

research update

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How Health Promoters Can Compete with Commercial Advertising



Commercial ads that refer to physical activity when trying to sell a product are much more common than publicly funded ads that promote physical activity. And it's very likely that the commercial ads take attention away from the publicly funded ads.

How can health promoters counter this trend and increase people's attraction to public health promotion ads?

AD EXECUTION

Execution elements are critical to the success of an ad (Pieters & Wedel, 2004). Execution refers to how ads are presented, and execution elements include things like pictures, text (ad copy) and fonts.

Using eye-tracking equipment, Pieters and Wedel (2004) examined which parts of an ad and which characteristics of a person most influenced the attention paid to an ad. They found that factors such as brand, pictures and text accounted for three times more of the attention paid to ads than did person factors such as motivation or interest.

WHAT WE DID

We conducted a content analysis of magazine advertising related to physical activity. We chose magazines because they are one of the oldest media and still one of the most popular media for advertising. Also, little is known about how health promoters use magazine ads to encourage physical activity.

We looked for physical activity-related ads in all 2005 issues of high-circulation Canadian English-language magazines. These magazines included *Maclean's*, *Reader's Digest* (Canadian edition), *Chatelaine*, *Time* (Canadian edition), *Canadian Living*, *Homemakers*, *Flare* and *Report on Business*.

We included any ad that contained a representation or mention of physical activity, whether the purpose of the ad was to promote physical activity or to sell a commercial product.

We then analyzed the execution elements in these ads. Some of the execution elements we looked for were:

- 1) **Presence of pictures and text.** Having both allows the reader to take in more information (Stammerjohan, Wood, Change, & Thorson, 2005).
- 2) **Colour or black and white pictures.** If you have a lot of text, colour pictures can overwhelm. If you want consumers to ignore your text (e.g. the "fine print" in drug ads), use colour pictures. If you want them to read your message, opt for black and white (Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1995).
- 3) **Number of lines of text.** People are more likely to read all the text if there are fewer than three lines. If there are more than 15 lines, it's very unlikely that people will read all the text in the ad (Rayner, Rotello, Stewart, Keir, & Duffy, 2001).

WHAT WE FOUND

We found 57 ads with some representation of physical activity. These ads comprised six per cent of all the ads in the magazines.

We found five general types of physical activity ads:

- Publicly funded health promotion ads (2)
- Commercial advertisers using fitness or sport images to

sell a product whether it was an exercise product such as sports shoes or a non-exercise product such as yogourt (33)

- Commercial advertisers promoting fitness (11)
- Corporate sponsored event (8)
- Unclassifiable (3)

In terms of execution elements:

- Every ad contained both pictures and text.
- One-third of the 33 commercial ads that used physical activity to sell a product had fewer than three lines of text. Fifty-six per cent had between three and 14 lines of text. None highlighted the benefits of physical activity.
- Both of the two public health promotion ads had more than 15 lines of text and colour pictures.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Commercial efforts dominate the physical activity-related ads that many magazine readers see. Commercial ads are the most numerous, and they contain the greatest number of features that are thought to attract more attention from readers.

Many commercial ads use physical activity images only as a backdrop for selling a product or service, many of which have nothing to do with physical activity. However, commercial ads routinely imply that products such as a new food type are somehow associated with the positive results of physical activity.

What is lost in all this is the active living message promoted by public health agencies. The few public sector efforts to promote physically active lifestyles are in danger of being lost among all the commercial ads.

Health promoters might try to use more effective execution elements in their advertising. For example, they could highlight the benefits of being physically active in fewer lines of larger text. They should also keep in mind that the use of colour pictures may make it less likely that people will read all the text.

This research shows that we need to examine the many types of physical activity-related ads that compete for the attention of Canadians. The dominant images and messages are intended to encourage consumption as much as physical activity. The long-term effect of this is not known.

Tanya R. Berry, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Alberta Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. Ron E. McCarville, PhD, Professor, University of Waterloo Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies. Ryan E. Rhodes, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Victoria School of Physical Education.

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