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Back to the Basics: Are Traditional Educational Methods Still Effective in a High-Tech World?

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Back to the Basics: Are Traditional Educational Methods Still Effective in a High-Tech World?

Abstract

Although Extension educators have harnessed the power of technology as an important vehicle for conveying research-based content, it is important that the power of traditional educational methods not be overlooked. These traditional methods remain ideas that work, have worked, and continue to work even today. In this article, we spotlight these traditional ideas by presenting a social marketing campaign that engages limited-resource audiences via themed print educational materials—posters, brochures, and bookmarks. Evaluation results indicate that the campaign has been successful in engaging the target audience and motivating them regarding the adoption of healthful behavior changes.

Keywords: [educational methods](#), [traditional](#), [technology](#), [social marketing](#)

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Introduction

We are producing and consuming more digital content than ever (Kulshrestha, Zafar, Noboa, Gummadi, & Ghosh, 2015; Sasseen, Olmstead, & Mitchell, 2013). Apps, social media sites, messaging, and pop-up Internet advertisements compete for our attention, offering newest products, latest best advice, or breaking news stories. Indeed, technology has transformed the way we learn and consume information (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

Extension educators have harnessed the power of technology as an important vehicle for conveying research-based content. For example, social media platforms engage teen parents with parent education (Allen, Jolly, & Barnes, 2016). Safe home food preservation practices are communicated through technology-based tools (Johnson, Case, Hyde, Kershaw, & Kraemer, 2018). Self-directed e-learning apps address childhood obesity (Parmer, Struempfer, Funderbuck, & Parmer, 2017).

The importance of digital technologies for increasing Extension's reach and client learning opportunities cannot be overlooked (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011). Even in light of this importance, it is critical that we not forget the effectiveness of traditional educational methods that have served Extension well for decades. In today's technology-saturated environments, we must be reminded that "old ideas"—print materials, fact sheets, brochures, displays—are media channels that have reached audiences in the past and continue to reach audiences even today.

In this article, we draw on traditional ideas that have worked for Extension by presenting a social marketing campaign that engages limited-resource audiences through the use of themed print educational materials—posters, brochures, and bookmarks. The campaign and associated evaluation results demonstrating its effectiveness are described. Implications for Extension professionals seeking to engage limited-resource audiences conclude the article.

Description

Quick Wins is a social marketing campaign that includes the placement of posters, brochures, and bookmarks in community locations frequented by limited-resource families. Each year county Extension offices are asked to identify partner sites that serve limited-resource audiences (i.e., local health department, social service agency, or senior center). For each partner site, counties are provided a large freestanding poster stand with an attached brochure holder. The poster stand accommodates a 2-by-3-ft poster and up to three sets of educational literature. Each quarter throughout the year, counties are mailed a marketing kit for each partner site. The marketing kit includes a poster to display in the poster stand as well as brochures and bookmarks. See Figure 1 for an example marketing kit.

Figure 1.
Marketing Kit



Each quarterly marketing kit highlights a theme designed to promote healthful eating, physical activity, hydration, or food resource management. Focus group sessions held with limited-resource participants informed the selection of the themes, content, and design of the campaign materials. Six campaigns that correspond to four major themes were launched over 18 months (Table 1).

Table 1.
Quick Wins Campaigns

Theme	Campaign title(s)
Healthful eating	Eat Healthy; They Will Too Healthy Now; Healthy Later
Active lifestyles	Move . . . It Matters
Water consumption	Water: The Choice Is Clear
Saving money	Simple Savings Savings in Season

We evaluated the effectiveness of the campaigns through an awareness and behavior change survey. Lists of limited-resource adults residing in the intervention counties were obtained through a third-party marketing firm. Individuals on the lists were solicited by email or phone. In order to participate, individuals had to be 18 or older, be residing in a county where the social marketing materials were displayed, have children 17 years or younger living at home, and have visited or received services at a health department, social service agency, or senior center within the preceding 18 months.

Findings

A total of 453 adults completed the survey. Frequencies were computed for each survey question. Table 2 provides a demographic overview of respondents.

Table 2.

Demographics Summary for Respondents

Demographic variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	360	79.5%
Male	93	20.5%
Ethnicity		
White (Caucasian)	364	80.4%
African American	61	13.5%
Hispanic (Latino/Spanish)	12	2.6%
Asian	6	1.3%
American Indian	1	0.2
Other	7	1.5 %
Prefer not to respond	2	0.4%
Age		
18-25	63	13.9%
26-35	172	38.0%

36-45	139	30.7%
46-55	57	12.6%
56+	22	4.9%

Respondents were asked whether they recalled messages related to each theme. Over four fifths of respondents recalled messages about healthful eating, and almost two thirds recalled messages about active lifestyles (Table 3). Slightly over half recalled messages about hydration, and more than one third recalled messages on food resource management (Table 3).

