

New Media and the VERB™ Campaign Tools To Motivate Tweens To Be Physically Active

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Abstract

The VERB™ Campaign used new media as part of a marketing strategy that surrounded children aged 9–13 (tweens) with messages that portrayed physical activity as a cool way to have fun with friends. The new media component of VERB consisted of three elements. First, Websites were used extensively. VERBnow.com was the primary Web site where tweens could engage with “virtual “sidekicks,” find places to be active in their area, record their physical activity, view tutorials from sports celebrities, and get ideas about making up games. The Websites of media partners used banner ads on their sites to drive traffic to the VERBnow Website. Second, VERB used cell phone technology to send text messages encouraging tweens to be physically active that began with an advertising campaign that prompted tweens to type “8372” into a cell phone key pad (spelling VERB). Third, VERB Yellowball incorporated digital technology with a separate Web site that encouraged tweens to play with one of the 500,000 Yellowballs distributed throughout the U. S., pass the ball to another tween, and then blog about how they had played with the ball. Interactive projections of Yellowballs also appeared on the floors of many shopping malls.

Introduction

To help change children’s sedentary lifestyles and the growing epidemic of childhood obesity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched the VERB™ It’s what you do campaign in 2002. VERB used social marketing to encourage tweens (children aged 9–13 years) to be physically active every day. Marketing activities, including school and community promotions, Internet and other mass media, and partnerships with national organizations and local communities, were implemented from June 2002 until funding ended in September 2006. Evaluation

of the campaign showed that tweens aware of the campaign engaged in more sessions of physical activity in their free time than tweens unaware of the campaign. These effects were found for important subpopulations of tweens after 1 year of the campaign (e.g., children aged 9–10 years and girls)¹ followed by effects at the population level after 2 years of the campaign.²

In this article, we describe the digital technology or “new media” component of VERB, including our use of digital media to deliver messages to tweens, and discuss the associ-

ated challenges. We document the number of tweens digital media reached and relate our surprising discovery that, despite 18 months without VERB commercials, tweens are keeping VERB alive by blogging on networks such as YouTube. Three

components are covered: (1) the VERB Web site for tweens; (2) the summer marketing program for cell phones, called 8372; and (3) the promotion during VERB's final year that combined electronic interactivity and blogging, VERB Yellowball.

Background

A cumulative congressional appropriation of \$339 million enabled VERB to take advantage of methods used by commercial marketers, including building a brand and associating it with a logo (Figure 1), conducting extensive formative research, using professional actors, and buying media and promotional opportunities to ensure reach-

ing a substantial number of the target audience. Although paid TV advertising, mostly on cable channels popular with tweens, was VERB's primary message vehicle, new media was emphasized from the beginning and expanded during the campaign as these media became a popular means to communicate with tweens.

Figure 1. VERB logo and tag line



VERB used a broad mix of marketing tactics to reach tweens and associate the VERB brand with activities that are cool, fun, and motivational. Our “surround strategy” brought campaign messages to the home, school, and community, making the VERB brand visible and familiar in multiple channels. Appealing advertising was delivered using an integrated marketing approach, so that all marketing communications, public relations, and direct marketing

had a single message that physical activity is fun, cool, and a social opportunity. Consistency of message and in the look and feel of the campaign created a unified force to deliver the message, while familiarity with the brand bred receptiveness to the message.

Throughout the campaign, electronic media helped facilitate integrated marketing. TV commercials directed traffic to the tween

Web site, VERBnow.com, where tweens viewed tutorials from celebrities such as Venus Williams. Cell phones were featured in a summer promotion to encourage tweens to be active. In the last year of the campaign, the integrated approach matured as mul-

tiple marketing media came together in the promotion, VERB Yellowball. CDC worked closely with the advertising agencies to implement and monitor the new media component. For example, CDC staff reviewed the blogs about Yellowball.

