

Social Marketing as a Framework for Youth Physical Activity Initiatives: a 10-Year Retrospective on the Legacy of CDC's VERB Campaign

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Abstract

Purpose of Review In 2002, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched the VERB. *It's what you do!* campaign to increase physical activity among tweens and concomitantly respond to the rise in childhood obesity. This retrospective study summarizes the history of the VERB campaign's social marketing approach and its effectiveness in promoting behavior change in the targeted population. **Recent Findings** The legacy of VERB, which ended in 2006, is discussed, with an emphasis on examining initiatives over the last decade and the degree to which they followed (or did not follow) the structural and thematic lead of the campaign. **Summary** The article ends with suggestions for how VERB still has the potential to inform other social marketing campaigns going forward.

Keywords Social marketing · VERB · CDC · Behavior change · Physical activity · Tweens · Adolescents · Youth · Kids · Campaigns · Communication · Product · Place · Price · Promotion · Exchange · Evaluation

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Introduction

In response to concerns about children's health, notably insufficient levels of physical activity and the emerging epidemic of childhood obesity in the early 2000's, the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched the VERB. *It's what you do!* campaign in 2002 that aimed to help children aged 9–13 years (i.e., tweens) be physically active at recommended levels and maintain those levels as they grew into their teen years. The U.S. Congress funded the campaign for an unprecedented \$339 million, and it ran continuously through fall of 2006. Concerned that implementing a traditional media campaign would be insufficient to produce sustainable behavior change, CDC planners firmly grounded their approach in principles of social marketing—a comprehensive, integrated framework for behavior change built on tenets of commercial marketing [1]. The outcome was positive overall, and since VERB ended, few, if any, public health initiatives have been so thoroughly documented with more than 30 articles and book chapters devoted just to describing the creation, implementation, and evaluation of the campaign. A decade after the conclusion of VERB, this article provides an analysis of its legacy. In the following sections, we review the history of VERB's social marketing approach, examine the influence that VERB has had on other initiatives aimed at increasing physical activity for kids, and offer social marketing lessons that can still be learned from VERB.

VERB History as a Social Marketing Initiative

Obesity among U.S. youth continues to be a pressing national concern. One in six (17%) of U.S. children aged 2–19 are obese [2]. To combat childhood obesity and to have optimal health generally, children need to have a healthy diet [3] and engage in regular physical activity [4]. A 2002 national survey

of children aged 9–13 years showed that 22.6% of U.S. children did not engage in any free-time physical activity outside of school hours [5]. In acknowledgment of an alarming trend at the start of the new millennium, Congress chose to combat the rising obesity epidemic in part by providing CDC with a level of funding unusual in public health. In addition, Congress directed CDC to reach children with the same methods that were used by other top marketers of products to kids. Congressional leaders wanted to test whether a government agency could partner with top marketing agencies to produce a truly inspirational campaign that would be modeled after, and compete successfully with, other tween brands, such as Disney and Nickelodeon. CDC and the marketing agencies planned from the beginning that paid advertising to surround tweens with a positive physical activity message would be a part of VERB, but CDC planners knew that more than just messaging would be required. VERB needed to make attractive offers for opportunities to engage in physical activities, try new activities, and experience the benefits of physical activity in non-competitive environments. The campaign also needed to connect kids to places to be active “the VERB way” through events in communities, programs in schools, and partnerships with youth-serving organizations. To deliver such a broad and comprehensive platform for planning and implementation, CDC adopted a social marketing framework for VERB to guide planners toward a comprehensive and systematic approach for planning and implementation [1].

Key attributes of the social marketing model that were used by VERB planners were (a) audience segmentation, (b) audience research, (c) a marketing mindset, meaning orienting to tweens’ needs and wants and not what planners thought they *should* want, (d) using all of the four Ps of the marketing mix (product, place, price, and promotion), (e) an attractive exchange, and (f) rigorous assessment of results [6••].

For audience segmentation, VERB planners chose tweens as their primary audience because the tween age is when children are starting to make their own lifestyle decisions but are still young enough to be influenced by important adults in their lives. Additionally, tweens become less physically active as they age into their teenage years, increasing the risk for overweight and obesity [7–9]. Within the national tween audience, further segmentation followed for four ethnic or racial groups: American Indian and Alaska Native, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American. Parents of tween and other influencers were targeted as secondary audiences of VERB [10, 11].

