

# Developing Social Marketing Messages for Covering Kids

March 1999

covering  
Kids

A National Health Access  
Initiative for Low-Income,  
Uninsured Children

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## About Covering Kids

Covering Kids is a national health access initiative for low-income, uninsured children. The program was made possible by a \$47 million grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation of Princeton, New Jersey, and is designed to help states and local communities increase the number of eligible children who benefit from health insurance coverage programs by: designing and conducting outreach programs that identify and enroll eligible children into Medicaid and other coverage programs; simplifying the enrollment processes; and coordinating existing coverage programs for low-income children. Covering Kids receives direction and technical support from the Southern Institute on Children and Families, located in Columbia, South Carolina.

*The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, and no official endorsement by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is intended or should be inferred.*

## **Developing Social Marketing Messages For Covering Kids**

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Over the past ten years, those involved in social issues and causes have increasingly turned to social marketing to improve the effectiveness of their efforts. Many people working for social change become involved because they believe in the social mission. Their backgrounds, education and experience have often given them a deep understanding of the social problem and its context. However, they have never been trained or exposed to “processes” that allow them to implement solutions to those problems.

Most professionals receive training on “how” to do their business. Accountants are taught how to do an audit. Health professionals follow prescribed procedures for taking a medical history, diagnosing and treating illness. Researchers are trained in the scientific method; architects learn engineering principles.

“Social marketing” is a process designed for those working to create social change that will improve the lives of others, or society in general. It is not a theory, but a practical approach to follow in order to create and manage needed social change. Social marketing is defined as the application of commercial marketing and communication principles to public initiatives/programs in order to achieve social goals through **behavior change**. The mission of social marketing programs is to benefit the consumer and/or society, not the host organization. Covering Kids is one such program.

A major challenge to the success of social programs is the need to influence or change the behavior of others. Often these programs seek to change the behavior of individual consumers: get your child immunized, quit smoking, wear your seatbelt, exercise, eat 5 servings of fruits & vegetables a day, check for radon in your home, and so on. However, the application of social marketing is broader and includes consumers such as the media, legislators, administrators, policy makers, organizational leaders and the like. Social marketers want these new audiences to deliver messages, change policies, pass legislation, revise regulations, implement programs and the like. In this paper, any potential audience of the social marketing effort is referred to as a “consumer.”

Covering Kids’ consumers could include anyone from low-income mothers to health clinic workers, volunteers, eligibility workers, state legislators or business owners. Just as there are many kinds of “consumers” of commercial products and services, there can be many kinds of “consumers” for social ideas and behaviors.

## **A Note About Social Marketing and Outreach**

It is important to understand the relationship between social marketing and outreach. First, it must be pointed out that social marketing addresses the building of “effective programs and initiatives.” It is much broader than “communication.”

Social marketing programs will typically address at least five areas (often called the 5 P’s) and only one of those areas is communication. The areas covered by social marketing include:

- What is being offered to the consumer (Product)
- What must the consumer do to receive the offering (Price)
- How will the consumer access the offering (Place)
- What kind of policy environment is needed to support the effort (Politics)
- What messages must reach the consumer to motivate behavior change (Promotion)

In other words, promotion or communication to various consumers is just one element of a social marketing program. It is wrong to equate social marketing with communication. This paper, however, is by necessity being limited to this one element → **the development of an effective communication strategy for social programs.**

As discussed below, there are six strategic questions that, when answered, define a communication strategy. One of these questions deals with how to reach or deliver the key message to the target audience. There are many vehicles available to reach a target audience. These include paid and public service advertising, editorial media, point of purchase displays, delivery of collateral materials (e.g., brochures, posters), as well as community outreach.

Unlike commercial marketing programs, social marketing programs do not have established sales forces, or wholesale and retail distribution networks to bring the offering and/or message to the consumer. Community outreach has developed to serve this need. By building working relationships with existing community organizations, outreach efforts create the program’s “sales force” and “retail outlets” for messages and services.

There are two critical points related to creating effective outreach networks:

1. Community organizations are themselves “audiences” for the social marketing program
2. Successful outreach activities must develop communication strategies that answer the six strategic questions for these community organizations.