VERBnow.com

The main tween Web site, VERBnow.com, was introduced when the campaign launched in June 2002. Material on the site was refreshed on a monthly basis and was revamped several times during the campaign's run to match new marketing activities. Features of the initial website included a VERB Games section where the user could control the actions of a child athlete, a Mouth Off section that invited the tweens to give their opinions, and a VERB Scrapbook feature with photos of a promotional tour that was called Wild 'n Crazy Kids and partnered VERB with Nickelodeon characters. Most popular with tweens were the links to other tween websites such as Nick.com or Cartoon Network because of the games available there, although tweens did not always know they had linked off the VERB site.

By February 2003, though more than 1.2 million visits to the site were tallied, usability testing showed that we needed to refine the site. The partner links (e.g., Nick.com) were appealing to tweens—too appealing—taking the tweens from the VERB site, often when they had not intended to leave VERB. Features such as the VERB Scrapbook and VERB of the Week failed to hold the tweens' interest because it lacked interactive functions. The emphasis on

sports on the first version of the Web site proved un motivating to low-activity tweens. Most tweens found the site too text heavy, and some language and symbols were confusing or intimidating. For example, tweens avoided downloads or were forbidden by parents to download for fear of computer viruses. In response, the download message was changed to the more user-friendly “click here to print out this page.” Tweens made many other suggestions. More activities and games that suggested interesting ways to be active were included on the site. Girls suggested adding cheerleading routines via a computer game that could then be practiced offline. Others wanted to earn points for completing off-line activities that could be redeemed on VERBnow.com for prizes. Research with moms of tweens showed that they liked the site, but they also gave suggestions to strengthen the site such as including more local activities and ways that tweens could personalize the content to their preferred activities.

Several new aspects of the website were added. To motivate tweens to be physically active, the feature, “MyVERB Recorder,” was added which encouraged tweens to register and log the type of activity and amount of time spent being physically active (Table 1). Registering meant a tween

was converting from a site visitor to a “registered user” increasing the tween’s investment in the site and the likelihood of repeated visits. By the end of 2004, the percentage of visitors who went on to register, known as the conversion rate, was 14%. By recording their physical activity, tweens became eligible to enter sweepstakes for

prizes, such as a scooter or bike. Between October 2003 and March 2004, more than 96,000 tweens had registered to log their activity and became eligible for prizes. By May 2004, the total hours of activity logged climbed steadily to almost 225,000 hours, with an average of 14 hours logged per registered user.

Table 1. VERBnow.com Site Activity

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Length of campaign promotion	October 2002 to May 2003 ¹	June 2003 to May 2004	June 2004 to May 2005	June 2005 to May 2006 plus June-July extension ²
Visits to Verbnow.com	--	1,074,047	3,597,104	6,287,399
New registered users	--	113,316	602,916	372,565
Conversion rate³	--	11%	17%	6%
Hours of activity on “VERB Recorder”⁴	--	224,451	1,763,276	1,587,768
Number of ViRTs created	--	--	385,610	445,094
Games generated⁵	--	--	1,393,014	985,535
Zip Code Searches⁶	--	--	1,218,890	470,016
Tutorials viewed⁷	--	--	409,075	72,973
VERB Yellowball Blog entries	--	--	--	17,000
VERB Yellowball Videos created	--	--	--	170,000

¹ Only page views were tracked in phase 1 = 3,807,717 page views.

² Exact numbers for August-September extension not available.

³ Conversion rate is the percentage of visitors who register as a user.

⁴ Began October 2003

⁵ Unique sessions of generating 1 or more games. Example of games: Yard soccer tag

⁶ Tweens could search for activities by zip code

⁷ Tutorials included Landon Donovan (soccer moves); Donovan McNabb (football throws); Skate board stances and kickflips. Phase 3 TV ads used Donovan and McNabb.

In the summer of 2004, formative evaluation guided another Web site redesign to align the site with a marketing theme that featured celebrity athletes and encouraged tweens to make up their own games. Tweens preferred a bright purple background and liked the ability to customize features of the new site (Figure 2). Users could access the search engine to locate activities in their zip code, browse videos and tutorials from athletes and pro sports leagues, or create their own games with the interactive “Game Generator.” We also

introduced “ViRTs,” virtual sidekicks that tweens could create and customize (Figure 3). A ViRT gained energy and could perform tricks and moves based on the amount of activity a tween recorded. ViRTs were immediately appealing. In December 2004 alone, tweens created more than 22,700 ViRTs. From the Web site’s relaunch in August 2004 until the campaign’s end in September 2006, a total of 11,584,749 site visits were recorded. ViRTs continued to be popular: more than 1,000,000 were created by campaign’s end.

