



Applying industry practices to promote healthy foods: An exploration of positive marketing outcomes☆



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ABSTRACT

The marketing and advertising efforts of food manufacturers and restaurants are often criticized for promoting less healthy foods. Yet, their marketing practices may provide a road map for the success of growers, producers, and marketers of healthy foods. This article proposes a framework for understanding the differences in marketing communications for healthy vs. hedonic foods. Specifically, an examination of the promotional efforts of hedonic foods as compared to healthy foods reveals marketing practices that can be adapted for healthy alternatives. Adopting these successful industry practices may promote a healthy shift in the eating habits of consumers and allow businesses that produce healthy products to thrive.

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1. Introduction

Consider the following television commercial. The ad opens with a male in his late teens riding a grocery cart down the side of a steep snowy mountain and ends with a fiery explosion reminiscent of the “extreme” genre of ads often employed by the makers of high caffeine beverages and snack foods. This ad, however, is for Bolthouse Farms baby carrots and carries the tag line “eat ‘em like junk food.” Jeff Dunn, former Coca-Cola executive and CEO of Bolthouse Farms, believes it is a “silly use of advertising dollars to tell people that vegetables are healthy” (McGray, 2011). Instead, Bolthouse Farms is plowing its advertising budget into an ad campaign that parallels the marketing efforts of the snack food industry. In addition to the “Extreme” ad campaign, another ad entitled “Indulge” features an attractive woman in a black silk night gown slowly drawing a baby carrot to her lips. While sensuous music softly plays in the background, a deep male voice announces that the product has “overt sexual innuendo,” employing sex appeal and humor to sell carrots. This over-the-top mimicry of junk food commercials prompted viral sharing of both of these ads on YouTube and contributed to a 10–12% boost in Bolthouse Farms baby carrot sales (McGray, 2011). In 2012, Campbell Soup Company acquired Bolthouse

Farms for \$1.55 billion in an effort to expand its market reach with healthy food and beverage offerings (de la Merced, 2012).

Bolthouse Farms' advertising and promotion practices illustrate how marketers of “good for you” foods can leverage industry practices to promote healthy food, creating positive marketing outcomes for both consumers who choose a healthy snack and for those who produce these products. Advertising approaches commonly used to promote indulgent foods (i.e., those higher in fat, calories, or sugar) utilize hedonic consumption themes of pleasure, fun, sensory stimulation, and excitement (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) shown to elevate mood (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Adapting practices from the snack food and beverage industries to sell healthy foods may offer an alternative path to increase consumption of healthy foods and beverages. This paper examines research on how marketing communications influence food and beverage choices. . Adopting a macromarketing perspective, Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Shultz (in this issue) describe how positive marketing should “leverage the resources of marketing knowledge to maximize the mutual benefit for consumers, organizations and society.” Using successful industry marketing practices to promote healthy choices has the potential to enhance the health and well-being of consumers and to grow the bottom line of businesses that invest in marketing these healthy alternatives. Ultimately, shifting consumption toward healthy foods may also influence the health of society by reducing obesity and the associated burgeoning healthcare costs.

The marketers of healthy foods and beverages may learn from the best practices of industry and augment their efforts with traditional food marketing strategies. Examining research that illuminates how food marketing can influence consumption decisions showcases

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opportunities for the makers of healthy foods to incorporate successful industry practices. Such an effort is consistent with a shift in the framework used to move food decisions away from a “paternalistic, normative model of the relationship” between food and health toward a focus on Food Well-being which emphasizes helping consumers and society develop a positive and holistic relationship with food (Block et al., 2011, p. 5). Researchers working to advance Food Well-being are investigating how to empower consumers to employ both automatic and deliberative influences on their food consumption to make healthy food choices (Bublitz et al., 2013). Rather than focus on how food choices are undermined by marketplace cues and persuasion attempts, consumers can draw upon these influences to become more mindful of their food consumption and develop healthy eating habits (Bublitz et al., 2013). This paper examines opportunities for marketers to make a similar shift toward Food Well-being by using industry marketing practices to promote the consumption of healthy foods. A positive marketing framework examines how consumers, businesses, and society can participate in an exchange that is mutually beneficial. Encouraging producers and growers to adopt a marketing communications strategy designed to successfully promote healthy foods may help advance consumer well-being and may also help the businesses that produce these products thrive.

A review of traditional advertising models outlines the drivers of successful marketing communication strategies. However, the typical marketing practices adopted to promote healthy food and beverages are quite different from the practices used to market and sell hedonic products such as snack food and soft drinks. Within a marketing communications framework, examples of corporate success in promoting healthy food and beverage products demonstrate how to transform consumers' choices but also how to build a profitable business model around selling healthy products. Specifically, positioning strategies, emotional appeals, product packaging cues, ad scheduling, alternative media, and target audience selection may influence the consumption of healthy foods and beverages. Finally, a discussion of the policy implications and future research directions for this alternative marketing approach outlines how these changes may advance the health of consumers and society as well as the success of the businesses that market healthy products.