CDC conducted extensive audience research to understand tweens’ attitudes, beliefs, motivators, barriers, and influencers of physical activity [12]. Focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic and brand comparisons research were done across the country with both tweens and parents. This led CDC to use a branding approach, and the entire first year of the campaign was dedicated to building the VERB brand [13].

Adopting a marketing mindset can require some mental shifting for public health professionals, who sometimes think that simply telling people what they need to do to be healthy will result in the desired behavior. VERB planners realized they would have to *market* the benefits of physical activity to their target audience rather than just *communicate* reasons for change. They determined that simply relying on print and broadcast advertising, posters, a website, etc. would diminish the chances for sustainable behavior change. The VERB brand was built to market the proposition that physical activity was synonymous with fun, cool, discovery, and being social [13]. The VERB brand and its associated attributes had to make an offer to tweens that choosing to be physically active was of more value than other things they could do with their time. This is a fundamental principle of social marketing. That is, a value exchange exists in which the target audience views that offer as appealing and fair [6••, 14]. They engage in a cost-benefit analysis and must decide that the benefits of doing the behavior have more value than the costs.

The value exchange was brought to life through the marketing mix of product, price, place, and promotion, the centerpiece and engine of any social marketing initiative. At the time of the campaign, thought leaders in social marketing conceptualized *product* as the desired behavior, but social marketers now see the product as the tangible goods and services that are being offered, along with the associated benefits of doing the behavior [15••]. A brand is also considered part of the product strategy [6••]. VERB had multiple tangible goods that ranged from activity kits that were supplied to schools to the popular integrated marketing campaign VERB Yellowball, where 500,000 yellow balls were delivered to tweens at schools, play areas, and recreation centers, with instructions written on the balls to play with the ball, blog about it, and pass it on. VERB’s marketing never included references to health benefits, exercise, physical education, or 60 min a day recommendations, but rather, stressed the play, fun, friendship, and skill development benefits of the product component [1].

Price, which refers to the costs, monetary and non-monetary, associated with doing the behavior, was addressed in VERB with giving tweens tangible rewards such as prizes for logging physical activity as part of an online game, giveaways like hats, wristbands, t-shirts, and physical activity journals. Non-monetary incentives came through the excitement and pride in participating in events sponsored by VERB, such as the SpongeBob SquarePants shows that went to 15 communities, the recognition of reaching physical activity goals through the school activity kits, and the sense of accomplishment associated with trying new skills offered through VERB tours [16].

A VERB *place* strategy was reflected in proactively creating safe environments where tweens could be physically active. For VERB, that meant a backyard, youth-serving

organization, community-based organization, church, park, school, or any other place that provided facilities and year-round or periodic event-based opportunities for tweens to be physically active and have fun [17]. In addition, VERB play spaces were set up at the VERB tour sites, including parks, sporting events, zoos, and summer camps. The VERB Yellowball campaign took play structures to schools along with college students hired to set up in the school gym to engage classes of students in a variety of sports. Another key place strategy was linking tweens to places to play in their communities by having them log onto the VERB website and put in their zip code. Through the zip code link, tweens could easily find venues of interest [18, 19].

VERB planners emphasized the *promotion P*, and many of VERB's resources over the four plus years of the campaign supported the strategy of surrounding tweens with a positive message about physical activity. Elements of that messaging strategy were the development of the VERB brand, producing advertising with professional actors and celebrities, and purchased media on TV, radio, Internet, and multiple magazines aimed at youth, through events and tours and programs designed for schools. During the last 2 years of VERB, partnerships developed with community coalitions that planned VERB-branded events that encouraged physical activity [18, 20].

Constant monitoring of the likability and relevance of the brand through a continuous tracking survey showed that the campaign resonated strongly with tweens [21]. An outcome evaluation, using a telephone survey of tweens and parents conducted annually, revealed that in all 4 years of the campaign, 75% or more tweens were aware of and understood the VERB messages. Furthermore, in 2006, the last year of the campaign, an impressive 28% had unprompted recall of VERB, meaning that when they were asked an opened question about knowledge of any advertising about kids getting physically active, they responded "VERB." A dose-response analysis showed that across all 4 years of the campaign, the more children saw VERB, the more physically active they were [22, 23].