Figure 2. VERBnow.com



Figure 3. ViRT characters on the VERBnow.com web site



Another popular feature of the Web site was video tutorials from professional athletes who were featured in television commercials at the time, including Venus Williams, Landon Donovan, and Donovan McNabb. Williams demonstrated a proper tennis backhand, forehand, and serve; Donovan showed soccer tricks, the kick flip, chest trap, and step over; and quarterback Mc-

Nabb taught the correct hand placement and stance to throw a perfect spiral (Figure 4). Although soccer was the most visited section, McNabb's football tutorials received the highest number of viewings, approximately 230,000 between August 2004 and December 2005. Donovan's and Williams' tutorials garnered approximately 117,000 and 22,000 viewings respectively.

Figure 4. Donovan McNabb demonstrates a spiral throw on the VERBnow.com tutorial



The VERB campaign was evaluated using the Youth Media Campaign Longitudinal Survey (YMCLS), a nationally representative survey conducted annually during April–June.^{1,2} YMCLS used computer-assisted telephone interviewing to assess tweens' awareness of the campaign and understanding of its messages and the effects of the campaign on tweens' attitudes and physical activity behaviors. Tweens were asked to name all the places they had seen or heard about VERB. For tweens who were familiar with VERB (74 % of all tweens), in the first and second years of VERB, tweens cited the Internet at 7% and 8%, respec-

tively, as one place where they had seen or heard about VERB. By the third year, 17% of tweens named the Internet, and 12% did so in the fourth year. Television was consistently reported as the main source of VERB awareness (averaging 89% over the four plus years of the campaign) followed by magazines (averaging 27%), and schools (averaging 17%). The campaign's media planners judged the traffic to the VERBnow website and the tweens' reports of the Internet as a source of information about VERB to be about what they expected given the resources that were allocated to this medium.

“8372”–Cell Phones Sent VERB Messages

In 2005, CDC and VERB’s marketing agencies developed a summer program, 8372, for “insider” access to VERB (Figure 5). The numbers, 8372, spell VERB when entered on a cell keypad. By integrating an 8372 website, TV ads, and messaging to tweens

on their cellphones, 8372 sought to create a personalized and relevant relationship with tweens. During the summer when tweens had free time and were looking for activities, 8372 reached tweens with things to do, entertainment, and celebrity news.

Figure 5. 8372 banner



A TV campaign promoted the 8372 program and included a call to action to go online to 8372.com or to text message to opt in to receive daily information. 8372.com included pages for girls and boys, relevant national and regional events, athlete trivia games, quizzes, horoscopes, scrapbooks, and celebrity webcasts. At events throughout the summer, CD-ROMs and branded merchandise were distributed to tweens to encourage online and mobile interaction.

An initial challenge for the 8372 promotion was getting tweens opted into receiving information. Tweens were required to provide their birth date and their parents’ contact information, usually an email address. For those younger than 13 years of age, VERB

contacted parents through email and parents gave approval for the tween to receive messages. If a parent denied permission or did not respond, direct communication was ended. Once opted-in, tweens received ideas all summer via cell texting or a Web agent for ways and places to be active. The Web agents were pop ups on the tween’s computer or cell text messages, often from celebrities, that encouraged physical activity, such as, “The weather is perfect for going outside. Go out and play.” At the conclusion of the three month campaign, more than 250,000 tweens had downloaded the desktop computer agent from the CD-ROM or online to receive activity messages, and 25,000 tweens opted to receive text messages.

VERB Yellowball

VERB Yellowball was a national, multi-component promotion that spanned fall 2005 through the end of the VERB campaign in September 2006. VERB Yellowball was based on a VERB TV commercial in which children took a sun-ball from the sky and played sports with it. Yellowball built on the theme of the TV commercials that aired during the last phase of the campaign. The commercials, called “sunshine,” were set to a hit pop song and showed tweens outdoors playing sports with a computer-generated “sun ball.” The spot reminded tweens that nothing replaces the feeling of play, and that every day is a new chance to enjoy the energy, rush, and exhilaration of getting outside and being active.

