



McDonald's New Communication Strategy on Changing Attitudes and Lifestyle

Tianbai Deng

MBA Marketing, SolBridge International School of Business

Daejeon 305-340, South Korea

E-mail: dengtianbai@hotmail.com

Abstract

Achieving and maintaining wide-scale positive dietary and lifestyle change is a complex and formidable endeavor, given the current food environment. Moreover, for positive change to occur, nutrition messages should be communicated in a scientifically precise, yet practical and motivating manner. McDonald's tries its best to adapt communication strategies to changing situation.

In the paper, discussions regarding communication efforts and the best methods to take, deliver, and evaluate the impact of nutrition messages illustrated both the challenges and the opportunities McDonald's is facing.

The description of communication analysis, channels and strategies illustrate McDonald's communication strategies in the near future.

Keywords: McDonald's, Communication strategies, Lifestyle change

1. Analysis of the Situation

1.1 Health situation in America

Nowadays, some two-thirds of Americans are overweight, roughly 30 percent of American children are overweight or obese, and Big Macs and super-size French fries have drawn criticism and lawsuits for McDonald's promoting obesity. Governments and influential health advocates around the world blame the marketers for explosion in childhood obesity. Many countries have taken some measures to ban fast food TV advertisings with the cartoon character directly to children, force fast food advertisings to include healthy-eating messages, or take greater self-regulations.

1.2 McDonald's Key Issue

To respond to the global criticism and "Super Size Me" negative effects on McDonald's, McDonald's has already done a lot of active marketing and communication strategies to avoid such negative effects on the brand image: broke a "Change" campaign that replaced McDonald's Golden Arches with a question mark to show its dramatic change on food nutrition structure, promoted menu changes with healthier salad, fruit...and small portion size, offered "Happy Meal" for adults and children, encouraging a balanced and healthy lifestyle...

Despite McDonald's great effort on changing people's attitude towards McDonald's and making public aware of new healthy products without abandoning the Arches, research showed that the chain hadn't received the hoped-for awareness for some of the newer items on its menu and frequent users didn't like to admit to friends that they ate at McDonald's. With the commission to helping solve the U.S. obesity problem and advocating a balanced lifestyle between daily calorie intake and physical activity, McDonald's found although people know a lot about the balanced food and healthy lifestyle, it is still very difficult to change people's behavior of keeping on taking junk foods in McDonald's and to associate McDonald's brand image with healthy food.

1.3 SWOT Analysis

Strength:

- Strong brand name and reputation
- Sales increased 7.4% in 2008, confidence market toward McDonald.
- Strong and wide communication channel in the market.

Weakness:

- Narrow product lines.

- McDonald brand association as junk foods.

Opportunity:

- Opportunity to enlarge market, the consumers who care about healthy issue.
- Slightly changing market brand image about McDonald.

Threat:

- Changing taste of the consumers.
- Public attack about obesity issue.

1.4 Core of McDonald's Current Problem

The core of the current problem is that people still keep on buying only junk foods in McDonald's although they know much about what is healthy and nutritional food, what can damage his health; people still think McDonald's is a junk food restaurant although it also provides healthy foods. Also, the confusion and skepticism about fast food nutrition messages are contributing to the problem.

The media today are full of information about nutrition. News about health and fitness can be found almost daily on television. Most major newspapers devote regular columns to nutrition, health, and dieting. Even the Internet focuses on health—a recent Google search revealed over 46,000,000 Web sites related to the terms “nutrition advice.”

Americans report that they do indeed use the media as a source of information about nutrition, and that television (72%) and magazines (58%) are relied upon more often for nutritional guidance than are family and friends (17%). (The American Dietetic Association, <http://www.eatright.org>) At the same time, many adults also feel that the media contain information that is often confusing and contradictory. In one recent study, adults who reported more confusion and skepticism about nutrition messages in the media also were more likely to eat a fat-laden diet. (Patterson RE, Satia JA, Kristal AR, Neuhouser ML, Drewnowski A, 2001) The authors of the study speculated that the proliferation of media information may be contributing to a nutrition backlash among certain subgroups of people.

2. Communication Analysis

2.1 New Campaign Objectives

According to the current situation, McDonald's designs a new communication campaign to change the dietary behaviors of a large number of people, including potential health-oriented customers and frequent junk food users. McDonald's new communication Campaign called “Happy Exercise And Love Touch Health (HEALTH)” project, in partnership with WHO, nutritionists, local communities, fitness centers and various media channels, etc. This campaign initially is planned to be carried out in U.S. during one year and later it will be brought into effect in other countries all over the world adaptively.