Thus, the main goal of VERB, which was to demonstrate that public health could partner with top marketers to produce a campaign that caught and held children's interest and increased their levels of physical activity, was realized. The branding strategy with resources poured into paid advertising to build and maintain the brand was critically important. Equally vital was using social marketing as the foundational approach to behavior change that inspired tweens to buy what VERB was offering—opportunities and *places* for tweens to be active, in ways they could relate to for an appealing *price* using *products* that were interesting and useful. CDC planners hoped that VERB would be a model to inspire others to adopt a similar comprehensive framework, one that went beyond information and awareness messaging. In the words of social marketer William Smith, social marketers have to make the

behavior easy, fun, and popular [24]. VERB did that with the hope that others would follow by incorporating principles and strategies of social marketing into their own initiatives.

The Influence and Legacy of VERB

As noted in the introduction, more has been written about VERB than any other physical activity initiative aimed at kids (30+ journal articles and book chapters), and few, if any, campaigns targeting other public health issues have been so thoroughly documented. Given the vast amount of information available on VERB in the literature, what then is its legacy? In the 10 years since it ended in 2006, what evidence is there that other initiatives have followed the lead of VERB thematically and structurally? Has VERB inspired other programs to "offer" physical activity to kids as fun and cool within a complete social marketing framework? The overall evidence suggests that VERB has had an influence but the resulting landscape lacks depth and a defined contour. That is, a number of published reports in the last decade describe campaigns primarily in the USA and Canada that have directly referenced VERB as a major influence and/or have specified social marketing as their developmental framework, but in most cases, the reality behind the details shows that planners often overpromise on social marketing principles and revert to traditional single-pronged approaches that do not stray far from simple messaging. In this section, we review what the literature reveals. The summary offered here does not represent a formal systematic review but rather an overview of the most prominent reports from the last 10 years.

The initiative that most explicitly characterized VERB as its model comes from north of the U.S. border. In 2012, a governmental/private foundation partnership in Québec launched the WIXX campaign to promote physical activity among youth [25••]. WIXX was created to replicate and extend the VERB campaign, citing VERB's success in promoting sustained physical activity among tweens [26]. WIXX aimed to increase knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy as well as promote favorable social norms regarding physical activity [26]. The initiative produced TV, radio, and web advertisements, held local community events, and conducted experiential marketing [25••]. Using the same branding approach as VERB, WIXX attempted to establish physical activity as fun and cool through advertisements that included hip hop dancing, playing outside, and having fun with friends. Strategies to reach boys and older tweens specifically included a gamification approach in which youth could take up physical activity challenges to win prizes [26]. Although they attempted to elicit support from parents, campaign planners acknowledged that they were not able to implement the same sort of message strategies directly targeting parents as VERB [25••]. The authors did make a passing reference to social marketing in saying that they intended their approach to

coincide with the four As of social marketing (i.e., appealing, affordable, available, and appreciated) offered by Hastings as an alternative to the traditional four Ps [27], but the specifics on how exactly they applied the individual elements were ambiguous.

Although not modeled as directly on VERB as WIXX, another initiative from Canada that also relied on VERB for guidance was the Long Live Kids (LLK) campaign that was developed by a not-for-profit coalition of partners from the beverage and food industries. The goal of the campaign was to increase physical activity in kids across Canada. Planners prefaced the details of their approach by noting that Critical analyses of the media literature suggest behavior change is unlikely particularly without sophisticated social marketing campaigns that are enduring and provide support for that behavior change with policy and programming [28]. They then offered VERB as the primary exemplar for using social marketing as a strong foundation for behavior change, providing substantial discussion about the VERB strategy as well as the methodological approach to evaluation. Despite the apparent attraction to VERB's use of a social marketing framework, the details of the initiative showed little evidence that program planners grounded their approach in broader principles of social marketing. In fact, the authors ultimately characterized their approach as a media literacy campaign. The program relied heavily on public service announcements. There was no mention of an attempt to incorporate of a broader marketing mix even though the authors framed part of their discussion of the results on message recall by noting that behavioral effects may be unlikely in the absence of an extensive and prolonged social marketing campaign [28].

