

Lessons Learned from *VERB*TM:

Findings for General Market Tweens and their Parents

Formative audience testing has been a critical component of the *VERB*TM campaign's development, driving the content, tone, and implementation of *VERB*. Before new advertising is launched, concept testing is conducted to validate the communication strategy and aid in the selecting concepts that resonate strongly with the target audience and ensure messages are acceptable, understandable, culturally appropriate, and motivating. After an advertising concept is produced, message testing is conducted to explore the target audience's reactions to specific concepts; to determine which messages the target audience finds understandable, relevant, appealing, unique, and motivating; and to identify anything that is confusing or controversial. Though much of this information gleaned from the testing is specific to each ad, these data contain a wealth of valuable information about key target audiences — tweens and parents — that can be used to help shape other health communication efforts on physical activity.

Two reviewers from the *VERB* evaluation team independently analyzed qualitative investigation reports from the concept and message testing to identify recurrent themes and recommendations within each audience segment. In this report, findings will be presented for the general market campaign targeting tweens and their parents. Health communication practitioners can use these findings to assist them in developing more effective and appropriate messages that encourage physical activity among youth.

Findings for General Market Tweens and their Parents

The following thematic summary is generated from focus groups, dyadic interviews, and individual interviews with children aged 9–13 years and their parents. The interviews were conducted as part of the message development of the *VERB* campaign. These themes were derived from the reports from 17 rounds of qualitative data collection conducted between June 2002 and September 2005. The reports covered both concept and message testing for ads and promotions promoting physical activity among tweens (children aged 9–13 years) and their parents and from consumer testing to develop the campaign's tween-targeted Web site. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics and methods for each investigation. Participants took part in focus groups or in-depth interviews in which they shared their responses to television, print and radio ads, promotional ideas, or the Web site. These reports were analyzed for their overarching themes and concepts and are presented here. It is our hope that these findings can be used to develop concepts and messages that promote physical activity

among tweens and their parents, leading to more tween-centric messaging and effective physical activity promotion.

Please Note: Qualitative techniques have certain limitations. These investigations are exploratory in nature; that is, they are used to stimulate dialogue, elicit a range of responses, generate ideas, and drive message development. Because of the limited number of participants, unstructured questioning procedures, and the potential for one respondent's opinions to influence those of others, the formative investigation findings reported here should not be considered conclusive or generalizable. The findings contained in this report represent insights gleaned from four years of qualitative investigations for developing physical activity campaign messages. When applying them within your community and situation, the findings should be viewed within the context of their limitations.

Table 1. Methods & Participant Characteristics

Location & Date	Method*	Number of Interviews or Groups Conducted	Target Audience	Length of Interview/focus group
Englewood, NJ Atlanta, GA June 2002	Friendship pair in-depth interview	35 pairs	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Recruited from across the US June 2002	Telephone focus group	11	Moms of 4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
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Oak Park, IL September 2002	In-depth Interview	15	6 th & 7 th grade boys & girls	60 minutes
	Focus group	9	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes

Location & Date	Method*	Number of Interviews or Groups Conducted	Target Audience	Length of Interview/focus group
Oak Park, IL October 2002	In-depth interview	12	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	45 minutes
	Focus group	12	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Atlanta, GA December 2002	In-depth interview	11	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	45 minutes
	Focus group	9	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
	Focus Group	4	Moms of 4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Houston, TX Los Angeles, CA April 2003	In-depth interviews/ ethnographies	11	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	2 hours
	Mini focus group	5	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	90 minutes
Chicago, IL New York, NY April 2003	Mini focus group	6	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	90 minutes
		~40	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	Varied
		~40	Parents of girls & boys in grades 4 - 7	Varied
San Francisco, CA April-May 2003	In-depth interview	4	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minute
	Mini focus group	10	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
	Mini focus group	4	Moms of 4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes

Location & Date	Method*	Number of Interviews or Groups Conducted	Target Audience	Length of Interview/focus group
Chicago, IL August 2003	In-depth interview	18	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Chicago, IL July 2003	In-depth interview	8	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
	Mini focus group	12	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
	Mini focus group	8	Moms of 4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Oak Park, IL February 2004	Mini focus group	6	4 th – 8 th grade girls & boys	75 minutes
Oak Park, IL February 2004	In-depth interview	12	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	45 minutes
	Triad interviews	4	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Chicago, IL April 2004	Focus group	6	5 th – 8 th grader girls & boys	60 minutes
Chicago, IL New York, NY July 2005	Friendship pair in-depth interview	14	4 th – 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes
Chicago, IL August 2005	Mini focus group	8	4 th – 8 th grade girls & boys	75 minutes

Location & Date	Method*	Number of Interviews or Groups Conducted	Target Audience	Length of Interview/focus group
Chicago, IL September 2005	Focus group	4	6 th & 7 th grade girls & boys	60 minutes

* Focus groups comprised at least 6 participants; mini-focus groups comprised 4 participants; and in-depth interviews were conducted one-on-one, or in pairs or triads.

Thematic Summary of General Market Tweens and Their Parents Findings

- ✓ **Physical Activity messages should generate feelings of happiness, fun, and the excitement of being active.**

Messages should appeal to a broad range of youth, including low active and high or moderately active youth. Messages should promote the behaviors sought by a physical activity campaign for youth and use images and audio cues that convey happiness, excitement, and fun about being physically active. Mothers responded favorably to messages about physical activity's contribution to a child's success in other areas of life.

- ✓ **Ads should feature a mixture of friendly competitive sports and individual physical activities.**

Showing just competitive sports leaves low active youth feeling that physical activity is not for them. Friendly neighborhood pick-up games appeal to all youth. Depicting innovative activities or creating new activities entices tweens to try being physically active. Showing a variety of physical activities allows children to express their own personalities and creativity through physical activity. Parents of tweens were especially supportive of the concept of "try new activities" so that their children don't resort to sedentary indoor activities if they get bored with one or two outdoor activities. Ads also should depict activities that have year-round appeal.

- ✓ **Include in messages the range of benefits that physical activity provides.**

Mothers responded favorably to ads that demonstrated the relationship between physical activity and the child's future success and its positive impact on the physical, mental, academic, social, and moral development of youth. Moms responded favorably to messages which noted that physical activity helps build self-esteem and leadership skills.

✓ **Ads should create a feeling of inclusion.**

Showing tweens of different races, genders, body types, and of different abilities, including people with disabilities, conveys that being physically active is fun for everyone. Moms of tweens preferred ads that showed parents and families being active together, if one of the campaign's goals is to get parents to be active with their children. Moms preferred ads which included fathers as well as mothers, to indicate their belief that getting tweens physically active is the responsibility of both parents. Moms suggested that depicting being active together as a family reinforces and supports increased tween physical activity by role modeling and making this a family priority that everyone is part of. They also pointed out that everyone benefits from this strategy in terms of improved communications, family dynamics, and physical health.

✓ **Be careful to avoid gender bias.**

Ads that show both boys and girls actively playing together are more likely to appeal to both genders. Avoid depicting physical activities generally associated with boys by using only male actors in the ads; similarly, avoid depicting physical activities typically associated with girls using only female actors. For team sports, show friendly neighborhood co-ed teams playing. Even a perception of gender bias may distract the audience from the intended message. Differences do exist between tween girls and boys, and these differences are reflected in their preferences for words, images, and activities. It is important to understand these differences and to seek a middle ground whenever possible.

✓ **For an ad to be effective, all characteristics and elements of the ad must reinforce the intended message and behaviors.**

As physical activity is fun, the narrative, images, logo, music, and colors should all be *positive, upbeat, and bright*. Tweens responded well to a positive message (try this) and less well to a negative message (don't do this). Show kids that are happy and having fun. Tweens also responded well to ads that showed different high energy level activities. Tweens want to hear real kids speaking, not just adults. The voiceover should convey high energy and excitement, matching the ad's visual cues.

