy eating habits, physical activity, and influence other preventative health behaviors (Craeynest et al., 2001; Grier & Bryant). However, the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns are limited, because this strategy is most often used as a promotional tool (Craeynest et al.; Hill, 2001). This myopic use of social marketing may limit the long term affects that a program may have on its target market. However, adopting a strategic brand management approach may prove more beneficial for the long term success and viability of a public health program as well as aid in eliciting behavior change in the target audience. Therefore, due to this limitation, there is a need for public health initiatives to incorporate the marketing principles utilized in branding.

For instance, branding a public health program would include building awareness and positive consumer associations (i.e., brand equity) with the cause and the public health organization. Consequently, brand equity may provide a host of vital benefits- such as brand loyalty- to the public health program and cause (Evans, 2011). Currently, the literature on brand management in public health is limited (Asbury, Wong, Price, & Nolin, 2008; Evans, 2011; Evans, Blitstein, Hersey, Renaud, & Yaroch; Evans & Hastings, 2008), but growing, likely due to parody among public health programs. Due to this parody, it has become of chief importance for public health programs to establish a point-of-differentiation in the minds of its stakeholders and target audience. Thus, we will detail the elements of brand management in the subsequent sections.
Background

A brand is considered as the name and/or symbols intended to identify a product or service, as well as differentiate it from other products or services in the marketplace. Moreover, the brand is comprised of the tangible and intangible product attributes such as names, packages, distribution strategies, and advertising that are combined to add value to—in the context of this study—a public health program. In addition, branding enables a company or program to attach meaning to its product or service (Aaker, 1991). Public health programs may benefit from attaching the intangible associations (i.e., thoughts, feelings and attitudes) people have with a social cause with tangible items such as names, symbols, people and colors. The aforementioned tangible elements of a public health program act as a starting point in the brand management process (Aaker).

The differential effect that the tangible and intangible elements of the brand provide is collectively called brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Once brand equity is form in the minds of the target audience, it will either improve or diminish the value they attribute to a public health program. The notion of establishing brand equity has become an increasingly important component in determining the marketing strategies of companies. Public health programs may possess brand equity due to the value the target audience attaches to the cause and/or the program. While there are several conceptualizations of brand equity, given the mission and nature of public health programs we utilized a consumer-based approach to brand equity and brand development in the program examined in this case study. Therefore, from this perspective, we content that brand equity is created when a consumer is familiar with the brand, and holds favorable, unique, and strong brand associations in mind.

Strategic Brand Management in Public Health

Promoting public health programs and campaigns through branding is relatively new, but has promising potential due to lasting benefits of adopting a healthy lifestyle. To this point, public health initiatives may benefit from adopting branding strategies in order to produce a successful campaign. In this context, much of our conceptual knowledge on public health branding is attributed to Evans and Hastings (2008), the authors stated that branding is associated with identifying and analyzing determinants of brand choice and using that information to improve brand positioning and execution. Furthermore, the execution and effectiveness of public health brands vary among types of organizations (Evans, 2011). Specifically, branding has been effec-
tively utilized in large-scale tobacco prevention and physical activity initiatives (Farrelly, Davis, Haviland, Messeri, & Healton, 2005; Huhman et al., 2010). Creating branded public health programs are a new and innovative way for public health practitioners to build brand awareness, brand personality and acceptance for a cause. However, effective branding is often expensive for new initiatives, as it can be costly to obtain a high level of brand awareness and brand associations (i.e., brand personality) through the components of the marketing mix.

The Utilization of Sport in Public Health Programs

Despite the aforementioned constraints for brand development, public health practitioners may find building brand equity feasible by partnering with notable organizations that may benefit from an affiliation with a public health cause. In regard to obesity, it maybe advantageous to collaborate with national, regional or local sport organizations. In recent years there have been a few notable collaborations involving sport entities and public health initiatives. Some of the most successful examples include the Livestrong Foundation and The Susan G. Komen For the Cure Campaign. The success of Livestrong has been attributed to its association with sport. Additionally, Livestrong is considered one of the first commercial philanthropic brands (Mickle, 2009). The Susan G. Komen For the Cure Campaign has also benefited from its connection with sport (i.e., run/walk races) and the National Football League’s (NFL). For example, NFL players, coaches, and referees show their support by wearing the campaign’s signature pink color on clothing, hats, jerseys, and equipment during the entire month of October. Moreover, public health programs use these corporate partnerships to gain awareness for both the firm and campaign. In the context of this case study, university researchers in the areas of public health policy, sport, and fitness partnered with Ronald McDonald House of Charities and the Indianapolis Colts Play 60 campaign to create and administer a six-week branded fast food education and physical activity school-based initiative aimed at educating middle school aged children about physical activity and eating-on-the-go.