## Communication Strategies for Marketing Social Change

A common fault of many social programs is to rely solely on “information and data” as the basis for messages. This reliance leads to messages that present “the facts” about a specific program or behavior, on the assumption that exposure to these facts will lead consumers to change their behavior. The presentation of facts or information will rarely motivate behavior change. Pre-testing of outreach information is necessary to determine what message the consumer actually receives, because any information is filtered through the consumer’s reality.

The following example shows how presentation of even the most straightforward information can yield unanticipated outcomes. A public education campaign widely disseminated a message to women that *women with a history of breast cancer in their family were at greater risk of having breast cancer themselves*. The intent was to increase women's knowledge about risk factors for breast cancer so they would seek appropriate screening. However, subsequent consumer research has found that this health message, **once processed through the consumer's reality**, was translated as “If I don't have breast cancer in my family, I don't need to worry about breast cancer.” Lack of family history of breast cancer is now a primary reason women give for not having a screening mammogram. Yet, 80% of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer have no history of it in their family.

An often-heard comment on the part of well meaning program staff is “if we just educate ‘them’ about how important our issue is, then they will do the right thing.” For example, if parents just understood how important health insurance is for their children, then they would get them covered.

What committed advocates don’t realize is that the perceived importance of their issue is through their eyes, not the consumers’. There are also thousands of other committed advocates who feel the same way about their causes. However, social marketers have found that unless we can make an issue or cause relevant to someone’s personal life, we will have no effect.

It is impossible to educate consumers to value an issue, regardless of all the supporting data and evidence of its importance (although as will be seen, this information may be a very useful part of any campaign). Instead, communicators need to understand what consumers already value and what their needs and wants are today. Communication and outreach that actually have an impact on the consumer must “position” the issue as meeting the consumer’s currently valued needs and wants.

## The Critical Need for Market Research

To formulate powerful messages it is essential to listen to consumers describe their lives through their eyes (e.g., What happened the last time your child became sick? Where did you go? What did you do?). Market research is a prerequisite to effective communication and outreach.

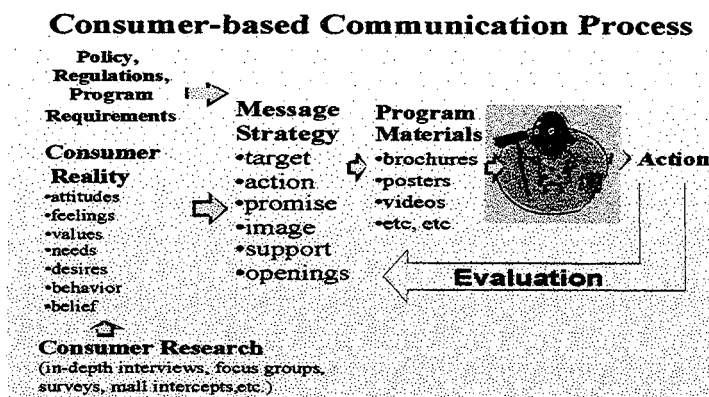
Market research is a discipline that has developed to meet the information needs of program developers. Market research is different from much research that is done for academic or scientific purposes. Market research is designed to help program designers make decisions. It is not designed to determine “causality” or prove theories. Those trained under the scientific or academic model may perceive market research as being “bad” research. It is not bad research – it is different research that meets program designers’ needs. In fact, the use of market research helps commercial organizations make billion-dollar decisions every day.

There are many ways to conduct market research. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, are invaluable for understanding how audiences think. Tracking surveys, help to determine whether the program is moving in the right direction. Since marketing research is different from many other kinds of research, it is important to work with trained communication researchers. Audiences cannot tell you how to communicate with them. Trained communication researchers must extract values, needs, wants, barriers, etc. from the consumers’ stories about their lives.

## Consumer-Based Communications

*Consumer-based communications (CBC)* is the process for developing effective messages for target audiences. As shown in Figure 1, the CBC process is intended to transform information about the issue or program along with other empirical evidence into message strategies that are relevant to the reality of the consumers in the target audience.

