

FLASH! THE NETHERLANDS LIFESTYLE CAMPAIGN FOR THE PROMOTION OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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Context

More than half the Dutch population exercises too little or hardly at all. Taking exercise is crucial for health in general and the prevention of various chronic illnesses in particular. In addition, there is an important social dimension to sports and physical exercise, such as preventing isolation and promoting integration and the quality of life at local levels. It is therefore essential to promote physical activity. Taking insufficient exercise means that people are not complying with the agreed 'Dutch Standard for Healthy Physical Activity' (NNGB in Dutch). According to this standard, adults should engage in moderately intensive physical activity at least 30 minutes each day, five days a week. Children and teenagers should exercise one hour a day, seven days a week. Only 45% of the population aged 13 and over actually meets this standard. Differences in terms of gender, economic class and ethnic origin are insignificant. From the age of 15, and most notably from the age of 65, physical activity is clearly on the decline. The figures indicating decreased participation in sports activities are even more dramatic. However, compared to other European countries, the Dutch are fairly active.

In recent years, all sections of the population have become increasingly aware of the importance of physical activity, an awareness also supported by medical research. Not taking sufficient exercise drives up absenteeism and health care costs. Because of these developments, the government has set out its targets in a Sports, Physical Activity and Health policy paper (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2001). One of these is to set up a campaign.

The result is the Flash! Campaign, which aims to encourage physical activity in the broadest sense. Its focus is not only on organised sports. As important in contributing to an active lifestyle is everyday exercise such as cycling, walking to work and gardening. However, there has been a dramatic change in these kinds of activities in the past 50 years. Due to cars, televisions and computers, physical activity is no longer a daily necessity – nowadays, exercising is a choice, and if it is linked to health, this choice is seldom made. For these reasons, the campaign focuses on physical activity as one of the key lifestyle themes.

The Netherlands Institute for Sport and Physical Activity (NISB) was commissioned to mount a campaign to promote physical activity. The design of the 2003-2007 Flash! Campaign was inspired by fairly successful campaigns held in Australia, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Scotland and Canada in recent years. These experiences have taught us about the effectiveness of the media in achieving campaign targets, factors that help create support in society and the importance of setting up sub-campaigns focusing on attitude change.

A number of quantitative targets have been formulated for the campaign; I give just two illustrations: First, 50% of all adults had heard of the NNGB by mid-2006; second, the percentage of Dutch people not engaging in physical activity was reduced from 12% in 1988 to 10% in 2006.

The campaign focuses on three target groups:

- The Dutch population and settings where many individuals perform below the NNGB standard such as primary schools, schools for pre-vocational secondary education, businesses and homes for the elderly.
- the intermediary organisations involved in health promotion in the above settings such as area health authorities, Provincial Sports Councils, Occupational Health and Safety services and social welfare organisations.

Project/partners

The campaign has both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. Information distributed by the media in the form of government advertisements and documentary soaps support local, more personal approaches in specific target group settings. Given the aims of the campaign, the strategies overlap. The Flash! approach is to consult with each target group and identify opportunities and constraints for promoting physical activity. Targets are developed in and with the groups. The emphasis is on the local level since this is where changes have to occur and where attitude change is best promoted. The media can be used to highlight local activities and help persuade people to take part.

The approach of holding six sub-campaigns in different settings was chosen to enable us to comply with each target group's wishes, thus creating a persuasive impact. After all, health is best promoted in settings where people work, play and love. Flash! aims to encourage people to engage more in physical activity, making them realise it can be fun to exercise every day as well as promoting good health. Instead of taking a moralistic attitude, the campaign focuses on what the target groups consider feasible. Obviously, the Flash! Campaign is plan-based, but much depends on the people available and the support given by the partners in the various settings as well as local circumstances.

The government required NISB to obtain co-funding from market parties. Fortunately, we have been successful in deploying both sustainable entrepreneurship and marketing in our campaign. Additional funding has allowed us to carry out local activities in the various settings. This encouraged the intermediary organisations involved to contribute to the campaign.

The campaign's mixed approach is in line with a cyclic model. According to this model, a campaign can appeal to four successive emotions or attitudes, namely inducement, information, encouragement and support.

Results

After eighteen months, the NIPO market research institute published the first campaign results in September 2004: 46% of the adult population is aware of the NNGB standard. This percentage should rise to 50% by 2005/2006. The results are mainly due to the large number of public organisations communicating our message, notably health insurance companies and the Dutch consumers' association.

Local plans are assessed in periodic evaluation reports in which supply is evaluated and where possible adapted. 50% of intermediary organisations are currently actively involved in the campaign. Well over 700 organisations have submitted plans and at least 300 of these are to have a structural impact.

Discussion

There is much discussion about the Flash! Campaign, covering a wide variety of topics and dilemmas. Some of these might be interesting for this conference:

- * involving the food and beverages industry as sponsors
- * the combined deployment of media momentum and local networks associated with specific settings
- * the possibility of establishing a scientific basis for an approach such as ours.

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