To this end, the remainder of this case study will be devoted to describing the creation, implementation and evaluation of the Fit University Inc. MVP program as a branded childhood obesity initiative. In the ensuing section of this paper, we will introduce the brand development components utilized to build brand equity in the Fit University MVP program. Lastly, future opportunities for successful public health branded programs will be proposed.
Case Report/Program Design

Fit University Inc., also known as Fit U™, is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating cutting-edge wellness initiatives that change perceptions and empower individuals, families, and communities. The aim of Fit U is to serve as the coordinator between individuals seeking a strong, healthy lifestyle and the companies that want to help serve that goal; this public health program draws on corporate partnerships to deliver its message. Additionally the program provides tailored educational resources to help Americans live fit lifestyles. Founded in 2011 by a university professor, Fit U was created in response to the prevalence of obesity among America's youth. Nearly one in three children and adolescents in America are affected by obesity - that is three times the rate of the last generation. Fit U aims to close the gap between Americans and fitness by meeting individuals where they are, partnering with other organizations they can work with, and together building creative "bridges" to a healthier life.

Brand Development

Acknowledging the importance of the strategic brand management process and building consumer-based brand equity, Fit U researchers carefully implemented the three basic concept of brand development as denoted by Evans (2011): 1) positioning, 2) personality, and 3) execution.

Brand Positioning

First, in order to aid the target audience in differentiating our program from similar programs in the marketplace we created a positioning statement, a tagline, and goals for Fit U. The manifestation of positioning the program resulted in our signature program, entitled Fit U: MVP™, an overall wellness initiative dedicated to changing perceptions and empowering kids through our mantra: Moderation, Variety and Play-or MVP. We positioned the program as a series of school-based educational seminars on making healthy food choices at home, school, and on-the-go, by teaching children new and exciting ways to stay fit and active. Consequently, the goals of the program were as follows:

- To educate children and families on "the good, the bad, and the too much" in fast food and grocery store establishments.
- To teach children how to be empowered consumers at home and on the go.
To urge children to be catalysts for change in their schools, communities, and homes.

To enlighten children about benefits of living a healthy lifestyle.

To gain an understanding of the motivations, constraints, and influences underlying exercise and food choices amongst the youth.

To build a multi-faceted marketing/advertising campaign that motivates and inspires children to make healthy choices through the use of social media and technology.

In order to establish and emotional point of difference (PoD) (Evans, 2011) with the target audience we created the MVP Pledge™. The MVP Pledge is an oath taken by all Fit U™ MVP™ participants to signify their personal goal to live a healthy and physically active lifestyle. Participants were given signature pledge bands and promised to adhere to the MVP program’s three key principles. The first principle in the MVP pledge, Moderation, focuses on avoiding foods that lack essential nutrients, and practicing healthy eating behaviors at fast-food restaurants and supermarkets. Next, Variety centers on eating an array of nutritional and well-balanced foods and participating in an array of fun physical activities most days of the week. Finally, Play refers to movement or physical activity—whether playing basketball and soccer with friends or jumping rope—are part of the MVP pledge.

**Brand Personality**

Brand personality is considered a brand association dimension that is typically expressed in adjectives that describe the brand (Aaker, 1991). Evans (2011) suggested that brand personality is an expression of a brand’s PoD—the social and emotional aspects of the brand that differentiates it from similar organizations. Brand personality maybe difficult to create in new organization, thus collaborating with organizations with high brand equity and distinct brand personalities may prove to be beneficial. Therefore, we entered into a strategic partnership with Ronald McDonald House of Charities (RMHC) and the Indianapolis Colts Play 60 campaign. Both entities provided value-in-kind resources during the MVP Pep Rally and Fit U Fit Fair, our pre and post events respectively. Furthermore, in order to leverage the brand personalities of our corporate partnership with the Indianapolis Colts, the Indianapolis Colts cheerleaders and mascot made appearances and provided assistance at the pre and post events. In this instance, RMHC agreed to contribute a specified monetary amount, which was used to fund Fit U and in exchange, the corporation was included in all marketing and promotional efforts. The affiliation with Fit U allowed RMHC to benefit from in-
creased exposure and cause-related marketing of an obesity-related public health program. Partnering with a public health program such as Fit U is especially important for the brand image of an organization such as RMHC that is commonly associated with its fast food corporate component.

**Brand Execution**

Brand execution is the practical application and implementation of the tangible brand components (e.g., images, colors symbols, logo, taglines). Moreover, it is what the consumer experiences when consuming the brand’s products or services (Evans, 2011). Therefore, we created a trademarked logo for Fit U (Appendix A) that was displayed on all Fit U program related materials. Second, we created brand awareness and associations through a presence on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook & Twitter) and a website (www.fituniversity.org) dedicated to providing information about the public health program and related items. The result was a clearly articulated brand identity that created brand equity among the constituents of the program. With respect to the process of brand execution (Kotler, 1999), the following section will discuss the other brand execution components of the program.

