



CRITICAL INSIGHTS
STRATEGIC MARKET RESEARCH

HEALTHY MAINE PARTNERSHIPS
SUMMARY
OF
FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Prepared for:

CD&M Communications
and
Healthy Maine Partnerships

DRAFT

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Focus Groups • Surveys • Public Opinion Polling

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF REPORT

Healthy Maine Partnerships, in collaboration with its strategic marketing partner, CD&M Communications, is in the process of examining the attitudes and beliefs of families regarding physical activity and nutrition. This effort includes an assessment of both parents and children. To assist in these exploratory data gathering efforts, Healthy Maine Partnerships and CD&M Communications retained Critical Insights, a strategic market research firm based in Portland with extensive experience conducting research with disparate populations concerning social marketing issues.

The research will be used to provide direction for a communications campaign that will target family members with messages that are intended to be compelling endorsements of the benefits associated with attaining a healthier lifestyle. While cognizant of the challenges faced by some populations within the state, both CD&M and the Healthy Maine Partnerships are committed to a detailed understanding of the obstacles that may prove to be inhibiting factors in the ability to pursue a healthier lifestyle and to exploring efforts to increase the salience of the benefits of healthier choices concerning improved nutrition and increased physical activity.

The research involved conducting a series of qualitative inquiries among representative members of the target audiences in several distinct regions of the State. In August and September, qualitative assignments were conducted with low- to moderate-income parents in a number of regions across Maine. A separate report of results from these sessions was issued in October of 2002.

In late October of 2002, two companion discussion groups were conducted with young people age 11 to 14 in two regions of the state. This summary report will highlight the findings of these focus group inquiries.

In reading this report, it should be noted that although focus groups are powerful indices of consumer sentiment, the results of these qualitative inquiries do not have statistical significance. Particularly where only two groups have been conducted, the results should be viewed as leading to directional rather than statistically valid conclusions and are meant only to aid in strategic and marketing guidance.



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METHODOLOGY

Two groups were conducted for this research effort targeting middle school students age 11 through 14. A total of 22 Maine youth participated in the research effort. The table below summarizes the research plan:

Date	Audience	Location	Time
October 2	7 Youth	Calais Motor Inn	6:00
October 15	15 Youth	Shiretown Motor Inn, Houlton	6:00

Participants were professionally recruited using RDD by interviewers in the Critical Insights Information Center. Youth were further screened to exclude respondents who had recent previous focus group experience, as well as anyone with any close affiliations with advertising, market research or the media.

During the course of the approximately one-hour discussion sessions, young people in each group were asked to discuss their perceptions of proper nutrition, as well as incidence, circumstances and volume of soda consumption. In addition, respondents were asked to discuss in detail what they perceived to be the benefits of engaging in more physical activity and better nutritional choices. Similar to the parent groups, young people were also asked questions about eating vegetables and fruits, tobacco consumption, and exercise.

A copy of the discussion document used in this research effort has been appended to this report.



SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Following a brief introduction during which participants were informed of the anonymous format of the group, the need for honesty and candor, and the purpose and presence of videotaping and observers utilizing the closed circuit feed, the discussion began.

To provide a sense of context, young people were asked to indicate the size of their family and number of siblings. Notably, group participants came from large families. In Calais, all but one participant had at least one other sibling and all were the oldest or second oldest child in the family. In Houlton, all participants had at least one brother or sister and more than half of the fifteen participants came from families with at least three children.

EATING HABITS AND NUTRITION BELIEFS

- Most participants reported that their nutrition habits were merely fair. A few felt they ate well and a couple of male participants cavalierly indicated that their nutrition habits were poor.
- There was a general consensus among the group in defining foods that are healthy and nutritious. These foods included fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy products, breads, proteins, and foods containing calcium.
- The Calais group, as a whole, was well aware of the food pyramid and what it encompasses. In Houlton, there was little unaided awareness of the food pyramid, yet respondents mentioned each of its constituent parts individually.
- The Houlton group was brought through an additional exercise in which respondents were asked to cite foods that were not nutritious or were unhealthy. Candy, soda, and foods with large amounts of sugar were mentioned most frequently. Fat-laden foods (chips, French fries, etc.) were also noted.
- Approximately half of these participants bookend their day with meals at home (breakfast and dinner). A fair percentage of young people also indicated eating breakfast at school. In Calais, the majority of respondents ate breakfast and lunch at school.