McDonald's HEALTH campaign includes organized, communication-based interventions aimed at different groups of people and social marketing efforts that include communication activities.

McDonald's are to take more social responsibility to serve for two Objectives:

- 1) To change the image of Mc. Donald from the junk food restaurant to become friendly and healthy food restaurant. This objective has a purpose to attract those who are health-oriented and pay much attention on healthy foods and healthy lifestyle, enlarging the market.
- 2) To change behavior of the existing consumers who are keeping on taking only junk foods, persuading frequent fast food users to change their lifestyle by buying balanced meal with McDonald's traditional foods and new healthy foods together.

Clearly, McDonald's nutrition promoters are facing some major challenges because achieving and maintaining wide-scale positive dietary change is a complex and formidable endeavor. Moreover, for positive change to occur, McDonald's need to design nutrition messages that attract attention, make sense, and help to encourage change in people's established attitudes and behaviors to the target audience in a scientifically precise, yet practical and motivating manner. McDonald's will concern much more on how people interpret particular messages in the media and on what types of messages are more effective with which types of target audiences from the perspectives of communication and psychology.

2.2 Target Audiences

One of the most important tasks for McDonald's communicators is to know the audience. Because different people are influenced by messages in different ways, if they fail to attract attention or they are misinterpreted, it will do no effects on people and waste a lot of money on marketing.

Therefore, in McDonald's case, audiences could be segmented in terms of age, current dietary practices, existing nutritional attitudes and eating behaviors.

As reported, the American Dietetic Association, segments adults into three groups based on public opinion polls of people's nutritional beliefs and behaviors. The first group, the "I'm already doing it" segment, consists of individuals who are knowledgeable about nutrition and are already eating healthfully and exercising. This segment, which accounts for approximately 38% of adults, is presumably eager for the latest nutrition information and does not need strong persuasive tactics. The second group, the "I know I should but ..." segment, constitutes about 30% of adults. These people are knowledgeable about nutrition and believe healthful eating is important, but they do not necessarily practice health-promoting behaviors. Health messages for this group need to overcome behavioral rather than attitudinal resistance. The final group, the "don't bother me" segment, is the toughest to change. About 32% of adults do not care, are in denial, or have other concerns that seem more crucial. They are not likely to pay much attention to nutrition information in the news or in health campaigns. (The American Dietetic Association, <http://www.eatright.org>)

Referring to the segmentation by the American Dietetic Association and other elements such as McDonald's current socially responsible target marketing considered, we would like to use psychographic segmentation to target on two general categories of audiences on the basis of knowledge of health, attitude and opinion of McDonald's.

One segment is "I'm already doing it" segment that is really caring about healthy lifestyle and considering McDonald's foods as only junk foods.

The other one is those that frequently go to eat in McDonald's and do not want to buy healthy foods in McDonald's. In this segment, "I know I should but ..." group and "Don't bother me" group are included. Why we segment them together? Actually there is no obvious boundary between their attitudes since their attitudes can be changing all the time through nutrition information sources. Even if they have different attitudes towards health, their behavior of lifestyle is almost the same and most of them are sensitive about social acceptance and the opinion of others.

If we sub-segment the second segmentation, it can be:

One is *young people* who can easily change attitudes and accept new ideas and paying much attention on beauty and figure. McDonald's strategy can be targeted from the perspective of "beauty-shaping".

One category is *children* who really believe someone whom they like such as Ronald. If they get the message of "1 hamburger + 1 salad + 1 game=1 healthy love", they can be willing to accept that and try to persuade their families to change bad eating styles.

Another group is *adults* who frequently go to McDonald's. Most of them start to care about their health but cannot stop eating McDonald's. "Keep eating ours in a healthier way" seems good news for them.