**MVP Pep Rally**

Featuring the Indianapolis Colts Cheerleader and their mascot Blue, Fit U staff and community partners engaged students in an exciting event to promote awareness about physical activity and wellness through interactive games and contests. In addition, The MVP signature bands were be given to all participants to signify the beginning of their six-week pledge to live a more healthy and active life.

**Fit U: Fast Food Educational Seminars**

These weekly seminars were conducted conjointly with the participating school’s physical education classes. The seminars covered various aspects of healthy eating and fast food dining through lively and highly interactive presentations. Prior to the seminar, students participated in a preliminary survey on their perceptions of fast food, physical activity, and nutrition. Post-seminar, students receive their Fit U: MVP™ Diploma along with gift certificates from our corporate sponsors.
Fit U: MVP Fit Fair™

The Fit U: MVP™ program culminated with the MVP Fit Fair™. The Fit Fair consisted of a four-quarter football style sporting event where participants split into three teams – Team Moderation, Team Variety, and Team Play. The event consisted of education and physical activity for participants, as they visited various fitness and nutrition activity stations like Zumba®, Lacrosse, Football, and CrossFit to earn calorie expenditure tokens for their team. The MVP Fit Fair™ ended with an Olympic-inspired medal ceremony where all three team received prizes and awards. For our partnering physical education instructors we issued grants for physical education class supplies from our sponsors.

Methodology

Fit U: MVPTM was a six-week program where students met once a week with Fit U instructors to learning about fast-food, physical activity and sport. Students from a Midwestern middle school were recruited and completed the research sessions on a voluntary basis (n = 217). The group consisted of 98 females, 94 males, and 25 participants chose non-response for gender.

During the Fit U: MVPTM pilot program, information was gathered on participants' demographics, perceptions of food and healthy lifestyles, and experience with the Fit U program. Led by instructors, four seminars introducing elements of healthy lifestyles were held on the following topics: (1) understanding food labels, (2) the food pyramid, (3) media influence on mind, body, and movement, and (4) eating on the go. We gathered data from the participants before, during, and after the educational seminars.

Results

For measuring the effectiveness, participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire evaluating the Fit U program. This survey includes 12-items asking participants to evaluate three categories: the Fit U program, Fit U teachers, and how the program influence behavioral change. A total of 166 students completed the questionnaire. The figures in Appendix A show the percentage of participant responses for each of the questions.

The results showed that participant evaluations of Fit U’s educational and recreational components were very positive. More than 80% of participants stated that they have learned and felt the program was interesting and fun. About 85% of students responded that Fit U teachers were fair and knowl-
edgeable. One of the goals of the program was to change behavior and attitude toward fast-food consumption and physical activity. The results indicate Fit U was successful in this venture as 80% of participants said that their attitudes and actual behaviors on physical activity and healthy eating have changed. Further, around 70% of the students indicated that after participating in the Fit U program they had set goals to be more active and eat healthier.

Discussion

Proper physical activity education has become crucial due to high rates of childhood obesity. Cognitive behavioral interventions and programs that focus on increasing physical activity are recommended for youth struggling with obesity (Braet, Tanghe, Decaluwe, Moens, & Rosseel, 2004). Studies have shown that even modest amounts of physical activity can have tremendous health benefits in youth (Craeynest et al., 2008; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010). In response, effective public health programs and social marketing campaigns are needed to develop programs aimed at resolving the problem of childhood obesity. School-based programs developed to decrease obesity have suggested that health education alone may have a limited impact (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). Therefore, social marketing campaigns and branded public health programs should be used to facilitate and support behavior change (DeBar et al., 2009). Social marketing often uses nonconventional approaches in order to make the targeted health behavior more interesting and less arduous. We identified these tactics and attempted to create a branded program that would resonate with our target audience. Therefore, Fit University, Inc. was an attempt to create a branded public health program that leveraged relationships with sport entities and other community sponsors. Fit U is considered a public health program, a social marketing campaign, and a branding effort dedicated to helping resolve the problem of childhood obesity. Utilization of the brand development process to create public health campaign such as Fit U, has promising potential due to lasting benefits that branding provides. Creating brand equity was crucial for the development and success of Fit U and will continue to be an important component of the program going forward. The future success of the program will be heavily dependent on leveraging brand equity with hopes of expanding participation and overall awareness of the program to the nation’s youth. Lastly, our findings represent the strong impact branded public health programs can have, and shows the need for future research and programming in this area.
References


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Appendix
I learn new things... Interesting Fun

I know how to eat healthier at fast food places I am more physically active I eat healthier

I set goals to be more active I set goals to eat healthy food