Figure 1



The core of this approach is consumer research conducted to understand the consumer's reality. CBC poses a series of strategic questions whose answers, based on consumer research, lead to communications that are relevant, meaningful, and compelling to the audience. The immediate result of the CBC process is a strategy statement — a few pages that lay out who the target consumer is, what action should be taken, what to promise and how to make the promise credible, how and when to reach the consumer, and what image to convey.

This strategy statement then guides the execution (e.g., format, text, design, graphics) of *all* communication and outreach efforts, be they public relations, community outreach, mass media, direct marketing, media advocacy, skills-building, creating environments supportive of behavior change, or interpersonal influence. It identifies the most important "levers" for contact with the consumer. Everyone from creative specialists through management and program personnel can use the strategy statement as a touchstone to guide and judge the effectiveness of their efforts.

The core questions around which the CBC process unfolds are best answered with **solid consumer research and disciplined creativity**, usually in a facilitated work group of people who have diverse knowledge, talents and skills and who will be responsible for the program. The work group meets after it has answered the questions individually, based on available research. Then answers to the questions are "juggled in the air" and changed until they fit with each other as a consistent and coherent whole. Over time, consumers change, and answers to the questions should be continually reviewed and updated.

The following sections describe the strategic questions posed by the CBC process. Aspects of the National Cancer Institute's 5 A Day for Better Health media program, a nutrition education campaign to increase consumption of fruit and vegetables, are used for illustration.



## The Consumer-Based Communication Process

The CBC process consists of six interrelated questions.

### 1. Who are the target consumers and what are they like?

To answer this question one must do empirical research on consumers to describe possible consumer targets, and then one must **select** the consumer segment most likely to achieve the greatest gains toward the public health objective. Target selection is based on several factors:

- **size of the consumer segment** (e.g., how many people are we trying to reach)
- degree to which the consumer segment is in need or would benefit from the behavior change (e.g., most at risk)
- extent to which the consumer segment is reachable with available resources (accessibility)
- extent to which the consumer segment is likely to respond to communication (responsiveness).

A variety of both quantitative and qualitative data sources can help describe and select the target consumer segment. In the beginning, it is more important to understand in-depth who the consumer is. This can be done through qualitative research, in-depth personal discussions or focus groups. The formality of the qualitative research design is less important than the ability of the researchers to **listen** to consumers and see the world through their eyes. The consumer is never “wrong” – what they think, see and believe is the reality within which messages must be developed.

For a message to be relevant and effective it must be **highly personal**; the receiver must be described as a person, not as a population or statistic (e.g., low income yet working, below 250% above poverty level, migrant workers). The strength of qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews is that they provide an in-depth understanding of the target audience as well as critical insights into current consumer actions specifically related to desired behaviors. A thorough understanding of the target provides the basis for answering the other CBC questions.

The target consumer should be specific and vivid regarding such things as how they go to work, how they spend their leisure time, and what sections of the newspaper they read.

What's important to this person? What are the person's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about their children, going to get health care, the medical system, and the behavior change, its benefits and barriers? What can motivate this person to do something

differently? *Most importantly, an understanding of the consumer's current behavior process must be developed – a "map" of the steps they take along the way to or from the behavior of interest.* For example, what are the actual steps consumers have taken before to obtain health coverage for their children?

Well-described specific targets help to focus efforts where they will be most effective. This is a particularly useful point for social initiatives like Covering Kids, in which resources may be limited. Organizations with fewer resources must deploy them more wisely.

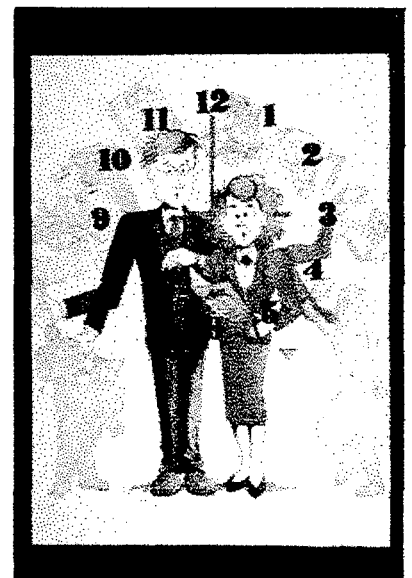
It is not always easy to follow this advice, since, by concentrating resources on one target, others will be missed. This is a common concern among public officials who believe that the mandate to serve "the public" means the impossible task of reaching and persuading everyone at once. Also, it is important to consider the competing interests of the multiple constituencies with which many agencies and groups must interact (e.g., Medicaid community, state legislators, special interest groups). Conscious target selection can maximize impact. When resources permit, a communication program can develop different strategies to meet the needs of diverse constituencies.

