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McDonald's joins OH walking clubs to reduce obesity

Craig McGuire - 2 Jan 2006 00:00

Even before weathering negative publicity from bestsellers (*Fast Food Nation*), documentaries (*Super Size Me*), and a slew of lawsuits blaming it for the bulging waistlines of obese nugget noshers, fast-food goliath McDonald's Restaurants saw the ketchup on the wall.

The "Eat Smart, Be Active" initiative was launched under first-year CEO Jim Cantalupo. More chicken and entree salads were added to the menu, as healthy options, such as fruit, were introduced into Happy Meals. And lest we forget, the Super Size option on the menu was phased out last year.

Along the way, co-ops, or local collections of franchises, have been implementing initiatives to endear themselves to their Oak Brook, IL, parent.

For McDonald's Restaurants co-op of Northeastern Ohio (NEO), that meant expanding its "Get On The Go Northeast Ohio" (GGNEO) program and targeting African-American communities.

Strategy

With the obesity rate in Northeast Ohio at a hefty 58.1%, the need for physical activity, along with a sensible diet, is obvious.

In 2004, when NEO kicked off the GGNEO program as part of a collaboration with Stern Public Relations, it saw 102 walking clubs established in 19 different counties.

"It was a great reaction, but we knew we could do better, as the majority of the members were seniors and young people," says Laura Hegedus, an AE at Stern. "We especially made an effort to extend the program into the African-American community that makes up such an important part of our customer base in the area."

As it did the previous year, McDonald's NEO partnered with Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS), a national nonprofit, noncommercial weight loss support group with more than 200 local chapters.

To drum up interest in the African-American community, the co-op recruited an African-American spokesperson, physician Dr. Rita Beckford, a.k.a. "Dr. B."

Her DVD, Home With Dr. B, teaches people how to fight diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease by way of healthier choices, including exercise.

"Dr. B not only talks the talk, she walks the walk, having lost over 80 pounds," Hegedus says. "She is a very impressive, compelling person and was a perfect fit for this campaign."

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Tactics

Coordinating a multi-layer campaign drawing together McDonald's NEO, the TOPS organization, and Dr. B. Stern executed a publicity program to attract interest to new walking clubs planned for the Cleveland, Akron, Canton, and Youngstown areas.

Internal memos were issued to all restaurants advising the crew about the program and providing information on how to respond to customer queries.

An online initiative was launched, including the creation of a website that showed the benefits of walking regularly and detailed instructions on how to join a local club.

Participating radio partners were secured and furnished with club information and logos for their websites.

Each walking club met weekly for 16 weeks and chose a captain and co-captain who recruited members, collected and submitted waiver forms, distributed club materials, submitted monthly club logs, and awarded McDonald's Premium Salad coupons for perfect attendance.

Results

"McDonald's has always been a strong proponent of PR, and we fully realize that the life of the brand is dependent on proper messaging," says Joe Woods, regional marketing manager, McDonald's Ohio Region. "The better we tell our story, the more successful we are. But, as was the case here, sometimes you just can't tell your story in ads."

This year, 412 GGNEO walking clubs with nearly 3,000 members in 19 counties were established, representing a 300% increase, with 300 clubs in the African-American community.

Dr. B was featured on WKYC-TV 3 (NBC) exercising with local GGNEO walking clubs. Also, a feature story on Dr. B and the GGNEO walking clubs appeared on the front page of the "Arts & Life" section in *The Plain Dealer*.

Future

Woods says he has already fielded calls from his counterparts in various regions across the US interested in implementing similar programs.

PR team: McDonald's of Northeast Ohio (Columbus, Ohio) and Stern Public Relations (Pepper Pike, OH)

Campaign: Get On The Go Northeast Ohio walking clubs

Time frame: June 5 to September 18, 2005

Budget: \$25,000

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