- In Houlton, the discussion of school menus immediately followed a series of questions about nutritious vs. non-nutritious foods. Almost universally, young people lampooned school food as non-nutritious, citing such examples as pizza, burgers, desserts, and the availability of a la carte items such as candy, Pop Tarts, Hostess cakes, etc. either in the cafeterias or via in-school vending machines.
- More varied responses were encountered when participants were asked how often they ate out at restaurants, specifically fast food establishments. These responses included everything from once a week to every two months to almost every night.
- Respondents indicated that they are most likely to eat at fast food restaurants when the family is pressed for time. These time pressures to sit down and have a meal at home are most often due to parental commitments (work, other responsibilities, etc.) or children’s activities (sports, clubs, etc.) that keep the family unit split up and on the go.
- The vast majority of participants reported eating vegetables fairly frequently, with all claiming to eat them least twice a week and most reporting eating vegetables every night. According to these young people, vegetable consumption is a mix of fresh vegetables (typically in-season) as well as frozen/canned vegetables.
- While frozen and canned vegetables allow many families to always keep vegetables on hand, having fresh fruit available appears to be more of a challenge. Availability of fruits in the household is more fragmented, with some families appearing committed to having fruit on hand, while other households do not purchase fruits as often. A few respondents indicated the availability of fruits in school lunches.
- Notably, few participants indicated that their parents prohibited them from eating any foods. A few indicated that their parents tried to limit their consumption of certain foods, such as fast food, sweets (candy, ice cream, etc.), and soda.
- In Calais participants agreed that their parents did not talk to them about “health things.” Instead, information about health-related issues was reported to come from schools.



SODA CONSUMPTION, ATTITUDES, AND BELIEFS

- On a daily basis, participants reported drinking soda, water, juice, and milk.
- All participants reported drinking at least some soda. Consumption ranged from a glass or can a day up to several large (20 oz.) bottles of soda per day.
- Parental consumption of soda was spontaneously mentioned in Calais, with most of these youth noting that their mothers drank fairly copious amounts of soda.
- The sodas most often cited include Mountain Dew, colas, fruit sodas such as Sunkist or Crush, and new “extreme” sodas such as Red Fusion, Pepsi Blue, and others.
- Boys tended to report more soda consumption than did girls.
- Respondents claimed to like the taste of soda, claimed it was “fun” and associated with having a good time (hanging out with friends, going out, doing fun things, etc.), and also enjoyed the feeling of soda’s sugar rush.
- Vending machines for beverages appear quite common. In Calais, although several participants reported that their school had at least one drink vending machine, only one participant indicated that the machine contained soda. In Houlton, respondents claimed the machines had soda and juices (Fruitopia, etc.).
- Students reported drinking sodas from the school machines on a regular basis, most often after school and before heading home. In some schools, access to the machines is limited during school hours or is off-limits to younger students.
- In many cases, parents play a role in limiting, controlling, or – in some cases - - encouraging the amount of soda these young people consume. Examples ranged from an extreme where a young person was allowed to only drink water to a boy who was home schooled and claimed to drink several large bottles of Mountain Dew each day.