After extensive research the 5 A Day media program selected a target audience of people who reported eating 2-3 servings of fruits and vegetables a day and were also trying to eat more. They represented a large and growing number of consumers predisposed to adopt the new behavior – eating 4 to 5 servings a day – and likely to influence others to change their behavior. They also were more likely than others to have children, secondary targets of change efforts. One might have targeted people who eat fewer servings of fruits and vegetables, a more needy group. However, the decision was made to work with momentum for impact. **The ability to show results also enhances the viability of the program.** Other audiences targeted with different strategies can be added later.

According to national consumer surveys, the 5 A Day target consumer was more likely to:

- *be between the ages of 25-55*
- *have a busy, hectic lifestyle*
- *"cut corners" in meal preparation*
- *value convenience in selecting and preparing foods*
- *have health oriented knowledge and attitudes about diet*
- *be concerned about losing weight*
- *see cancer as the health problem to be most concerned about*
- *watch local news, news interview shows and prime time movies*
- *listen to soft rock, classic rock, easy listening and country and western radio.*

### 5 A Day Target Audience



It is helpful to use the consumer data to personify the target consumer, giving him or her a name and a biography. The above information was used to construct a portrait of the 5 A Day target audience — including an illustrator's rendering of it — that the entire planning team discussed and understood. This process helps the team to become immersed in the consumer's reality.

## **2. What *action* should the consumer *take* as a direct result of the message?**

This question aims at choosing the **consumer action** that results from the communication. This action may differ from the program objective (e.g., enrolling kids, simplification of the enrollment process, streamlining program options). The program objectives are based upon problem identification, policy analysis, and population studies. The "science" may say people should enroll their kids in health care coverage. But just telling people to do that ignores where they are coming from and/or how they can get to the recommended behavior.

As mentioned, any behavior consists of a series of steps which lead to that behavior. Various models for consumer behavior processes exist. Since each behavior differs, the model — or map — must be adapted to each situation. By combining behavior models with consumer research that shows where the target "is" on the map — as well as the mental processes, competitors, benefits, and barriers that comprise its terrain — the **specific action** prompted by the message can be located.

A consumer map can help to identify those points in the behavior process where consumers pull away from the recommended objective (e.g., enroll your child) and move toward another behavior (e.g., use the emergency room). For example, in the 5 A Day program, some consumers could not find the fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator and therefore found it easier to munch from a bowl of potato chips on a counter top.

Having mapped out the behavior process, the question becomes **What is the consumer doing now, instead of the desired behavior?** That action is the **competitive behavior** — the behavior that marketers want to replace. Answers from consumer research help formulate the intermediate steps that stand between where the consumer currently is and where marketers want the consumer to be. Consumer behavior models help determine which intermediate steps should be changed for greatest impact. Those intermediate steps then become potential candidates for the communication "**action**."

Different **competitive behaviors** (e.g., using emergency services versus home treatment) may suggest different types of messages even when the **desired action is the same**.

Continuing the 5 A Day example, the communication action might be:

*Stock a bowl of fruits and vegetables on the kitchen counter, instead of storing them in the refrigerator.*

An example of the same communication action with a different competitive behavior would be:

*Stock a bowl of fruits and vegetables on the kitchen counter, instead of a bowl of chips.*

These two communication action statements would generate very different message strategies.

Mapping the consumer behavior process and identifying points at which barriers or competing behaviors occur can suggest a variety of opportunities where a communication effort can and cannot lead to the desired behavior change. Often other types of efforts besides communications are needed. For example, if people do not eat fruits and vegetables with lunch because they are not readily available (as in some areas), communication about "eating more for lunch" is not appropriate. Similarly, if Covering Kids target consumers have had coverage for their children but could not obtain access to medical care, then communicating the benefits of coverage may not be an appropriate strategy. Be realistic about who the target is, and what a communication effort can achieve.

