

Can Branding Improve School Lunches?

* Brian Wansink, PhD is the John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing in the Applied Economics and Management Department of Cornell University.

David R. Just, PhD is Associate Professor of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University.

Collin R. Payne, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at New Mexico State University.

* Dr. Wansink is the corresponding author. Address: Cornell University, 15 Warren Hall, Ithaca NY 14853-7801, phone: 607-255-5024, fax: 607-255-9984, email: Wansink@Cornell.edu

Article text word count-598

Introduction

As school food services outsource more and more of their food preparation, the processed products they offer to school children are increasingly branded. There is a legitimate concern that branding will make the more indulgent foods even more attractive. Conversely, a promising question is: could branding more dramatically improve the attractiveness of healthier foods? Brands, characters, and icons attract the attention and interest of children. Pairing favorable icons with healthy food is not widely used, yet a low cost way to make healthy food more salient could be to associate it with a favorable icon.

Methods

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval at Cornell and after obtaining parental consent, 208 (99 female) children ranging from 8-11 years old were recruited from seven ethnically and economically diverse schools. The study occurred during lunchtime on five consecutive days at each location. After selecting their lunch, each child was individually offered the opportunity to take one or more last items, either a free apple and/or a cookie.

On the first day of the study, both the apple and the cookie were offered without a sticker, as a *pre-test* control. This enabled us to calibrate a baseline preference for each child. On the last day of the study both the apple and cookie were offered without a sticker as a *post-test* control, to help us determine if the presence of stickers on the apple had any carry-over.

The remaining three days were intervention sessions. On one day, children were

offered a choice between an apple (without an icon) and a cookie that had a sticker of a familiar popular character (i.e., Elmo) on it. On another day, children were offered a choice between a cookie (without an icon) and an apple that had a sticker of the Elmo icon on it. On another day their choice was between a cookie (without an icon) and an apple with a sticker of an unknown character. On each day of the study, each child's choice (cookie, apple or both) were unobtrusively recorded, which served as the primary dependent variable for this study. Children were accustomed to knowing they could not take any lunch food home with them. The majority of children who selected a food ate at least a portion of the food. All analyses were 1-tailed tests and were performed using SPSS (version 16.0, SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL).

Results

As indicated in Figure 1, the Elmo sticker led children to nearly double their apple choice compared to pre-test control session ($\chi^2 = 2.355$, $p = .06$). On the other hand, there was no effect of the Elmo icon on the cookie ($\chi^2 = .007$, ns). Paired-samples t tests for the above comparisons were constructed by comparing the choices of children who participated in two intervention sessions, although overall sample size was decreased because not all children participated in all sessions. Consistent with the results of the chi-square test, there was a marginally significant effect suggesting that children were more likely to choose an apple when the Elmo icon was on it than when there was no icon (pre-test control), $t(78) = -1.65$, $p = .05$. On the other hand, there was no effect of the Elmo icon on the cookie, $t(82) = -1.18$, ns. In addition, there was the no effect of the unknown character icon on the apple choice compared with the pre-test control, $t(98) = -.41$, ns.

[Figure 1]

Comment

Overall we find preliminary evidence suggesting that subtle environmental interventions such as pairing healthy foods with the Elmo icons were effective in increasing healthy foods choice among school children.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Jennifer Cole Nobel, Laura E. Smith, and Josh Baylin for help with data collection. Special thanks to the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation for their support through their Healthy Eating Grant Program.

Dr. Wansink had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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Figure1. Elmo Stickers Increases Percentage Who Took Apples Compared to Control Sticker or No Sticker

