

5 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

to Build More Effective
Obesity Prevention Programs

Start with consumers most ready for *change*

Learn from **SMALL TRIALS**

Keep it *simple*, concrete, and credible

Speak to the **heart**

Integrate with their lives

Lessons from AED Research and Practice

Introduction

Most Americans know the importance of eating healthy and getting regular physical activity. Despite this knowledge, obesity remains one of the top contributors to preventable death in America. For the first time in history, today's children are the first generation whose life expectancy is less than that of their parents.

Reducing obesity's impact on the nation's health demands a vigorous, broad-based response that includes changes in policy, environment and behavior. To achieve these changes, public health planners must communicate effectively with policy-makers, stakeholders, communities and individuals. Communication efforts might focus on making the case to a mayor for preserving the parks and recreation budget, or improving tax benefits and security for supermarkets in inner city neighborhoods. They may include discussions with school district leaders about healthier lunch offerings or restoring lost PE classes, or with parents about swapping out the Hot Pockets and soda with fruit and water as after-school snacks.

Regardless of the communication objective, with today's shrinking budgets and expanding health challenges, health communicators must meet greater demands with fewer resources. Much has been learned in the past from the experience of physical activity and nutrition

researchers and communicators. Too rarely though are those lessons captured in practical ways that inform future communication efforts.

Together with hundreds of partners, we've learned a great deal about how to communicate effectively in order to change policy, improve environments, promote behaviors—and ultimately save lives. Our mission commits us to share our lessons learned so that others can *"do better at doing good."*

To share key lessons learned from our work on obesity prevention, we settled on five principles that will help those promoting nutrition and physical activity to approach their work in fresh ways. More consistent use of these principles will contribute to stronger and more effective programs that ultimately can save public health resources and improve results.

For each of the design principles that follow you will find:

- A short description of the principle
- Brief reference to the AED research supporting the principle
- Real world examples of the principle in practice as part of consumers' daily lives

We have also included suggestions for ways these principles might apply to your work as well as a "notes" section for you to capture thoughts to share with others and use in your program planning.

1 Start with consumers most ready for change

When it comes to physical activity and nutrition, those considering positive changes may be the largest segment. CDC’s HealthStyles data suggest that about half of U.S. adults want to eat more healthily. The numbers of those who say they want to become more active are equally high. These *Intenders* don’t need to know “*why*,” they want to know “*how*” to overcome their respective barriers.

Provide simple, science-based tips to consumers who are open to either trying new foods or actually changing their eating behaviors. Showing consumers *how* to make simple, effective changes will give them confidence that they *can* eat more healthy meals without having to make big changes in their lives. For CDC, AED did this with tip sheets from the Tailored Energy Intake Project and the Energy Intake project.



Weight Watchers and 12-Step programs offer measuring and recording tools and support to help people through the weight-loss process—focusing on *how* to accomplish the end results of eating healthy and losing weight.

Hardware stores like Lowe’s and Home Depot lower the bar for customers to tackle home improvement tasks. They invite customers to try new projects with slogans like “*Let’s Build Something Together*” and offer free in-store classes and workshops.



American Legacy Foundation gives smokers a new way to think about quitting. The “Become an Ex” campaign focuses on helping smokers learn *how* to do everything they currently do with a cigarette, but without one. Focusing more on ‘*how*’ and less on ‘*why*’ keeps consumers engaged in the program, and increases their likelihood of success at quitting.

Focus scarce resources on audiences where you can achieve the greatest gains.

YOUR NOTES:

Learn from small trials

2

Qualitative research methods allow communication planners to quickly learn about consumer preferences and behaviors with small samples of respondents. This iterative “small trials” approach helps planners test hypotheses and apply new findings to continually improve consumer messages, tools and tips while conserving resources.

For CDC, AED used an iterative hypothesis-testing process that drew from prior weight loss maintenance research to develop and test messages and materials for new audiences. Literature reviews and secondary research informed development of draft message concepts. Then researchers used a staged series of focus groups to test and revise the materials and messages with new audience segments.

When testing the HHS Physical Activity Guidelines message concepts, AED also sequenced focus groups over several weeks. Findings from earlier focus groups were used to revise questions and concept testing in later focus groups.

To understand how tweens influence parents’ food purchase behaviors, AED used recent grocery receipts and kitchen audits to amplify data collected in interviews and focus groups. These simple research techniques revealed important contradictions between what parents say they do (their aspirations for providing healthy food) and what they actually purchase and provide.



Variations on this “try-it-out” principle are evident all around us. Many stores provide free samples of food that is sold there. Some services and subscriptions offer free trial periods or issues to allow customers to experience the product before making a long-term commitment. Paint suppliers now provide samples in small sample jars to let consumers see what the colors look like on their walls.

Test hypotheses quickly with consumers to improve messages.

YOUR NOTES:

Keep it simple, concrete, and credible



Tackling complex new challenges feels more do-able when they are broken down into simple, concrete steps. Consumers often prefer fewer choices with clearer benefits and manageable costs.