Mapping behavior may also identify multiple points for multiple messages. For example, there may be good communication opportunities in the supermarket to encourage the consumer to try the new pre-cut carrot sticks (instead of peeling, cutting, and often giving up on carrots) as well as on the refrigerator door to remember to snack on the pre-cut carrot sticks inside.

By examining previous experience, theoretical considerations, consumer research, resources available for the project, and the answers to the other five questions, the team will start to focus on the action in the process that appears most important to the consumer's current reality and most susceptible to influence by a communications effort.

Based on such considerations, the 5 A Day team mapped scenarios in which people might buy, serve, or eat fruits and vegetables. It became apparent that low top-of-mind awareness, physical invisibility, and perceived amount of effort and time posed obstacles to the target's positive intentions and preferences for fruits and vegetables over faster, less nutritious foods. The target audience was very much driven by a perceived scarcity of time. Hence, the team set the following action:

*Add two servings of fruits and vegetables "the easy way" instead of "the hard way."*

Finally, the action sets the objectives against which to measure success. If the purpose is to get consumers to add two servings daily in "easier ways," then a variety of steps along the way to this objective can be measured, such as changes in awareness and perceptions of "easy" and "hard" ways to add fruits and vegetables. Reported willingness and efforts to make these changes can also be measured. Immediate changes in the number of people eating five fruits and vegetables a day were not expected. Yet, according to the USDA, consumption among adults increased significantly within 3 years. However, expectations for changes in incidence of diet-related cancers (the real purpose of a public health campaign) would not be realistic, because such change involves many more variables and would not appear for decades.

### **3. What reward should the message promise the consumer?**

This question focuses the team on exactly which rewards the target consumer might find most appealing and motivating toward behavior change. A **consumer reward** is a benefit in the immediate future that the consumer expects to gain through the action. It is subjective – and not limited to scientific facts or other objective realities; however, it must exist in the mind of the consumer. Often, this is a reward the consumer dispenses to him- or herself.

The reward connects the consumer to the desired action. Two questions help to identify aspects of the consumer and the action that might match each other.

- **What in the consumer's life motivates his or her behavior?**
- **What is there among the attributes of the new action that might satisfy those motivations better than the current behavior?**

For 5 A Day, research showed several pertinent motives, such as controlling one's weight, looking good, feeling healthy, feeling virtuous, and feeling in control of one's time, along with health benefits. For many people, the great taste of fruit or vegetable dishes, the convenience of consuming them, or being able to eat nutritiously while "on the run," were much more motivating rewards than appeals based on their ability to reduce the risk of disease.

The creative exercise of linking consumer needs with attributes of the action may suggest several possible rewards. Choosing one reward will provide greater impact for the campaign. It increases repetition of the message and reduces potential confusion. Once the reward has been identified, it must be connected with the action in the consumer's mind via communications. The consumer, not the message, must make the connection between the action and the reward; the message need never mention the connection explicitly. The reward must be strong enough to overcome the barriers or costs of changing the behavior.

Again, in the 5 A Day media program, research showed that most members of the target group knew they needed more fruits and vegetables, but not how many. They also thought that consuming more fruits and vegetables required too much time to acquire and prepare them. And their sense of time scarcity seemed to drive their lives. Hence, the communication opportunity was to make them aware that (1) they needed to add *only* two servings a day to their routine — a specific, manageable goal, and (2) they could do so in a way that gained them some control over their time, which was their greatest perceived need. The overall “**promise statement**” thus became:

*If I (consumer) add two servings of fruits and vegetables the easy way (new action) **instead of** making it hard (old action), then I will feel relieved and more in control of my life (reward).*

This illustrates a useful format for describing your message: If I (action) then I will (reward). Here the “I” is the target consumer from whose perspective the promise is seen.