2. Traditional advertising models

One of the earliest advertising models introduced, Attention → Interest → Desire → Action (AIDA), continues to permeate beliefs about advertising as an invariant sequence of steps, a “hierarchy of effects” (Barry, 2002; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999, p. 26; Weilbacher, 2001). To be effective, marketing communications must first break through the cluttered media environment and compel consumers to tune into the advertising message. The ad message must then generate enough interest and desire to motivate the consumer to act or purchase the product. The advertising strategies used by the snack food and beverage industries have been effective in building strong brands and generating demand for the products they sell. However, hierarchical models have been criticized because they seem to assume that a consumer's mind is a “blank sheet awaiting information” without prior knowledge of a brand (Weilbacher, 2001, p. 22) and without consideration of how a consumer's marketplace experience influences advertising effects (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) developed a framework for advertising effectiveness that incorporates the influence of cognition, affect, and consumer experience but is independent of a hierarchical structure. Whether advertising influences occur as a set of hierarchical steps or independent of any sequential order, most models suggest that, following exposure to advertising, cognition and affect interact with a consumer's experience to influence behavior. In a broader explanation of the effects of advertising, Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) describe how marketing communications influence how consumers “think” and “feel” about the products

advertised and ultimately drive consumers to purchase a product. This model provides a foundation for examining the communication strategies used by the marketers of healthy vs. hedonic foods and beverages in their efforts to persuade consumers.

2.1. One goal, two strategies

What differentiates marketing for an unhealthy snack food from those efforts designed to promote a healthy snack alternative? An extensive review of the effects of food promotion to children demonstrates that “the most popular appeals used in the promotion of foods to children were hedonistic, including taste, humor, action-adventure, and fun” (Hastings et al., 2003). Food marketing to adults frequently uses emotion to emphasize pleasurable food experiences (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Faiseur, 2011). Further, marketing efforts by industry often employ creative ads to capture the attention and interest of consumers. One benefit of creativity is the positive emotions prompted by the ad which influence consumer response to the product (Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Buchholz, & Darley, 2007; Yang & Smith, 2009). By comparison, marketing activities aimed at curbing consumption and promoting healthy eating are more likely to adopt a sterile, nutrition education focus which may not be as effective in attracting attention and persuading the audience (Ellen, Bone, & Stuart, 1998; Ewing, Napoli, & du Plessis, 1999).

In 2011, advertisers in the United States spent an estimated \$144 billion (James, 2012) and Nielsen Media Research estimates that during the first six months of 2012 more than \$266 billion was spent globally on advertising (Heine, 2012). The food and beverage industry is the second largest advertiser in the U.S. (Story & French, 2004) and spent 1000 times more on advertising in 2004 than the government spent promoting healthy eating habits that year (Consumers Union, 2005; Wymer, 2010). An analysis of food advertisements that appeared on television in 2004 revealed that 21.6% of ads directed to children promoted food products with restaurants/fast-food, cereal, sweets, sugar beverages, and snack foods topping the list of food products advertised (Desrochers & Holt, 2007). In their analysis of common criticisms of marketing practices, Stoeckl and Luedicke (in this issue) describe how the food industry “seduces consumers” with cheap prices for large portions of tasty, calorie-dense food fueling the obesity epidemic. Thus, it is clear that the food and beverage industry not only markets their products differently but also far more heavily than efforts designed to promote healthy eating. While the marketers of healthy and hedonic foods both aspire to increase consumer demand for their products, research indicates that these groups approach this goal by relying on different marketing practices.

2.2. Organizing framework for food & beverage marketing

One way in which the marketing communication practices for healthy foods appear to differ from the practices used for more hedonic foods and beverages is revealed by how marketers for these products attempt to persuade consumers. Marketing communications for healthy products tend to focus on informing consumers of the nutritious nature of the product or the health benefits of consuming the product, information which is more cognitive in nature. By contrast, advertising efforts for hedonic food and beverages often focus on dimensions of taste or the sensory experience of a product which may trigger an affective response (Hastings et al., 2003). Taste, for example, is known to be the primary influence on food choice (Goldberg & Gunasti, 2007). Research indicates that when ads trigger an emotional response, they are generally better at shaping attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Geuens et al., 2011). Even for low involvement, utilitarian products (e.g., healthy food), researchers have found that employing incongruent emotions in ads may produce “more positive ad and brand attitudes than non-emotional ads” (Geuens et al., 2011, p. 419 H2a). This research implies when marketers of healthy foods employ humor and sex appeal,

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