Three American programs have claimed to conduct initiatives within a social marketing framework and directly drew comparisons to VERB. Although only partially focused on physical activity,¹ the 5-4-3-2-1 Go! campaign in Chicago relied more definitively on core social marketing principles than other comparable American programs. Targeted at parents of children ages 3–7 years old, 5-4-3-2-1 identified VERB as the standard for effectively using social marketing within community settings for behavior change initiatives aimed at parents and children, and they explicitly spelled out a complete marketing mix by noting that planners included a price strategy (e.g., emphasizing how to make it easier to be active), place strategy (reaching people where they live and shop), and product strategy (suggesting specific healthy behaviors in which kids can engage). They also implemented a multi-layered promotion strategy [29].

In contrast, a more geographically diverse program was the HEALTHY initiative implemented in 42 middle schools across the USA. The overall goal was to reduce risk factors for type 2 diabetes with heavy emphasis on behavior change related to physical activity. Also citing VERB as a model, program planners clearly identified social marketing as the perspective guiding their approach and even offered a specific definition of social marketing as the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of their society [30]. The definition is very consistent with commonly used conceptualizations used in social marketing [6••]. However, the detailed description provided for the many individual elements of the campaign focused almost entirely on messaging rather than a broader-based marketing strategy. For example, they used posters, banners, messages in classes and cafeterias, and public address announcements to reach students with information. The promotional aspect was both multi-pronged and often creative, but planners never explicitly referenced the other parts of the traditional marketing mix of price, place, and product. They did make a brief reference to incentives that were never further explained, and they also staged a number of events in which they gave easy access to equipment for physical activities. The latter potentially could be viewed as a place strategy, but the authors never framed it through that marketing lens.

The other USA-based initiative that made comparisons to VERB as well as claiming that a social marketing framework guided strategic decisions was the CATCH (Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health) middle school project implemented in central Texas² [31]. Aimed at encouraging teachers to incorporate short, structured classroom activity breaks for students during the day, program planners described their initiative as building on the success of VERB by adding the teacher angle. They designed an experimental study with three conditions labeled as basic, basic plus, and basic plus social marketing. The latter condition included the unique element of having a facilitator help to implement what they labeled as a “student-driven social marketing campaign.” Planners discussed the social marketing component as a program that encouraged students to get at least 60 min of physical activity each day and sought to persuade school administrators to make physical activity facilities available outside of school time and during breaks in the daily schedule, which could be construed as a place strategy. There was little other information in the report, however, that suggested the social

¹ The 5-4-3-2-1 campaign addressed five daily risk-reducing behaviors with only one of the five directly addressing physical activity. The five behaviors were eat five servings of fruits and vegetables, consume four servings of water, eat three servings of low-fat dairy, limit screen time to 2 h or less, and engage in one or more hours of physical activity.

² The CATCH campaign described here was a local initiative conducted in Texas from 2009 to 2013, but it came under the umbrella of the larger CATCH program that began in the 1990s prior to the implementation of VERB [31, 32].

marketing portion included strategic elements beyond an additional layer of messaging.

Several other American initiatives published since 2006 aimed at increasing physical activity for kids also have claimed to frame a campaign/program within a social marketing framework, but like other previous examples, the details present little evidence that the intervention involved more than basic messaging. Although published after VERB concluded, these other initiatives surprisingly either make no reference to VERB at all or the reference to VERB campaign activities is perfunctory at best. For example, the Trial of Activity for Adolescent Girls (TAAG) implemented in six different areas in the USA stated that their intervention was grounded in a social marketing approach, but the description talked only about increasing awareness and participation in activities through media and promotional events [33]. Similarly, Project FIT that primarily targeted Hispanic and African-American children in 3rd–5th grades delineated a social marketing approach to increase physical activity and healthy eating that just included the distribution of items like water bottles stamped with a project logo, stickers, and mini-media such as school newsletters, brochures, posters, and calendars [34]. The Power Play! campaign in California [35] and the Bike, Walk, and Wheel initiative in Columbia, MO, [36] designed to increase physical activity for kids also fall into the category of initiatives that purported to follow social marketing principles but that offered program descriptions that appeared to rely only on conventional messaging.