- Only a few participants reported that they super-sized their drinks at fast food restaurants when given the option. There appeared to be no regular pattern, even among those who claimed to super-size on occasion. One participant illustrated that the super-size option is viewed as a treat (e.g., “I usually get a medium unless my mom or dad decide to spoil me”), while others mentioned that they were more likely to super-size when they were going to be driving with their parents, taking a trip, or returning home from a game or event.
- When asked why adults might be concerned about young people drinking a lot of soda, themes such as sugar, hyperactivity, and a general sense of it “not being good for you” were most common. While few could quantify the amount of sugar in soda, most young people believed it to be a significant amount. Students demonstrated considerable awareness of a connection between soda and hyperactivity, mainly due to the sugar and caffeine found in soda.
 - A number of edgier students in the Houlton group exclaimed that they found this to be a significant benefit to drinking soda.
 - In Calais, many participants also reported that their parents and/or other adults had indicated that soda causes weight gain. Several female respondents related that their mothers had told them that soda “goes right to your thighs”.
 - Another male participant in Calais reported that there is “lots of bad stuff” in soda and that this is evidenced by the fact that “Coke can take rust off a nail.”
- When asked what sugar does to the body, participants all agreed that it “makes you hyper” and “there’s fat in it.” Most simply vaguely claimed that it was “bad for you.” One female participant also gave an example of a family member who couldn’t drink soda because it caused her blood sugar to increase.
 - There appears to be a minimal awareness of diabetes as being somehow linked to sugar among these students.



BEHAVIORAL CHANGE/REDUCTION IN SODA CONSUMPTION

- Few felt that they would ever stop drinking soda. Instead, they indicated that they might possibly decrease their soda drinking, but would always have soda “once in a while.”
- Boys appeared more reluctant to give up soda than were girls. Notably, after discussion of the negative aspects of soda, a number of girls in the Houlton group were quick to note that they wouldn’t have that difficult a time giving up soda as they “didn’t really drink that much soda.” This was contrary to earlier claims of significant soda consumption.
- Participants indicated that instead of soda, they would drink more of the other things young people typically drink: water, milk, and juice.
- Participants were then prompted with several nuggets of information concerning the effects of soda, notably weight gain, reduced energy/health, impact on appearance/complexion. After being informed of these potential effects, young people were queried as to the impact this information would have on their consumption of soda. Notably, these incentives had limited effect on participants. These young people were quick to dismiss these risks and rationalize their behavior.
- Weight gain appeared to be most plausible for respondents, who believe in the link between sugar and weight gain. However, many of these young people claim they are active, play sports, etc. so that weight gain is not a concern.
- Given the hyperactive side effects of soda, few respondents could draw the connection between reduced energy and soda consumption, aside from a “crash” following drinking a lot of soda.
- In middle school, concerns about complexion are limited and this motivation is likely less salient than it would be for a slightly older audience. Other respondents claimed to be comfortable with their complexion and not worried about possible negative consequences from what they eat or drink.



- When asked to compare soda to cigarettes and soda to candy, all participants stated that it would be much more difficult to give up cigarettes than soda due to the addictive properties of tobacco. By comparison, neither soda nor candy was technically seen as “addictive,” but by virtue of the presence of caffeine and also by consuming more soda than candy, soda was seen as being more difficult to quit.
- When asked what would be the first and/or easiest thing they personally could do to positively impact their health, a majority of participants reported increasing their exercise. Participants demonstrated a general awareness that in order to improve their health, they would simply need to exercise (e.g., take a walk or run) and eat in a healthy manner (e.g., fruits and vegetables). However, exercising was seen as a substantially easier lifestyle change in comparison to altering their diet or eliminating certain foods/beverages. For these young people, doing more of something they already feel they do a lot of (exercising) is seen as more palatable than changing their diets.

APPEARANCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

- A number of respondents parroted back dialogue and points of view on esteem and appearance they have likely learned in school, such as being comfortable with their bodies, etc.
- However, female participants appeared more likely to admit to having friends who worry about their weight.
- Generally, these young people appeared pleased with their appearance. Desired modifications focused more on things like hair color, eye color, and height than on body type or weight.
- All participants indicated that they know at least one person who is on a diet, but claimed that the diets were prompted more by health than by appearance concerns.
- When asked to define what being on a diet means, participants agreed that dieting meant eating “good food” and/or less food.