VERB Yellowball translated the idea of the sunshine campaign into action by dropping 500,000 yellow balls at schools, recreational centers, malls, and tween concert and sporting events countrywide. Three

simple instructions and a unique code were printed on each ball (Figure 6). The instructions were that tweens should play with the ball, and then visit VERBnow.com to register the ball and blog about what they did. Then they were to pass the ball on, perhaps to a friend or neighbor, and thereby “pass on play.” The code allowed tweens to use the Web site to track how far their ball was passed and to read other tweens’ blogs about what they were doing with the ball. For example, a 12-year-old boy wrote,

My big brother “passed” his yellow ball onto me, which was “passed” on to him by a friend who rec’d his from MLS soccer camp. I have had a lot of fun playing with it in my front yard. One day I was practicing my soccer skills with it and the next day I had it in the pool with me. I am now going to pass my yellow ball on to my other brother. This has been fun.

Figure 6. Yellowball



Yellowball made use of tweens' desire for social networking. We wanted tweens to feel they that they were part of a movement to "pass on play" and that they had some agency over their Yellowballs as the balls were passed across the country. Having tweens log in and track their balls reinforced their ownership of the project. For its innovative mix of marketing and social networking, Yellowball earned numerous public health and advertising industry awards.

Yellowball interacted with tweens both personally and digitally. Personal interaction was conducted through guerilla marketing in which teams of young adults took reconditioned vans (Figure 7) around the country to places such as summer camps, schools, and parks. The digital interaction was through the Yellowball mini-site and interactive projections at theaters and malls.

Figure 7. Yellowball mobile van



Yellowball mini-site

The VERB Yellowball mini-site launched November 1, 2005. The site included a community area for tweens to blog about their Yellowball experiences. Tween could also blog on VERBnow.com which linked to the mini-site. The mini-site grew rapidly. New sections were added, including Video Mixer,

which allowed tweens to choose scenes and music to create their own Yellowball video. Tweens could then share their videos with friends, which added a viral component to the marketing initiative. A photo section, constantly updated, contained pictures of tweens playing at Yellowball tour events.

The site also included pictures of actress Hilary Duff with the Yellowballs and featured her personal “mock” blog. Additionally, if tweens blogged about their ball, they could win free iTunes.

By campaign’s end, tweens had generated more than 17,000 Yellowball blogs and created more than 170,000 videos. In com-

parison with the 1–3% for a typical marketing campaign, 10% of tweens reached by Yellowball visited the site and blogged. In 2006, the YMCLS included a question about awareness of Yellowball; 56 % of tweens reported having seen Yellowball. On the same survey, 75% of tweens reported being aware of the VERB campaign in general.

Interactive Projections

We built buzz and intrigue for Yellowball by using new interactive technologies. In December 2005, VERB became a charter advertiser with Reactrix, a technology to project interactive advertising on the floors of more than 80 malls and movie theaters (Figure 8). The VERB projection was a 30-second branded spot and a 45-second Yellowball street soccer game. During the holiday season, the average interaction rate for the projection was 63%, indicating that

Reactrix was a promising medium to engage tweens. Interaction rate is determined by intercept interviews conducted at the mall, asking mall shoppers if they stopped to look at the Reactrix projection and then whether or not they proceeded to play in the graphic. For example, a tween might try to catch the Yellowball image as it is moving around on the mall floor. Due to the campaign’s success, VERB renewed the partnership through September 2006.

Figure 8. Interactive projections on the walkway of a shopping mall



The Yellowball promotion integrated new media in complex ways that produced some challenges, especially considering the young age of the target audience, 9-13 years. The promotion asked the tween to register their ball and its number on the Yellowball web site, pass it to another tween, and then to blog about it. Getting tweens to blog about what they did with their Yellowball was important to the viral nature of the promotion, but could be intimidating or time-consuming for some tweens. For one national promotion that distributed Yellowballs at community events, the percentage of tweens who received a ball who went on to blog about it (also known as the conversion rate) was 7% overall. Another Yellowball promo-

tion that hired young teens as Yellowball Ambassadors who were to play, pass, and blog about their ball reported a 22% conversion rate. Feedback from these 12- to- 15 year-olds included that their busy schedules often put blogging at the bottom of their to-do list.