- ✓ **Tweens and parents are comforted when they are made aware that they are “not alone.”**

Tweens and parents responded favorably to ads that showed other people experiencing similar barriers to being physically active, such as fatigue, guilt, or feeling unsure of themselves. Tweens and parents believed they were more likely to try a new physical activity if they knew that there are others who felt as they have, and have succeeded in having fun by trying something that is physically active and fun.

- ✓ **Messages should convey a single unified thought.**

Materials that promote physical activity should clearly communicate the intended message, without bearing resemblance or alluding to other messages. Instead messages should be singular, presenting a unified thought supported by images and sounds.

- ✓ **An ounce of guilt can be a powerful motivator for parents.**

Parents want to do what is best for their children. Moms expressed that ads that introduce a bit of guilt (e.g., Should I be doing more for my child?) motivate them into action. Too much guilt, however, is counterproductive.

- ✓ **The choice of words and names is extremely important to tweens and moms.**

Words and names should capture present day popular youth culture. Ads should be current and in-the-know, and thus are more likely to be heard, even at the risk of becoming dated within 6–12 months. The language used should be realistic for how moms speak to kids, and how tweens speak to other tweens. Make sure that words in the ads are easy to read (large enough, clear), and that there aren't too many words. Kids may not notice or read the tagline on an ad; so the visual images in the ads must speak for themselves.

- ✓ **Make ads edgy, but not over-the-top.**

Tweens, especially boys, like ads, Web sites, and videos that are edgy. Tween boys respond best to things that they think would be considered edgy among children 2–3 years older than themselves. Tween girls and moms are offended by things that are too irreverent—rude, unsportsmanlike, dangerous looking, trash talk, being mean, showing disregard for public property, being disrespectful or vulgar. Because campaign ads need to address tween boys and girls, and sometimes moms, ads must be edgy, but not too edgy!

- ✓ **Tweens and moms enjoy seeing kids play unsupervised or just for the fun of it.**

This appeals to mom's nostalgia that they could raise their children during the more carefree, innocent days of their youth.

Tweens respond very positively to playing just for the fun of it.

- ✓ **Tween girls and boys, and their moms, want ads to be inspiring.**

Kids respond favorably when ads suggest to them "try your hardest," "believe in yourself" and "never give up." Empowering children and challenging them to visualize their own situations helps tweens, especially low-active tweens, to overcome feeling intimidated by an activity and to try it.

Trying a new activity makes kids feel like they've accomplished something, building confidence and the willingness to keep on trying other things.

Tweens and their moms want to be made to feel like they can do more, reach higher, be more, and try something new. One mom shared that "I've learned to say yes (to my kids), just encouraging them to try new things until they find one that they like."

Tweens also responded positively to ads that showed kids playing and feeling "pumped." Tweens responded favorably to ads that empowered them to visualize their own situations on their own terms. Tweens also responded favorably to ads that suggested that they wouldn't be judged by others and that encouraged self-discovery and their own individuality.

- ✓ **Help moms to avoid over-programming tweens and to overcome barriers.**

Moms are concerned about their children being over-programmed, which taxes tweens and moms, adding to everyone's stress and sense of fatigue. Moms responded favorably to ads that showed flexibility and a range of activities that can be done locally. Moms welcomed information about local activities that were free or at a very low cost.

- ✓ **Ads should show tweens using good judgment.**

Moms responded favorably to ads that depicted tweens using good judgment in dress, playing in safe areas, and respecting property and those around them.

Moms responded negatively to ads that showed activities that tweens might want to imitate that could be dangerous or lead to injury.

✓ **Show “real kids,” not child actors nor drawings of kids.**

Tweens see themselves best in situations where ads that are done with “real kids,” not child actors. Seeing “real kids” having fun being active communicates to tweens that these activities are achievable. Tweens also preferred drawings that looked realistic.