TOBACCO USE AND MARKETING

- In Calais, none of the participants claimed that they had ever tried cigarettes. However, these respondents are likely underreporting experimentation, as most did say, “almost everyone in our class does” or “almost everyone I know does.”
- In Houlton, a few participants – edgier girls, most commonly – reported experimenting with cigarettes. Similar to results from Calais, most claimed that they knew many people their age who smoke, often regularly.
- When asked why they believed these peers smoked, participants indicated that they think others smoke because they “think it’s cool.” When asked to clarify what they mean by “cool,” participants stated that other students see their parents/other adults smoking and that “everyone else is doing it so they want to do it too.” Participants reported that messages/images involving the illustration of health risks associated with smoking (e.g., lung cancer) and the amount of money wasted on cigarettes were the most effective in deterring them from smoking.
- When asked to identify the one thing that worries them the most about smoking, participants focused mainly on health concerns (vague mentions of “cancer”) and dealing with peer pressure. More specifically, health concerns were associated with “people dying of cancer because they smoked.” The fears of peer pressure were illustrated well by one female participant in Calais who indicated that she was worried that “someone will try to convince me to do it and when I say, ‘no,’ they will hate me.”
- Participants appeared quite savvy and knowledgeable regarding tobacco industry marketing. Most articulated that smoking was being depicted as fun, glamorous, etc.
- Similarly, many drew a parallel between the imagery in cigarette marketing and that of the soda and fast food industry, where marketers have enlisted teen-friendly pitchmen such as Shaquille O’Neal, Kobe Bryant, Shakira, and Britney Spears. Students appeared somewhat jaded and readily acknowledged that the presence of these celebrities indicated that they, as young people, were being targeted.



MEDIA ISSUES

- Much like soda consumption, TV viewing ranged widely and was predicated on parental controls. Some young people are allowed to watch very little while some claimed to watch two hours or more a day. On weekends, viewing tended to uptick slightly.
- Given that most students watch at least some TV and have access to the Internet, it was not surprising that TV and the web were cited as the most effective means of communication. TV was cited most often in Houlton, while the Internet was cited more frequently in Calais.
- Radio stations and music formats cited by respondents were oriented around rock, pop, and rap. Rappers such as Nelly and Eminem and a number of hard rock bands were cited.
- In Calais, more benign TV shows featured on Nickelodeon (Such as Sponge Bob) were mentioned as favorite programs. In Houlton, edgier programming on MTV (Cribs, DisMissed, Jackass, etc.) was mentioned, along with The Simpsons and a number of shows on teen-focused networks like the WB.
- The most popular youth websites include Email/instant messenger sites, sports (for boys), and girl-oriented sites (gurl.com). Other multi-media sites tied to TV shows and networks such as Nickelodeon, MTV and Disney were also mentioned.



STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

- Despite a fair awareness of the importance of nutritious foods and claims that they eat many vegetables, participants in both groups reported that they are currently practicing fair or even poor nutrition habits.
- While dinners at home appeared to be reasonably nutritious, a strong majority of young people reported eating out at fast food establishments at least once a week. Lifestyle issues and other commitments on the part of both parents and children sometimes necessitate eating “on the go”.
- Parents serve as role models for their children with regard to habits concerning diet, soda consumption, and smoking. However, even among those young people with positive parental role models in the area of nutrition, a significant amount of time is spent at school and with friends, beyond the range of parental supervision.
- The amount of vegetables participants reported eating was highly dependent upon what was served to them by their parents at dinner. Few young people report partaking in any of the available vegetable dishes at school. However, most claim to have vegetables with their dinner most nights, if not every night. The notable exceptions would be dinners out, particularly at fast food establishments.
- Participants received the majority of their information about health related issues at school. Young people claimed that their parents do not spend a great deal of time discussing health-related issues at home.
- Participants perceived soda consumption to be highly related to hyperactivity, with a clear acknowledgement on the part of young people of the role of sugar in increased hyperactivity.
- Notably, for young people, there is a strong connection between foods/beverage being deemed “unhealthy” and the sugar content of these foods and drinks. Over time, young people appear to have been ingrained with the notion that sugar=bad and, consequently, unhealthy.
- In addition to sugar, participants were aware of other “bad things” in soda, such as caffeine. Additionally, a few students were vaguely aware of other properties of soda, such as the ability for Coke to “take rust off a nail.”