Creating and maintaining “fair exchanges” is the heart of marketing. However, it may not always be easy to identify a reward that consumers feel is commensurate with the cost of changing their behavior. At times it may be impossible. People with low incomes, for example, may be focused on more urgent needs such as food and shelter. Pressing on with a message that is not in tune with these people’s realities may be seen as insensitive to consumer needs and undermine the credibility of the source. There the wise social marketer and outreach team may choose to invest in developing the market (or community) for the long term. In low-income communities, one might help the consumers to identify and satisfy their most immediate needs. In this respect, community development and empowerment strategies must be part of the social marketer’s toolbox.

Though rewards are “in the consumer’s mind,” they must be reinforced by the actual experiences that accompany the behavior change. This is where marketers typically turn to such strategies as developing social support networks (e.g., recruiting volunteers to help fill out applications), modifying environments to provide positive feedback (e.g., training for front line staff who handle intake), and teaching people self-reinforcement techniques (e.g., on-site messages or follow-up to remind consumers why they are doing this). Such activities help the target confirm that the behavior change is positive and sustainable.

#### **4. How will the promise be supported to make it credible?**

It is one thing to promise the consumer a worthwhile reward; it is another to make the promise credible. Support can come from relevant *information* about the behavior and from how the message is presented — its *execution*.



**Informational support** can include scientific facts about the recommended behavior change, and must be important, understandable, and believable to the target, as well as unique to the new or recommended behavior versus its competitors. A thoroughly research-based description of the target will again prove its value by providing information on the relevance and believability of such facts. Remember, the promise is supported only if it does so in the mind of the consumer.

While facts and data are often the first place social programs look for support, they may not be the best place. **Emotional support** is often quite persuasive. In the 5 A Day campaign for example, food is an emotion-laden area. The 5 A Day promise could have been supported with information about how increasing daily fruit and vegetable consumption can reduce one's risk of cancer. But appetite appeal demonstrations were the crucial elements that reinforced the "great taste" message and overcame a strong barrier to trial behavior. When such demonstrations also include opportunities for the target to see or experience the rewards, they can be powerful tools for behavior change.

The issues around children's health, family love and parental and social responsibility for children can be extremely emotional. Understanding how Covering Kids consumers define and feel about these areas will be crucial to successfully designing powerful messages that motivate and reinforce behavior change.

The most effective messages are executed with graphic illustrations, stories, testimonials, slice-of-life dramas and comical presentations that bring facts or feelings to life. Role models and spokespersons can demonstrate the behavior, helping the consumers master the new behavior with confidence. Role models that look, dress, talk and behave like the target audience while delivering the message influence credibility. The music, colors, background, design, typeface, and paper stock — all the visual and auditory cues evident to the target — are opportunities to provide support (or if done haphazardly — to take away from support.)

In the 5 A Day campaign, support for the promised reward of "feeling relieved and more in control of my life" occurs in what is said and shown, as well as *how* it is said in shown. In consumer terms, the support fills in a "because" in the promise statement:

*If I (consumer) add two servings of fruits and vegetables the easy way (new action) instead of making it hard (old action), then I will feel relieved and more in control of my life (reward) because*

- *People I respect (models and spokespersons) who lead busy lives like me can do it*
- *I have seen and tasted lots of quick and easy ways to add fruits and vegetables to my diet*
- *Adding two more servings — not five — is quite reasonable*

## 5. What communication openings and vehicles should be used?

Consumers do not passively await the message; on the contrary, habits such as selective inattention and selective perception often close their minds to the message. Yet when they are in the right frame of mind, consumers are more apt to notice, attend to, and act favorably on messages that meet their needs. So, CBC seeks the **communication openings** in the person's life and **vehicles** that best fit through those openings.

The **openings** are the *times, places, and circumstances in which the target consumer is most receptive to the message*. The times may be parts of the day, week, or year. From the consumer's point of view, they may be wake up time, commuting time, lunch break, family regrouping time, starting a new school year time, paying the bills time, etc. The places may be those where the consumer may be thinking about or desiring the reward, such as emergency rooms, social service agencies, schools, health fairs, and at drug stores when purchasing over-the-counter medications for children. The circumstances are situations that open the consumer to messages about the behavior, such as when the child is sick, when parents must document vaccines for school attendance, or are seeking out other social services. Research for 5 A Day revealed that consumers are more likely to be thinking about preparing meals during "transitions," such as on the way home from work. Research also indicated that the 5 A Day target consumer often made food choices at the store, and not from a grocery list.

