

Innovative Zoo Partnership Lending New Insight into the Power of Animals to Market Healthy Food to Kids

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It is no secret that US children are not consuming enough fruits and vegetables. Recent data show that 60% of children do not eat enough fruit to meet daily recommendations, and 93% of children do not eat enough vegetables.¹

While the exact cause is unclear, industry-driven food marketing efforts aimed directly at children are considerable influences, amounting to \$1.8 billion in expenditures in 2009 alone.² Global brand marketers have utilized animals to help sell their products for decades, and though public health advocates have traditionally focused on educational approaches to improve diet, recent efforts are changing the way that behavioral interventions work.

A new partnership between the Brandywine Zoo and the University of Delaware Center for Research in Education and Social Policy is demonstrating how sectors can work together to solve important problems while at the same time reminding those involved in changing human behavior that we may, indeed, have a lot yet to learn from animal behavior.

Approximately 181 million visitors attend AZA accredited zoos and aquariums each year- a figure greater than the attendance at all NBA, MLB, NHL and NFL games combined. Our own Brandywine Zoo sees 80,000 local visitors annually and beyond animal care, provides a valuable recreational, conservation and educational opportunity for residents.

Psychology tells us that animals are uniquely enticing to humans.³ Indeed, we are biologically wired to react certain ways in relation to animals. When it comes to associated thoughts and feelings it is likely that advertisements with animals place the persuasion process in motion and lessen consumer resistance while transferring positive associations that they have with the animal to the product. Animals have cultural and symbolic meanings that advertisers have for years employed to contribute to a brand's equity.⁴

When it comes to children, research has frequently documented the special relationship that children often have with animals; pets can provide children with a special type of companionship and joy.⁵ For example, in one study kids consistently ranked their pet in the list of "top 10 most special" relationships.⁶ Further evidence suggests that children often seek out their pets as sources of comfort and esteem, and can even prefer cats and dogs to human relationships such as aunts, uncles and grandparents.⁷

Approaches to influence healthy choices have been at the forefront of recent national efforts, many of which are focused on children. For example, strategies which "nudge" students toward healthier choices in the school cafeteria have made headlines as approaches to encourage food products to display playful names that will appeal to children, place healthier products within easier reach, and display produce in bowls to encourage sampling have demonstrated wide-scale appeal and support from the USDA and local districts alike.⁸

In large part due to efforts by the First Lady and the Partnership for a Healthier America, collaboration between industry, government, and academic sectors has brought renewed focus to the role of retail and merchandizing to increase access and consumption of healthy foods. In 2012 for example, Birds eye announced an agreement with Partnership for a Healthier America

(PHA) to spend at least \$2 million annually on marketing vegetables to children.⁹ In this example, “iCarly,” Nickelodeon characters were used to promote vegetable consumption.

In 2014, the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) announced efforts to launch an “eat Brighter!” campaign, where Sesame Street characters are featured on product packaging and in store produce aisles.¹⁰ Early findings show that when the Sesame Street character Elmo promotes broccoli, children’s interest in eating broccoli compared to chocolate more than doubled.¹¹

This year, thanks in part to an ACCEL Ace award, new research is underway with the zoo to examine how public health efforts can capitalize on the unique appeal of animals.

A zoo-based animal marketing campaign using a series of animal characters called Tastimals, has been developed to support the promotion of healthy food to foster a fun, healthy association with consuming fruits and vegetables. Early experimental data demonstrate that children are twice as likely to select a produce item when a Tastimal animal character is associated with the product. Building on early findings, a second study is underway to test the characters alongside new family-friendly healthy snack and meal options at the Brandywine Zoo concession stand. Together, we seek to understand the extent to which children’s healthy food selections could be driven by an animal association.

We know that changing consumer behavior and diet is not an easy proposition, especially with limited public health dollars. Current efforts to shift the social, cultural and physical environment, however, appear to have had an effect at curbing the obesity epidemic. As we continue to advance the field, finding new ways to maximize reach and minimize costs may reside in new and unlikely partnerships.

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