Table 3.
Respondent Recall of Campaign Themes

Theme	Yes	No	Unsure
Healthful eating (Eat Healthy; They Will Too and Healthy Now; Healthy Later)	376 (83%)	36 (8%)	41 (9%)
Active lifestyles (Move . . . It Matters)	299 (66%)	95 (21%)	59 (13%)
Water consumption (Water: The Choice Is Clear)	231 (51%)	145 (32%)	77 (17%)
Saving money (Simple Savings and Savings in Season)	163 (36%)	208 (46%)	82 (18%)

For each theme, participants were asked to recall the format in which they saw the messaging (Table 4).

Table 4.
Respondent Recall of Messaging Formats

Theme	Poster	Brochure	Bookmark	Other
Healthful eating (Eat Healthy; They Will Too and Healthy Now; Healthy Later)	385 (85%)	258 (57%)	27 (6%)	5 (1%)
Active lifestyles (Move . . . It Matters)	331 (73%)	240 (53%)	18 (4%)	0
Water consumption (Water: The Choice Is Clear)	294 (65%)	227 (50%)	45 (10%)	5 (1%)
Saving money (Simple Savings and Savings in Season)	231 (51%)	294 (65%)	41 (9%)	14 (3%)

Participants who recalled the messages were then asked whether they planned to use any of the information from the materials. Lists of the top responses for each theme are provided in Table 5.

Table 5.
Respondent Planned Behavior Change

Behavior	Frequency	Percentage
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Healthful eating

Keep fruits and vegetables available	293	78%
Share meals as a family	252	67%
Serve as a healthful eating role model	222	59%

Active lifestyles

Use tips to get active at home	132	57%
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Water consumption

Drink at least one glass of water with meals or snacks	226	77%
Provide water to children throughout the day	203	69%
Keep a pitcher of water in the refrigerator	121	41%

Saving money

Check grocery ads for sales	148	64%
Buy in-season fruits and vegetables	134	58%
Use grocery list and calculator when shopping	118	51%

Finally, participants were asked about the formats they prefer for receiving information about healthful lifestyles. For each format, participants responded (yes or no) as to whether they preferred to receive information about healthful lifestyles in that format (Table 6).

Table 6.
Respondent Preferred Information Formats

Format	Frequency	Percentage
Posters	372	82.1%
Websites	357	78.8%
Brochures	353	77.9%
Apps	301	66.4%
Social media	298	65.8%
Online ads	246	54.3%
Magazines	230	50.8%
Newspapers	202	44.6%
Bookmarks	165	36.4%

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent participants who responded yes to indicate having a preference for receiving information in the identified format.

Implications

The results of this social marketing campaign have several practical implications:

1. *When designing Extension programming, Extension educators should not overlook the value of traditional methods.* Our results indicate that adults still pay attention to and retain information communicated through these traditional methods. Print materials, displays, and posters remain valuable tools in the Extension teaching toolbox. For participants in our study, the top three preferred formats for receiving information about healthful lifestyles were posters, websites, and brochures. It is worth noting that bookmarks were not highly ranked as a preferred information source; this could be due to the lack of in-depth content contained on the bookmarks. Given its pervasive presence, it would be easy to assume that the web would be the best vehicle for conveying educational messages. However, as our study shows, traditional methods, including those involving the use of posters and brochures, are still preferred. The key for Extension educators is to design programming and messaging that leverages the best of each educational method for the target audience.
2. *Younger age is not synonymous with a preference for technology.* Well over half (68.7%) of participants in our study were between the ages of 26 and 45. As digital natives and digital immigrants, this demographic is accustomed to and comfortable with accessing information using technology. Yet even in light of this fact, traditional print materials were still effective in reaching the audience and engendering behavior change.
3. *The environment is important.* We designed our campaign to target limited-resource families through social service agencies. These settings often have waiting areas where participants can view posters, brochures, and bookmarks. Here participants were able to pick up, read, and digest the information provided all while waiting for services. Extension educators should continue to consider the environment in which their education will be taking place and how best to match educational methods with the educational environment.

Even in today's technology-rich landscape, traditional Extension methods are ideas that (still) work. Print materials, posters, and displays—although lacking the bells and whistles of newer technology tools—call us back to the basics as effective means for delivering Extension content and fostering behavior change.

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