**Vehicles** convey messages. They may go through traditional media along established channels like network TV or newspapers. Or they may go through consumer openings in other ways, such as promotions (point-of-choice materials or handbills), direct mail, pharmacy counter-top displays, public relations (video news releases to local stations, talk shows on family issues), packaging, and non-traditional media (refrigerator magnets, place mats, church fliers). The target description should reveal what message vehicles the target consumer chooses during the course of the day or week or month. The key question is "When and where can the consumer receive it best?" and not "When and where can we send it out?"

Social programs have tended to rely on the same vehicles regardless of their ability to deliver the message. For example, brochures are an integral part of most public campaigns whether or not the audience can read them or there is a means to distribute them to the audience.

Media programs have relied heavily on public service announcements (PSAs). Media channels donate time and space as they see fit for exposing PSAs. Such time and space rarely coincides with the most effective openings for large and likely target audiences. Serious consideration should be given to sparing the investment in developing and distributing PSAs if their effective exposure to target audiences cannot be assured – **"free" media time and space may be too costly for what they deliver.**

Using some paid advertising time and space is another way to penetrate consumer openings. Often, a media campaign is intended to *remind* or *reinforce*; this may require high frequency of exposure to be effective. This need not always be through "big" media, such as television; it can be through "small" media that are closer to pertinent consumer openings, such as radio, billboards, school book covers, parent materials distributed through the schools, posters, shelf labels, place mats etc. Paid advertising, especially in broadcast media, may also be helpful in reaching the so-called hard-to-reach audiences, such as non-whites and lower-income people. These audiences are much heavier users of broadcast media than the general public; they also have distinctive program preferences. They really are not difficult for commercial advertisers to reach.

A combination of communication vehicles, along with systematic and carefully crafted interpersonal support, is usually more effective than any single tactic. A consistent and synergistic communications program that is carefully planned to exploit the consumer openings is more likely to break through the clutter of competing messages and create a single, compelling image. In the 5 A Day program, examples of **openings and vehicles** included:

*Live announcer copy for "drive time" radio*

*Advertisements at transit stops and buses*

*Point-of-purchase programs at grocery stores*

## **6. What image should distinguish the action?**

All but the newest behaviors have a pre-existing **image** — a set of expectations and associated feelings among consumers. Images allow consumers to economize their processing of information. They provide reassurance in a changing environment. Over all, the image of the desired action answers the consumer's implicit question: "Is this action something that I can see myself doing? Are they talking to me?"

The image comes mainly from: (1) the physical properties or functional consequences of the action and (2) communications about it, such as what peers, role models, authorities, or other influencers say, do, and show. Any communication will project a particular image of the desired action.

Developing or changing an action's image involves creating a look and feel for the action that makes it accessible, inviting, distinctive, and compelling to consumers. The image guides the style and tone of the communication program. The Government Printing Office recognized this when it rejected "slick" materials developed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to convey safety messages to young drivers because they lacked the "government look." (Understanding its young audience, the NHTSA realized that the "government look" was exactly the "image" they were trying to avoid).

Failure to manage the action's image would squander a valuable opportunity. Any planned image will give a consistent look and feel to *all the communications*, for both the team and the target. A truly compelling image will reinforce the other components of the strategy by clarifying how to execute all the messages: music, persons or characters shown, tempo, colors, background, design, typeface, paper stock, spokespersons, logo, slogan, and the like. The “non-verbal and non-rational” associations consumers have toward elements of the creative execution must be managed. Otherwise these elements can cause the consumer to bypass logical processing, and create an irrelevant and/or unappealing image of the action that is very hard to dislodge.

Covering Kids efforts must incorporate the current image of what it is offering (e.g., health insurance for children) and the desired behavior changes (e.g., enrolling their children) among its various “consumers.” Do parents perceive coverage as impossible to get? Or not worth the effort? Do state legislators see it as a program to improve the health of their children? Or as a costly program the state cannot afford?