Another challenge was the expense and time required to read and monitor the Yellowball blogs. Each blog was read before posting. A few were not posted for various reasons such as inappropriate language, a reference to drugs or something similar, or a reference to an individual that could have been offensive.

Discussion

During the 4 plus years of the VERB campaign, new media grew markedly as a communication tool among tweens and as a way to market to tweens. The number of VERBnow site visitors increased across the campaign years (see Table 1, page 4). The number of registered users increased by more than 500% from Phase 2 to Phase 3 following the major redesign of the site in August 2004. Following the suggestions that emerged from formative research, the site was made more interactive, easier to navigate, and could be personalized through the user's creation of their own virtual sidekick of ViRT. That the number of registered users decreased from phase 3 to phase 4 of the campaign may reflect the dominance in Phase 4 of the Yellowball promotion that included its own Web site. Sports celebrity tutorials by Landon Donovan, Venus Williams, and Donovan McNabb were the most

popular when TV and magazine advertising featured these celebrities in the commercials that ended with a call to action to go online to VERBnow.com. We witnessed opportunities to expand from Web sites, our foundational new media, to social networking via texting and blogging about VERB Yellowball. These social marketing methods, just beginning to take hold as the VERB campaign ended, offered us the opportunity to greatly expand the reach of the VERB campaign.

A major challenge was to engage youth with new media, while instilling them with the motivation to put down the media and get out and play. To address the dilemma, VERB constantly promoted the benefits of active play on Web sites, urged tweens to influence their peers' physical activity, and encouraged tweens to log their hours

of physical activity on VERBnow.com. The Web sites were kept fresh and interesting, and as an incentive, tweens who logged their physical activity could enter prize sweepstakes.

Other challenges that we encountered was capturing the tween-age group with the new media. Elements of the VERB Web site and Yellowball appealed to teens as well, leading us to track the age of site registrants who created ViRTs. The percentage of ViRT creators aged 13 and under ranged from 99% in May 2005 to 54% in August 2005 and had returned to 75% by the end of the campaign. Likewise, the Yellowball site attracted many teenagers who blogged about their Yellowball experiences. However, an upside to having teens on the site was to support the aspirational aspects of the VERB brand, increasing the “cool and hip” factor to tweens.

The number of tweens who interacted with VERB’s new media indicates that digital technology is a promising public health communication tool, and that new media can be an important part of a marketing strategy that aims to surround an audience with messages in the places they frequent, including online. Our outcome evaluation did not allow us to parse out the attitudinal or behavioral effects of any one channel in our surround strategy, but they were, in fact, meant to work together. By the final year of the campaign, more than 10% of tweens reported the Internet as one of their sources of awareness for VERB, and we

believe that in time this percentage would have continued to grow.

Before new media took hold, public health campaign planners assumed that once paid media stopped, product awareness would quickly diminish. However, our experience with VERB challenges this assumption. After the campaign ended, the VERBnow site stayed live through 2007. In the final quarter of 2006 with no mass media support such as TV ads, there were still over 284,000 page views and 2127 new registrations to the site. Throughout 2007, users returned to the VERBnow site with over 490,000 returning user visits recorded between January 2007 and August 2007. Six months later in December 2007, 15 months after VERB advertising ceased, the site recorded more than 55,000 visits. Recently, we saw that VERB commercials had been uploaded onto YouTube with accompanying commentary, all positive. A sunshine ad had been viewed 7686 times with 39 comments. Two examples are, “This is my favorite commercial ever. I remember falling in love with it and the song too. And yeah it reminds me of summer and just having fun too.” And another comment, “Such a good commercial. Actually made me want to go outside and run around.” In this way, the VERB message continues despite the lack of paid advertising. This suggests the enormous potential of new media and electronic networking, essentially tween-to-tween marketing, that public health can tap as a communication tool, just as commercial marketers have.

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