

# FOOD ON THE RUN: USING SOCIAL MARKETING AND MEDIA ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

---

By Cyndi Guerra Walter and Peggy Agron

## INTRODUCTION

The percentage of overweight youth has more than doubled since the 1970s (CDC, 2002). To improve the health status of California youth, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity & Nutrition) developed Food on the Run (FOR) to:

- Prompt adolescents to advocate for healthy food and physical activity options on their campuses;
- Advance positive nutrition and physical activity policies for adolescents; and
- Motivate adolescents to eat healthier and engage in more physical activity.

FOR utilized the spectrum of prevention model, which describes six levels of prevention activities – from strengthening individual knowledge and skills to influencing policy (Cohen & Swift, 1999).

## METHODS

FOR's primary target audience was low-income, early adopter adolescents – the diffusion of innovations category with the highest degree of opinion leadership in most social systems (Rogers, 1983). Formative research methods included literature and commercial market data reviews, focus groups, and key informant and one-on-one interviews. This research informed the social marketing plan

targeting adolescents and guided development of strategies addressing non-supportive policies affecting the adolescents' abilities to engage in positive behavior changes. During the formative research stage, adolescents repeatedly identified limited access to healthy foods as a barrier to accomplishing the desired behavioral outcomes (Flora & Myhre, 1998).

Realizing that individual behavior change was just one approach to social change, program planners employed a systems change approach to working with adolescents. Students advocated for positive school policies and helped release the *California High School Fast Food Survey* (Samuels & Associates, 2000), which detailed the widespread availability of fast foods on high school campuses. The survey release was designed to reframe the issue from the adolescents' behavior of purchasing junk foods at school to the public policy issue of providing unhealthy foods on high school campuses.

## RESULTS

Release of the *Fast Food Survey* led to:

- News coverage in all California major media markets and other national media (Takada, 2001); and
- California legislation restricting the sale of unhealthy foods in public schools (Official California Legislative Information, 2002).

Environment evaluation demonstrated that students were successful at making significant ( $p < .01$ ) changes on school campuses (e.g., adding salad bars and convincing school districts to switch from high-fat to low-fat milk). Additionally, student advocates significantly improved ( $p < .01$ ) their nutrition knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Agron, Takada, & Purcell, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Media advocacy and social marketing “increasingly are being joined to provide a more comprehensive health promotion effort” (Alcalay & Bell, 2000). FOR illustrates how social marketers can utilize a media advocacy approach with the objective of changing public policy based on what they learn from the formative research. Of note is the fact that FOR’s target audience identified the need to adapt the environment and provided policy solutions. Additionally, FOR did not cease targeting adolescents. Policy change and media advocacy strategies were merely added to the arsenal of this program.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This project was supported by funding from The California Endowment and the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Cyndi Guerra Walter, B.A.**, is Marketing Manager for California Project LEAN, a program of the California Department of Health Services and Public Health Institute in Sacramento, CA.

**Peggy Agron, M.A., R.D.**, is Program Chief of California Project LEAN.

## REFERENCES

- AGRON, P., TAKADA, E., & PURCELL, A.** (2002). California Project LEAN’s Food on the Run Program: An evaluation of a high school-based student advocacy nutrition and physical activity program. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Adolescent Nutrition Supplement, 102*(3), 103–105.
- ALCALAY, R., & BELL, R.** (2000). *Promoting nutrition and physical activity through social marketing: Current practices and recommendations*. Davis, CA: University of California, Davis, Center for Advanced Studies in Nutrition and Social Marketing.
- CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (CDC).** (2002). *Overweight and obesity: A public health epidemic* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/epidemic.htm>
- COHEN, L., & SWIFT, S.** (1999). The spectrum of prevention: Developing a comprehensive approach to injury prevention. *Injury Prevention, 5*, 203–207.
- FLORA, J., & MYHRE, S.** (1998). *Key informant interviews with students, experts and LEAN regional coordinators about healthy eating, physical activity and multicultural youth*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Health Services, California Project LEAN.
- OFFICIAL CALIFORNIA LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION.** (2002). *SB 19*. [Online]. Available: [http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/bill/sen/sb\\_0001-0050/sb\\_19\\_bill\\_20011014\\_chaptered.pdf](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/bill/sen/sb_0001-0050/sb_19_bill_20011014_chaptered.pdf)
- ROGERS, E.** (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3rd ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- SAMUELS & ASSOCIATES.** (2000). *California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and recommendations*. Sacramento, CA: Public Health Institute, California Project LEAN.
- TAKADA, E.** (2001). *Evaluating a media advocacy campaign: A content analysis*. Sacramento, CA: Public Health Institute, California Project LEAN.