

Executive Summary of the African American Formative Immersion Research To Support Brand Development For the Youth Media Campaign

In 2000, the U.S. Congress charged the Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with the task of planning, implementing, and evaluating a national Youth Media Campaign (YMC) to change children's health behavior. The objective of the YMC is to help youth develop lifetime habits that foster good health; these habits include appropriate behaviors relating to diet, physical activity, and avoidance of illicit drugs, tobacco, and alcohol. The CDC has the responsibility of designing and testing messages with various youth audiences, involving young people in campaign planning and implementation, using tactics employed by today's best youth marketers, and enlisting the involvement and support of parents and other role models.

Children aged 9 to 13 years, or tweens, constitute the youth audience particular to this report. The study necessarily extends its focus to parents and other adult influencers, thereby making its goal the articulation of the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors of tweens *and parents* with regard to physical and other positive activities.

In mid-November 2000, the CDC selected Aeffect, a strategic marketing and communications-planning firm, to provide research and consulting services to facilitate the YMC. The Aeffect research consultants and communications strategists have expertise in assisting organizations by gathering insights from determined target markets and leveraging these insights into effective communications. In September 2001, the CDC chose Frankel as the general market agency for their mainstream YMC efforts. Frankel in turn hired Portico Research to engage in an ethnographic study of mainstream tweens.

Inasmuch as the YMC will be a comprehensive nationwide effort, the CDC included several ethnic market segments to ensure the Campaign's overall success. In this context, in mid-September 2001, the CDC selected A Partnership to develop ethnic overlay research focused on the Asian American and African American populations. A Partnership subcontracted PFI Advertising, an African American firm from New York City, to ensure that the African American population was represented in all marketing efforts. PFI Advertising selected the K Group to develop the ethnic overlay research focused on the African American population.

The primary objective of this research was to understand the African American audience of the Youth Media Campaign who were not covered by general market formative research. Integrated with the general market formative research, this research project focused on uncovering the habits, practices, and attitudes of this particular African American audience segment regarding health, particularly prosocial and physical activities.

The respondents included African American tweens (from sixth and seventh grades) and parents from predominately minority-populated urban areas. The respondents were primarily inner-city residents, typically living and going to school in economically challenged areas. The tween respondents typically lived with at least one parent and at least one sibling. A mix of "somewhat" to "very active" tweens were recruited. The parent respondents were typically lower-income persons working full-time in blue-collar occupations. The parent respondents had at least one child aged 11 to 13 years and enrolled full-time in the sixth or seventh grade of a public school.

Altogether, eight 90-minute focus groups were conducted with male and female tweens in New York City and Los Angeles. Additionally, four 90-minute panels of male and female parents were conducted in these cities. Each group or panel consisted of seven to nine

respondents of the same sex. None of the parent or tween respondents were related to the other respondents.

Key Findings

Positive Activity

Neither the tweens nor their parents were overtly concerned about the lack of physical activity in this age group. Parents came believing that their kids were *active*; however, upon deeper examination of the meaning of the term, many realized that their children lacked the requisite amounts of physical activity. They were, however, explicitly concerned about the excessive time spent watching television and playing video games.

“I ride the bike or go to a friend’s house or mess with the girls or go on the Play Station.”—Boy

Barriers to Positive Activity

At least two types of barriers appear to deter or inhibit physical activity: those driven by the children and those that originate with the parents. The community and social structure of the African American community play a role as well. For the tweens, their somewhat fragile and sensitive egos frequently mean short trials of and early exits from programs and activities. Other barriers include the children’s preference for safe, noncompetitive, escapist activities that provide instant gratification. Transportation, community safety issues, and limited availability of programs are also barriers faced by the tweens.

The burden of day-to-day living creates an atmosphere conducive to parents’ succumbing to their children’s inactivity, rather than pushing them to participate. Time is a major issue for parents juggling the many demands of a modern household. If married, the respondents typically worked

a different schedule from their spouse, making support for outside activities more problematic. In the African American community, physical activity has a lower priority than academic, human development, and basic survival needs. Financial concerns, limited access to programs or activities, and concern for violence are other barriers faced by parents.

“They have a Play Station and go on the net. Play games on the net. Watch DVD. The neighborhood isn’t that safe. Keeps them out of trouble. We all have to rely on video and TV to baby sit.”—Mother

Perceived Benefits of Positive Activity

The most meaningful benefits to parents are the sociopsychological benefits: building self-esteem, offering healthy interaction, promoting discipline, promoting independent thinking, promoting positive thinking, and overall empowerment.

“We need to help them to dream ... to be aware of what they can achieve ... build self-esteem.” —Father

Regional Issues

Few issues were solely the domain of one region, with one major exception. Parents and tweens in the Los Angeles groups had considerably higher concerns about gangs, danger, and violence.

“It’s a given. The gang-bangers and the dope. We live with it every day.”—Father

Gender Issues

As might be expected, female tweens were less physically active than their male counterparts, and this research suggests they were much less active.

“I have chores. Laundry and take out the garbage.”—Girl

“I do homework first, then skateboard. Go to the center for basketball two times a week.”—Boy