2.3 Source Factors

One question that should be asked to McDonald's is whether the source of the message matters, whether we should the source of a dietitian or a celebrity or a "typical" consumer. These sources differ on several dimensions, most importantly in terms of credibility and attractiveness. Based on theories, a source can be considered credible based on at least two characteristics: expertise and trustworthiness. A registered dietitian (RD) is likely to be credible because she possesses special knowledge about the topic. Indeed, 90% of Americans believe that RDs are highly credible sources of information on the epidemic of obesity. (The American Dietetic Association, <http://www.eatright.org>)

Therefore, McDonald's HEALTH campaign messages use sources that possess both dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness to target on "I'm already doing it" segmentation because for this segment, trying McDonald's foods have high performance risk which cannot be taken easily through some sources which are not expert and trustworthy;

For the second segment which includes "I know I should but ..." and "Don't bother me", it is easier for McDonald's to use an attractive source to persuade them to try Healthy foods when they buy junk foods. And also they are sensitive about social acceptance and the opinions of others, so the attractive source and "typical" consumers can be effective for the second segmentation.

Sometimes, to maximize effectiveness, it's better to have a source that is both attractive and credible, but sometimes that combination is not possible. And it's difficult and risky to choose attractive spokespersons to show up as an expert. So maybe it's better for McDonald's to choose three kinds of endorsers: one is a dietitian who is expert and trustworthy; one is a sports star whose image and that of McDonald's new products he or she endorses is similar, which is called match-up hypothesis; another one is a nonhuman endorser who comes from the original Ronald but has the green color to show very strong health message.

2.4 Message Factors

Selecting the most appropriate source is only part of the challenge in creating a persuasive message. Additional issues must be confronted when the actual content of the message is designed. Four message strategies are particularly important:

- Whether to draw a firm conclusion in the message

- Whether to present a 1-sided or 2-sided message
- Whether to use fear appeals
- Whether to use examples or statistics

2.4.1 Drawing a Firm and Explicit Conclusion

Should a persuasive message explicitly draw conclusions, or should the message be crafted in an implicit way that encourages receivers to figure out the conclusions on their own? The research literature is pretty consistent here—persuasive messages that have an explicit conclusion or recommendation are more effective than are those that do not, according to a meta-analysis of such studies; Other evidence suggests that even with a highly motivated and intelligent target audience, explicit conclusions work better. (J.E. Maddux and R.W. Rogers, 1980) One likely explanation for this advantage is that vague messages leave room for receivers to draw inaccurate or even extremist conclusions. Along the same lines, McDonald's message should be given by an explicit recommendation by advocating a very specific course of action. For example, McDonald's ads can be one dietitian recommend a young mother who is worrying about children's health of eating McDonald's a lot that "1 hamburger + 1 salad + 1 game=1 healthy life", then the detailed instruction and nutrition structure can be learned by mothers and show their love to their children, which is more effective than offering only general guidelines.

2.4.2 Giving Two-sided Argument Messages

When we concern about whether to deal openly with opposing viewpoints, we decide to choose 2-sided message which presents both positive and negative sides of the McDonald's health issue because audiences today are exposed to so many competing and even contradictory messages. By using refutational arguments such as "Super Size Me" discussion, McDonald's can increase its source credibility by reducing reporting bias.

But we should control very well about the negative side: For the criticism to McDonald's, for example, we can present the opposition--"Super Size Me" movie and then rigorously refute it with evidence from another experiment to show that fat is caused by excess calories and less exercise but not McDonald's food. If you eat smartly and scientifically in McDonald's, we can also enjoy the foods there without getting fat.

2.4.3 Using Fear Appeals

McDonald's might hand on the nutrition message by using this strategy, for example, if it included vivid graphic information or a virtual experiment about the health risks associated with a high-fat diet to scare frequent fast food eaters. But later an effective response or scientific instruction should be followed to eliminate the excess fear.

2.4.4 Providing statistics or examples

McDonald's might show provide some statistics in their message together with vivid examples because we can touch different targeting audience at the same time, such as rational parents and playful children.

In a word, based on the particular theoretical perspective, the ELM, McDonald's should help differentiate audiences with different messages in terms of cognitive processing and elaboration. The "I'm already doing it" segmentation that is highly motivated and likes to think critically about health will use the central route; we should focus closely on the arguments and evidence in dealing with the message. "I know I should but..." and "Don't bother me" segmentations that are less motivated and who are less capable of understanding health issues will use the peripheral route; we can employ cognitive shortcuts and focus more on superficial aspects of a message.

3. Communication and consumer's behavior strategy

3.1 Preferred Channels of Communication

For McDonald's psychographic segmentation and the need of passing different messages, the HEALTH campaign focuses on advertising on TV or radio or magazines, print such as brochures, posters, scientific reports and Public Relations such as event, endorsements, and some new channels like internet and cell phone, etc.