In the private sector, consumer research is done to understand and guide the image of particular behaviors or product purchases. Focus groups and surveys ask people to characterize a product (or behavior) in personal terms, such as *what would this brand or behavior wear to a party? What car would the brand or behavior drive to the party, who else is with this brand or behavior at the party? What personal adjectives characterize this brand or behavior and its competitors?* Target consumers are often asked to rate the brand or behavior and its competitors, as well as themselves, on a list of personality adjectives. The resulting image profiles are then compared to determine a credible, accessible, appealing image — in a few adjectives — that works well with the target, reward, supports, openings, and vehicles selected.

Based on such data the consumer for the 5 A Day program saw people who eat 5 fruits and vegetables a day as more sensible, disciplined, healthy, wholesome, and fit than they saw themselves — all positive traits. However, they also saw the 5 A Day eater as less capable, dependable, gentle, and friendly than themselves. This suggested that the target audience may think they would have to pay a cost to fit into the 5 A Day regime — the 5 A Day action (adding two servings) would only appeal to those willing to give up being “capable, dependable, gentle, and friendly” to become “smarter, healthy, and fit.” To avoid reinforcing that less than positive image, the team combined the target's positive self-perceptions with their perceptions of people who eat 5 fruits and vegetables a day (balancing the positive with the negative.) The desired **image** became:

*Responsible (dependable, capable); balanced (healthy and smart, but not compulsive); and warm (friendly, gentle).*

All 5 A Day communications are constructed with a tone and style that fit this image. The 5 A Day target consumers takes in messages at a quick, barely controlled pace, as they move through a hectic day. So, every piece of communication must look and feel quick but manageable — and warm. Long recipes are out. So, too, are long or complicated phrases. Color and musical implications are similar: bright, warm colors and upbeat and unfrenzied tempos. Anything that smacks of leisure, discipline, or egotism does not belong.

Every execution of the message strategy is an opportunity to reinforce or change the image. Ideally, each execution will project the same image. Then all communications, past, present and future, as well as simultaneous, can reinforce one another. This is especially important with a small budget. Once an image for the message is crafted, it should be used consistently and maintained over time. Executions, of course, can change to maintain interest, just as a person changes clothes but remains the same person. The new behavior — with a strong, accessible, appealing image — can look different from — and better than — competing behaviors. For some messages, image can become the most durable, persuasive element in the whole message strategy.

### **Looking at the Whole Strategy**

While CBC questions are presented here in a stepped approach, the process is an iterative, or repetitive, one to permit the strategists to attain consistency among the various answers. At times it may be necessary to go back and change one of the answers because it does not fit the others. Indeed, the questions need not be answered in the order they are presented above. Any further consideration of one aspect of the strategy has implications for all of the others.

The result of the CBC process is a strategy statement or "creative brief" that serves as the foundation for all communication. Because the strategy statement is based on the realities of the consumer, it guides communication efforts to be relevant to the target audience. Since it focuses all of the team's creative efforts on finding ways to craft and deliver the same message, instead of finding new messages, it inspires and guides originality. And because each strategic question reinforces the others it maximizes impact.

Two practical notes: first, preconceptions, past campaigns, commitments, previously developed materials, and mandates means that CBC rarely starts from scratch. The process of addressing the strategic questions can still provide a better basis for understanding and evaluating the results of the current communication effort. And it can prepare the team to make needed adjustments in the program as opportunities arise. It can even confirm the wisdom of the current approach!

Second, research resources available for social programs often are directed toward activities that do not provide the necessary answers about consumers and effective

communication. Program staff, communication professionals and social marketers need to work together to redirect research dollars into marketing research that supports effective communication efforts and other interventions. Regardless, it is essential that the team raises these strategic questions and addresses them with the best information available. This allows the team to confront its assumptions and to consider different ones as they explore alternative visions of the consumer. It also allows them to identify research needs and update the strategy over time as better information becomes available.

In real life, information is never 100% complete. Since the consumer world is always changing, the researcher is always learning. As consumer-based communication efforts become more common in social program practice, more research dollars will likely be available for understanding the realities of priority consumers. Covering Kids is one such example. Covering Kids provides the opportunity to really LISTEN to consumers and to learn how to see the world through their eyes. This is an opportunity that should not be missed.



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