Ancestors’ Choice™ Environmental Strategy for Prevention of Childhood Obesity in Native Populations

BACKGROUND OF STUDY:

American Indians and Alaska Natives suffer the highest rates of health disparities, including obesity, where diet and lifestyle are key risk factors. Behavior change interventions attempted to date with AIANs have incorporated Native cultural components in hopes of somehow making it culturally relevant, as opposed to starting with Native culture and Indigenous wisdom as the community strength and foundation upon which to stimulate the motivation for and design of an intervention. This project developed from groundwork prepared in the Community Health and Development Department for a social marketing campaign entitled Ancestors’ Choice™ (AC), which promotes the choice for healthy dietary habits and lifestyles based in the wisdom of traditional Native values and culture. Ancestors’ Choice™ is a strategy to assist Native people living in the ‘real world’ to make healthier diet and lifestyle choices that in essential ways honor and emulate the practices and principles in contemporary times, which produced the health benefits of the peoples who lived during ancestral times. There is considerable evidence indicating that an approach, which encourages Native peoples in the direction of Ancestors’ Choice™, through culturally competent social marketing strategies, may result in improved health outcomes in these communities.

The hypothesis for this study was: “When messages attempting to motivate healthy eating habits in Native children, youth and teens are culturally congruent, when products have packaging and taste appeal, and when they are made readily available in the environments where children congregate, they will purchase/choose and consume healthier foods, snacks and drinks.”

The three aims of the study were 1) To tailor the campaign to address children, youth and teens of the Flathead Indian Reservation with emphasis on the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d’Oreille (Tribes) cultures 2) To evaluate its impact on brand name recognition and sales/consumption of Ancestors’ Choice™ labeled items with children, youth and adults, and 3) To further develop a RezChef™ cooking class to include cooking shows with children, youth and teens to be aired on public television and made available complete with healthy eating curriculum to include teacher’s guide and DVD for Rocky Mountain plateau tribes.

METHODS:

Participants in the study included people of American Indian or Alaska Native descent between the ages of 3 and 75 currently residing on or near the Flathead Reservation. Participants were invited to ‘taste–test’ products being considered for endorsement by the Ancestors’ Choice™ Social Marketing campaign. Participants were invited to provide input through focus groups on the social marketing messages with roots and connections to traditional culture that would have market appeal, guide decisions on channels of
distribution, tastes and local preferences. A family-friendly Indigenous Nutrition class and a play with a premier public performance called “Beansy and Peasy Choose Ancestors’ Choice™” was written by a local member of the Tribes. The performance premiered in December, 2009 with actors recruited from the Indigenous Nutrition class and community. It was later used as a teaching tool during a Traditional Cultural Encampment for the local Head Start staff and their families during the summer of 2010. This was requested of the SKC Community Health and Development Department, which may be attributed to the increased brand name recognition of the AC social marketing campaign. Future performances are planned with children and youth actors and audiences throughout the Reservation. Another local member wrote a poem, which was put to music and is planned for inclusion in the AC healthy lifestyles curriculum, with the intent of appealing to and reaching across the generations as storytelling, music and performing arts do so well in tribal communities.

Pre-Post surveys were conducted with various children, youth and adults throughout the Reservation to ascertain brand name recognition for Ancestors’ Choice™ and RezChef™. Youth groups were interviewed through focus groups at the beginning of the study to enlist their involvement in developing the Social Marketing Campaign for promoting healthy eating messages to children and youth. Taste-testing events were conducted for snacks, drinks, and menus developed through the RezChef™ programs. Recipes receiving youth approval were included with the RezChef™ DVDs.

As formative research, methods did not involve a control group, placebo or blinding of any kind. Data collection included in-person questionnaires and focus groups or tasting events where people were invited to sample the foods offered. All questionnaires and data collection procedures were developed or reviewed by the PI, Ms. Anita Dupuis, MBA, MPH, and approved by the Salish Kootenai College Independent Review Board, which has the independent authority to approve all health-related research involving human subjects.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS:**

Baseline pre-test results showed limited recognition of the AC logo with only 6% (3 respondents) indicating they had seen it in the pretest and 94% (44 respondents) who had either never seen it, or didn’t recall seeing it. Twenty-five percent recognized the logo in the posttest, as indicated in Figure 1, below graphically represents the 19% increase in brand name recognition. While convenience samples were taken at both pre and post surveys, this study was conducted during the initial stages of introducing
AC to this community, and a conscious effort was made by the data gatherers to not re-
survey those who were included in the pre-test. This dramatic difference indicates that
efforts are beginning to show success in building brand-name recognition for Ancestors’
Choice and RezChef™ on the parts of children, youth and adults within the Flathead
Indian Reservation community.

When asked where respondents had seen the AC logo, the locations named were Salish
Kootenai College (SKC), the two community pow wows, a women’s health fair, the local
SKC television station, college basket ball games where Ancestors’ Choice™ smoothies
were sold, and events hosted by the SKC Community Health and Development
Department.

Respondents were asked to respond to the question; What comes to mind when you look at
the Ancestors’ Choice™ Logo?

Figure 1 indicates that the majority of the respondents who have seen the logo are getting
the messages intended. The key messages are that it is culturally ‘Native’, promotes
‘traditional’ lifestyles, and that it is about being healthy and making healthy choices in
both diet and lifestyles. Similar results were demonstrated for recognition of the
RezChef™ logo.