Other North American initiatives have looked to VERB for inspiration but made no claims that they relied on principles of social marketing. For example, a Canadian campaign called Think Again attempted to bring about behavior change by directly targeting mothers of 5 to 11-year-old children [37]. They specifically referenced VERB's success in communicating directly to parents as part of the rationale for their approach. The campaign relied primarily on television and print advertisements that emphasized that children and youth should accumulate 60 min of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity a day. In the USA, the Let's Go! program was a 5-year community-based initiative in Maine aimed at school children and their families to engage in 1 h more of physical activity among other healthy behaviors. The authors chronicled in detail the achievements of VERB, but they noted that the comprehensive approach taken by the CDC might be too resource intensive for local communities to implement on their own. Rather than opting for a complete social marketing framework, planners relied on a more traditional media campaign using television advertisements, signs on buses, short videos aired in movie theaters, and web-banner advertisements [38].

Outside of North America, there are a few European examples of VERB's influence reaching across the Atlantic. In the Catalonia region of Spain, the European Youth Tackling

Obesity (EYTO) project, which cited the potential of social marketing to modify behavior, specifically referenced VERB as a success story [39••]. The focus of their approach was to identify five adolescents in each of several high schools who became known as Adolescent Challenge Creators (ACCs). Campaign planners trained the ACCs on principles of social marketing emphasizing a customer orientation, behavior change, theory, insight, exchange, competition, segmentation, and a methods mix. The ACCs then designed and implemented their own intervention targeting physical activity, eating habits, and screen time that they called “Som la Pera,” which is a Catalan idiom that figuratively means “we are cool.” Although clearly grounded in a social marketing philosophy, the details suggest that a truly comprehensive incorporation of the four Ps was lacking. For example, when they described their methods mix, most discussion centered on communicating messages through social media and visual materials. The Change4Life campaign in England, which targeted families with children ages 5–11 for change in physical activity and eating, also lauded the virtues of social marketing and identified VERB as the lead exemplar for a model of achievement [40]. Their description of social marketing demonstrated an understanding of foundational principles, but like so many other initiatives extolling the advantages of social marketing, the actual execution only highlighted promotional activities such as television and print advertising, a helpline, a website, and other collateral materials.³

Conclusion

Although VERB provided a well-documented model for how to use a social marketing framework to increase physical activity for kids, the evidence shows that numerous program planners have aspired to follow the VERB approach, but they rarely have taken advantage of the full capabilities of social marketing principles to bring about behavior change. Health communication tactics can provide a strong starting point, but we believe that initiatives have an even greater chance for success when relying on multiple strategies extracted from a larger toolbox. We recognize that some interventionists might avoid a more comprehensive social marketing approach because they feel they do not have the resources to incorporate other components of the four Ps, but we believe that there are less expensive, creative ways to utilize social marketing to its fullest. For example, planners can implement a price strategy by partnering with local sporting good stores to offer coupons

³ The reader might note we have not included discussion of some other well-known national initiatives such as First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign [41] and the NFL PLAY 60 program [42]. Although they both aimed to increase physical activity among kids, neither campaign has explicitly referenced VERB as a model nor have they claimed to follow principles of social marketing.

or rebates on physical activity equipment. The VERB Scorecard program, for instance, leveraged the VERB brand to support children's summer activities in communities and found that merchants, vendors, and even the public transportation systems in some cases were eager to offer incentives such as free rides on city buses if a child showed the VERB scorecard [43].⁴ We strongly believe that 10 years later there are still many valuable lessons to be learned from VERB and that those hoping to address the obesity epidemic by increasing physical activity among youth can continue to turn to VERB as a comprehensive, practical guide for social marketing success.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Marian Huhman, Ryan P. Kelly, and Timothy Edgar declare they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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⁴ The VERB Scorecard was a wallet-sized card that offered free physical activity options for kids, and it functioned as a ticket to enter fun physical activities within communities such as public pools and skating rinks. Kids also were able to track their activities, and when they were active for a designated period of time at a sponsored venue, an adult signed one of the 24 blocks on the card. When all squares were filled, the tween could then redeem the card prizes such as beach towels and water bottles, and they also became eligible for a grand prize drawing for larger prizes such as bicycles and running shoes [43].

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