✓ **Celebrities interacting with real kids strengthens ads.**

Tweens liked ads showing celebrities interacting with tweens and depicting physical activity as an integral part of their own lives. Celebrities that come across as genuinely liking and being interested in real kids are a value added to ads. Celebrities talking at tweens (talking heads, or lecturing) are not well received by tweens or moms.

✓ **Avoid ads that appear babyish.**

Tweens are transitioning from childhood into becoming teenagers and young adults. Ads perceived as being babyish do not appeal to tweens. Be careful to select tweens who do not have babyish voices or appearances for campaign ads. It is better to err on the side of more maturity.

✓ **Safety first!**

Showing activities performed safely is important for tween girls and tweens’ moms. Depicting an activity that looks dangerous, like skating on cement without helmets or other safety equipment did not appeal to tween girls and the moms of tween boys and girls.

✓ **Humor can be a powerful aid in selling the message to tweens.**

Tweens respond very positively to humor, especially if it has an imaginative twist or is a bit quirky. Incorporating humor into ads reinforces the message that physical activity is fun.

✓ **Help moms overcome obstacles to their kids being more active.**

Moms identified four obstacles making it difficult for their tweens to be more

active: safety concerns, income constraints, children's feelings of self-doubt ("I can't do it as well as others"), and moms' lack of time and energy.

- ✓ **A tween-friendly Web site can be a powerful tool for recruiting and engaging tweens, for reinforcing messages and for adopting desired behaviors.**

Encourage kids to let their parents know that they're going to visit your Web site. If done somewhat casually, it will be appreciated by parents as supporting their desire to know where their kids are going on the Web site, while not challenging tweens' desire for independence.

It is very important to make the Web site "sticky" without getting tweens glued to it, as that would be counterproductive to the goals of physical activity programs. For a Web site to be "sticky" (grab and keep the attention of tweens), boys are looking for a cool looking and edgy site. Girls want a site to be orderly, neat, and easy to get around as well as cool looking. Be sure to use exciting colors and graphics that have movement and surprises. A Web site needs to have current, upbeat music; have video clips and sound effects; and needs to be updated frequently to keep it fresh and "sticky." Tweens love to personalize things on the Web site, making it take on their own personalities. Always keep in mind that tweens tend to focus on larger visuals in the middle of the screen.

To make Web sites easy to navigate, use standard web conventions like "back" and "forward" buttons, scrolling, and a site map. Adhere to the heuristic that with three clicks, tweens can get anywhere they want to go on the Web site. Provide quick links and downloads. Tweens' attention span is short—if they can't get to the stuff they're interested in quickly, they will go elsewhere.

Use simple, to-the-point descriptors in labeling or naming things (not program jargon). If you use jargon, you have to provide definitions or descriptions for new users, and this makes a site less "sticky." Too much narrative will also drive tweens away.

What tweens seek out first and most frequently are games. Consider building messages and content into games to maximize tweens' exposure. Tweens also respond positively to likeable characters; upbeat music and video clips, especially with celebrities; quizzes and polls; fun facts; ideas about physical activity that will stimulate their own creativity; and features of the month. Tweens respond very positively to challenges, competitions, incentives, and prizes.

Tweens appreciate being able to find things to do locally through the Web site. Their moms really appreciate being able to find information about what is available locally that is either free or low cost, and how to get there.

- ✓ **Incentives and prizes can accelerate market penetration and the intensity with which tweens engage in a campaign or program.**

Prizes or rewards should reinforce the message and new desired behaviors. Both tween girls and boys are really motivated if they have a choice of prizes, and can make a decision about which prize to seek. Small prizes are sufficient to get tween girls' attention. Tween boys are often looking for larger prizes that "make it worth my while." Tweens were concerned that others will "cheat the system," and over time cheating can demoralize those that play it straight. Providing rules that make it hard to cheat and make the contest appear more honest appeals to tweens.