- In a hierarchy of harm, young people clearly see smoking as worse than either eating too much candy or drinking too much soda. This is not surprising, as most young people can clearly articulate drastic negative consequences from smoking. However, soda is seen as relatively benign; students do acknowledge that they occasionally drink too much soda and that the sugar and caffeine can have an impact, but there is really nothing other than a vague awareness of ultimately negative consequences.
- Many young people dismiss the potential risks associated with drinking soda. Concerns about weight gain from sugar are seen as addressable via additional exercise. Indeed, most young people see engaging in additional exercise as more feasible and desirable for them as opposed to eliminating soda consumption from their lifestyle. Among other risks, given the high sugar content of soda, few students can comprehend the notion of reduced energy from drinking soda. Finally, middle school-aged students were less concerned about appearance/complexion issues than would be older students.
- Participants did not see parents an effective route to disseminate information. Instead, participants cited TV, the Internet and school (e.g., teachers) as a valuable way to gain access to information.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- Introduction of participants
- Get number of children in household, gender and age
- Topic: Healthy Eating and Exercise
- Ground Rules: All opinions are valid; No consensus required, etc.

NUTRITION/HEALTHY EATING

- What do you consider to be nutritious? How would you describe your nutrition habits? (GOOD, FAIR, POOR)
- What do you consider to be a healthy diet?
- Approximately how many meals a day do you eat at home? At school? At restaurants? At fast food restaurants?
- What do you typically drink when you are thirsty?
 - Probe for approximate daily consumption of water, soda, milk, juice
 - How much soda do you typically drink at home?
 - Do your parents try to restrict the amount of soda you drink?
- Does your consumption of soda change on the weekend? In what way? Why?
- Do you buy soda at school? How frequently? For how much?
- When you get together with your friends, what do you typically drink ?
- What about when you go out to fast food restaurants?
 - How frequently do you supersize your meal?
 - How frequently do you supersize your drink?
- There has been some discussion recently about the fact that soda consumption among kids is at an all-time high. Do you know why this is a concern?
- Is ten teaspoons of sugar a lot to have in a serving of soda?
 - Why is there so much concern about sugar?
 - What does sugar do to the body?



- Do you typically drink diet soda or regular?
 - Is diet soda healthier?

APPEARANCE

- On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with your current weight/appearance?
- Have you dieted to lose weight in the past twelve months? Have you ever tried dieting? Probe with which diet? How long?

NUTRITION

- How often do you eat fruits and vegetables?
- What would it take for you to eat fruits and vegetables every day?

CHANGE

- What would it take for you to stop drinking soda?
- What would you drink instead?
- If you knew that cutting back on soda...
 - might cause you to lose weight, would you be inclined to cut back?
 - might give you more energy and make you healthier?
 - might affect your looks?
- Which do you think would be easier to give up: soda or cigarettes? Why?

TOBACCO USE

- How many of you smoke? (Frequency?)
- How many have tried cigarettes?
- What is the most appealing part of smoking?
- What concerns you the most about smoking?
- What messages / images make you the most uncomfortable about tobacco use? (list) Why?



- Do you feel that the soda manufacturers target you? The tobacco companies target you? Why?

ADDITIONAL

- What would be the easiest thing you could do tomorrow to improve your health?
- What is the best way to get information to you?
- What is your favorite:
 - Radio station?
 - Music?
 - TV show?
 - Website?