Figure 1. Survey respondents who ‘got’ the message of honoring and
practicing traditional diets and lifestyles and making healthy choices.
Results indicate that, the AC logo in particular, is sending the message intended. In answer to the question: “What comes to mind when you look at the AC logo?” responses included “traditional lifestyles, togetherness, unity, smoothies, Native culture, Indian wisdom, healthy traditional choices, heritage in the now”, etc.

In answer to the question; “What is it trying to get you to do?”, responses included “live strong, balance your life, choose ancestral ways, live a healthier lifestyle”, and responses in Pre and Post surveys were somewhat more evenly interpreted, indicating that the design of the logo may be a good representation of our major messages.

In answer to the question: “Does it appeal to you, and if so, Why?”, response was generally positive or complimentary, including “nice design, “beautiful, brilliant colors”, “its bright and eye-catching”, “it is simple and true”, “it is Native”, “it is traditional, it’s a powerful symbol, makes me think of family, suggests healthy choices, it feels right to decide, live our way and tribal unity.”

To the question, “have you ever bought/eaten a product with this logo, on it?”, one out of four (25%) had tried our product since the pretest was conducted and most would have been through the smoothie sales held at pow wows and other special events where hundreds and thousands of attendees gather.

In answer to the question: “Have you ever seen this logo?”

The respondents indicated considerable increase in brand name recognition. The primary venue was through the RezChef™ cooking shows aired on SKC TV and, e-mail advertising and posters hung throughout the Reservation.
In answer to the question, “What would help you make healthier choices on a daily basis?”, highest responses were “availability of healthy, local food and better nutritional education”, followed by “vendors providing healthy choices at special events”, with a tie in 4th place between “healthier fast foods available” and “recipes to use more traditional foods.”

The biggest exposure to Ancestors’ Choice took place during the smoothie sales held throughout the Reservation at various locations. A cooking show involving children for making the smoothies is in final editing as a half hour DVD program. Focus group results included suggestions for further activities involving the community; for example: a “biggest loser” contest, a play about making healthy choices using Native themes and humor, a weigh-in and run competitions, and an Ancestors’ Choice™ What’s for Dinner Party Marketing/Educational Strategy.

Limitations of the research include the non-randomized samples, difficulty coordinating children and parental schedules for obtaining comprehensive qualitative data, difficulty in accessing children for surveys, and high staff turnover. Enthusiasm for the various projects promoting a Native based diet and healthy lifestyle continues to grow as more and more connections within the community are developed and social networks and collaborations expand.

The play *Beansy and Peasy Choose Ancestors’ Choice™* is of interest to the local schools and Head Start programs throughout the Reservation and is expected to become a primary vehicle for increasing brand name recognition for Ancestors’ Choice™.
Social Marketing messaging and distribution strategies were gathered through focus groups involving SKC college students, including both young and middle-age students, as well as children of the students in the class who attended periodically. Table 1 outlines the major suggestions gathered through a focus group, listening and participant observation process.

Table 1. Focus Group Recommendations for promoting healthy diet and lifestyle messages.

| N = 15 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Make it Fun!    | Peer Pressure   | Use Humor!      | Contests        |
| Make it “in” Popular to be Healthy | Family/Parental pressure and influence | Including controversial humor – The Biggest Loser! | Organized Runs, Weigh-Ins, Biggest Loser Contests, Dance Your Off! |
| Use role models, success stories, athletes, actors, singers, etc. | Involve in shopping trips, cooking and tasting samples of healthier options | Ancestors’ Choice Song | Add dance/movement (round dance) to the Stick Game Tournaments, |
| Use animal characters to tell the story | Eagle, Hawk, Bear | Coyote/Trickster/Teacher | Traditional Games teaching fitness principles |

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The interest and enthusiasm for Ancestors’ Choice™/RezChef™, healthy culture-based diet and lifestyle health promotion continues to build throughout the community, and brand-name recognition is increasing. The SKC Community Health and Development Department is becoming recognized as a resource for promotion of healthy lifestyles based in cultural foods and traditions.

The Ancestors’ Choice™ and RezChef™ brand labels appear to have the potential to motivate healthy change in this reservation-based community; the Selish, Ksanka and Qlispe (Salish, Kootenai and Pend d’Oreille). Delivery mechanisms that create individual and communal, experiential-based learning and adoption experiences of health messages may have potential for greater impact in tribal communities in general. The strategies which have put Ancestors’ Choice™ “on-the-map” so to speak are selling healthy Ancestors’ Choice™ Smoothies, having a presence on the Web through the Ancestors’ Choice™ Facebook page, RezChef™ cooking shows, Indigenous Nutrition classes where
both college, youth and teens could collaborate on getting the word out through public music and theatrical performances to Early Childhood Services and others.

Future efforts to enhance the testing of the Ancestors’ Choice™ social marketing initiative would expand on the use of humor, performance, healthy, friendly competitions, and to recommend changes in policies for institutional and private sector food providers to offer healthier selections and to market them via methods suggested by the co-research participants in this study. Efforts using the traditional tribal cultural values and experiential-based learning methods identified in this study may be more effective with Native peoples of all ages. Finally, the ultimate test of the willingness of Native children, youth and teens to make healthier food choices as a result of culturally congruent messaging and social marketing is the subject for future studies where both the foods and marketing messages are strategically located in the environment and food purchase and consumption data can be gathered.

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