Health literacy plays an important role here, too. Nutrition and physical activity information and recommendations should be presented in plain language, with graphic treatments and pictorials that help consumers quickly grasp and navigate the choices available to them.

AED’s research found that consumers like to receive easy-to-follow physical activity and nutrition tools and tips from trusted sources, such as physicians and other medical professionals. Word-of-mouth from neighbors, family and friends also are considered credible sources of information. Stories and images of people add concreteness and credibility.



The Target prescription bottles, with their color-coded rings, help consumers manage their prescriptions, especially those living in a multi-person household. Flip video cameras user-friendly buttons and interface literally place video creation and sharing within a click of the finger.



Think about handwashing instructions in bathrooms: they’re simple, straightforward, consistent, from trusted sources and include pictorials to guide how to do the behavior.

Make it easier for consumers to do what they want.

YOUR NOTES:

Speak to the heart

4

Successful brands forge a deep emotional connection with their customers. Think Apple or Subaru or Nike. Eating, too, can be highly emotional, as is weight loss or weight loss maintenance. Tapping into **how consumers really feel** about these behaviors makes promotion messages more attention-getting and compelling.

AED's message testing about HHS's Physical Activity Guidelines and weight management found that appeals to self-control and accomplishment resonated well with adults. Consumer research about weight loss and maintenance also pointed to the importance of self-control, hope, confidence and fulfillment.

Parents struggle to get their children to eat healthy food. And children have special relationships with iconic characters. So when Mickey Mouse, Elmo and Sponge Bob appeared on fruit, vegetables and organic foods, kids' consumption of these healthier products increased.

Getting and preparing healthy food takes work. Drawing on the deep bonds we associate with preparing and sharing food with family and friends can add motivation.

Emotional ads help rescued dogs and cats find new homes. Michelin wraps its tires around chubby babies to remind us of why safety matters. By making us chuckle, a talking gecko makes insurance giant GEICO seem more fun and approachable.



Emotions move people to action.

YOUR NOTES:

Integrate with their lives

5

Healthy eating and physical activity guidelines are often overwhelming to consumers. Many consumers see healthy eating as an “all or nothing” decision, and the HHS Physical Activity Guidelines in their totality are seen as too difficult to attain for many consumers.

Research shows that consumers are more open to trying smaller steps, rather than seeing large behavior changes that do not apply to their lives. Program tactics like tools and tips need to be developed in ways that can be easily integrated into people’s daily living behaviors.

In focus group research AED conducted for CDC, consumers saw exercising in 10-15 minute increments as more feasible than the 30-minute daily recommendations.

In focus groups we conducted with families and singles, consumers saw small dietary changes that fit into their lifestyles as more do-able than general, far-reaching “healthy eating” recommendations.

AED developed and tested real life stories, or “testimonials,” to demonstrate how others very much like the consumer audience used tips and made behavior changes. Audiences reacted positively to both the testimonial concept and the tips and tools.



There are many successful products and services that easily integrate into people’s lives. Take “mommy and baby” movie showings or “yappy hours,” for example. Instead of having to leave your child or dog at home, movie theaters and bars offer ways to bring babies and furry friends along on outings.



Banking has never been more convenient. Consumers have long days and can’t always run errands like banking during regular business hours. Convenience banking, such as extended evening and weekend hours or opening branch offices in grocery stores, help consumers fit banking into their busy schedules. Integrating with their lives can be anything that allows a consumer to multi-task or helps them when they’re in a hurry.

Create opportunities that fit with multi-tasking and busy schedules.

YOUR NOTES:

Applying these design principles to obesity prevention programs

Applying these five design principles to obesity prevention programs may help us increase the appeal and use of program interventions.

As you work to create (or redesign) evidence-based obesity prevention programs, keep these five design principles in mind. Use them to evaluate your current programs and to identify areas for improvement. These principles also are useful topics for further consumer research, such as focus groups, to explore with consumers and those most ready for change.

Use the “notes” section at the end of each principle to capture thoughts to share with others and to guide your efforts moving forward.

Creating more engaging and appealing nutrition and physical activity programs for consumers is vital to our success in meeting greater public health demands with fewer resources.

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Who We Are

AED is a nonprofit organization working globally to create enduring solutions to critical problems in health, education, social and economic development. Collaborating with partners throughout the world, AED develops and implements ideas that change lives through more than 300 programs in all 50 U.S. states and more than 150 countries.

AED has a well-established history of promoting nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention with the support of many funders, including:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- U.S. Agency for International Development
- The World Bank
- UNICEF

AED has supported national and community efforts to promote healthy eating and physical activity and prevent overweight and obesity among Americans through social marketing and health communications. We have conducted consumer research, convened expert panels, developed and distributed communication materials and community-level programs for children, youth, adults and seniors.

Promoting health, education and positive social change lies at the core of AED's mission. As a result, we commit to share what we learn with our partners and colleagues so our collective efforts reap greater results. We hope you consider doing the same.



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