3.2 Communication Strategy and Promotion

- Introducing of a new clown.

Ronald is now familiar with white-face, in a canary-yellow jumpsuit, and a fire-engine red wig. Ronald is still being strategically re-fashioned. In 1998, refashion Ronald's hair and increase the width of the red stripes on his socks.

The idea is to introducing the new endorser into Mc. Donald, called Ronnie. With this *product line extension (in this case, the new product represented by the new character)*, we would like to represent the healthier food with Ronnie. Ronnie is the same exact character like Ronald, the only thing that differentiate the two of them is their color. If Ronald has red to dominate his cloth, Ronnie has green. The color green represents life; Abundant in nature, green signifies growth, renewal, health, and environment (<http://desktoppub.about.com>).

The strategy is to put them together in every occasion so that people will notice that here in Mc. Donald, we have

something new to introduced that is healthy foods such as Salad topped with a grilled or crispy chicken breast, salad with free choice of Newman's Own all natural salad dressings, two sides of vegetables with each salad purchased. A Fruit and Walnut was added in 2005 that provides 2.5 servings of the daily recommended fruit for adults.

- **Healthy Meal Package**

The idea is to offering packages which have salad included with the cheaper price. The cheaper price for this salad packages have an objective to attract the existing consumers to switch their behavior to become healthier food with the lower price offered.

The lower price is the tool for *reinforce the consumer* to consume more healthy food.

- **Free Sport Coupon**

This strategy is made for the existing consumers who like to consume less healthy food in Mc. Donald: after the fifth times they come to McDonald, they deserve for swim free coupon. This free coupon will give the consumers a chance to exercise themselves and change their behavior toward exercise. McDonald has to collaborate with the existing sport center to build this strategy.

This strategy is a *form of positive reinforcement with reward*. The consumers expected to learn that exercise is really good for their life style balance.

- **Two meals at one price**

Another way to get an effective communication strategy is through *buzz marketing*. With this strategy we can get lots of advantage because the consumers themselves who do the marketing for us. The only matter is we have to create the right buzz and deliver it to them correctly; otherwise the buzz marketing will goes to another way than we expect it.

To create buzz, we planned to make an event for six months where people can buy two meals at one price in the particular hours. Since they can buy two healthy meals, they have to buy the food and eat in the restaurant and no take away. This event will encourage people to search for their pair to eat together in McDonald. This will create the buzz because the only way to get the discount, they have to find their pair at that time. Think about how many people will search for their pair and create the buzz for McDonald about the "healthy hours" in McDonald.

- **Donations**

People will feel good when they generate their money for other people who need it. With this consumers behavior we can create the donation program. For every healthy food that they buy from McDonald, we will generate 1% from the total amount of the transaction. This program expected to create a good buzz about McDonald especially the healthy menu in McDonald. This event can change McDonald image in the society, they will notice that McDonald do have healthy menus.

- **Negative Reinforcement.**

We are also using advertising as our strategy to change McDonald's consumers. In this case, we use *negative reinforcement*. People will shown the negative impact if they never take an exercise on their daily routine. The audiences are expected to avoid the scene with start to change their behavior with buy healthier food and/or exercise more.

- **Cell Phone**

Everybody has a cell phone right now. In 1994, 16 million Americans subscribed to cellular phone services. Today, more than 110 million Americans are subscribers. Some experts predict that worldwide subscribership reached 1.2 billion people by 2005 (<http://www.networkworld.com>). This means we can use cellular phone in our campaign and become more effective to communicate our message that McDonald has health menus. With this campaign, expected the audience will notice about the new McDonald and start to buy healthy food in McDonald.

- **Merchandising, credit card and on line order.**

As we know, McDonald produces many types of merchandise for their young consumers. We just like to add organic icons for their merchandise such as fruits and vegetables. We also will give free salad for consumers who pay with the credit card or on line orders. This reinforcement should communicate the message that McDonald is now selling the healthy food.

4. Conclusion

Some types of evaluation such as media clips, phone calls, surveys, blogs, interviews or reviews can be efficient ways to evaluate and research further about McDonald's communication performance and prepare for improvement all the time.

To conclude we would say that the voices of the people as those health advocates and other communities cannot be stopped and there is no end of this game. These issues would be raised again but what we need is to change the consumer's attitudes. We can maximize our wealth by changing consumer's attitudes. And by following this communication strategy we can make our all stakeholders happy.

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