Are You Pouring on the Pounds?  
Agenda Building for Sugary Drink Limits in New York City

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Abstract

New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene launched its “Are You Pouring on the Pounds,” one of the first urban anti-obesity public health campaigns focused on sugary drink consumption in 2009. This surprisingly simple and inexpensive social marketing campaign raised awareness and possibly changed consumption behaviours pertaining to drinks with high calorie content through paid advertising and news media attention in a difficult-to-penetrate media market.

Keywords: New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, social marketing, media relations, agenda building, obesity, sugared-sweetened beverages, SSB, public relations
Introduction
New York City’s health and the sugar-sweetened beverage connection

New York City has a long history of progressive health care policy initiatives (New York City Government, 2005). In 1959 it banned lead paint in all residential buildings 12 years before the federal government enacted similar restrictions. In 2005 NYC required physicians to report A1C test (three-month blood sugar level) results to support the creation of a disease surveillance system that would aid in developing services for residents with diabetes. In 2006 trans fats and calorie labelling regulations were enacted banning trans fats in food establishments and requiring calorie counts to be posted in restaurant chains effective in 2008. New York’s Health Department is massive with an annual budget of $1.6 billion and more than 6,000 staff (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2014).

These aggressive actions belie a city with a host of health issues including smoking, heart disease and cancer. A twin healthcare issue -- diabetes and obesity -- emerged in the early 2000s catching the attention of healthcare experts. By 2004, 12 per cent of New York City residents had diabetes (Tabaei et al, 2012) and 22 per cent were obese (Wye et al, 2008). One study conducted by the city’s health department found that New York’s rates of obesity and diagnosed diabetes surged by 17 per cent in a two year period during 2002-2004 (Wye et al, 2008). By comparison, national rates during the same period showed a 6 per cent increase in obesity prevalence and no increase in diabetes diagnoses (Wye, et al, 2008).

While obesity is a complex public health problem with many contributing factors, by 2004, a growing body of research pointed to American’s increased intake of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) as a major contributor to weight gain. This change started in the early 1980s, when manufacturers began substituting a cheaper high-fructose corn syrup for sugar in all manner of products including carbonated beverages (Warner, 2006). Much cheaper prices and the trend in “supersizing” portions led to a 40 per cent increase in sweetened soda consumption from 1980-2000 (Warner, 2006).

A widely cited article entitled “Changes in beverage intake between 1977 and 2001” by researchers Nielsen and Popkin (2004) found that sugar-sweetened soda consumption accounted for “one third of the 16% increase in the total daily calorie intake” of Americans (p. 376) from the late 1970s to 2001. Another article, “Consumption of high–fructose corn syrup in beverages may play a role in the epidemic of obesity,” tied sugar-sweetened beverages to increased obesity rates in Americans (Bray et al, 2004). A meta-analysis of the available research on obesity and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) by researchers Malik, Schulze and Hu (2006) found enough evidence to support “public health strategies to discourage consumption of sugary drinks as part of a healthy lifestyle” (p. 274).
This recommendation and the city’s own health data were a clarion call for the New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), charged with protecting the health of its residents through education and policy. New York City’s 2005 Community Health Survey indicated that 27 per cent of adults consumed at least one sugar-sweetened beverage per day; the average was 1.9 sodas per day, nearly 300 calories (Rehm, et al 2008). In a 2008 New York City Health Department news release, SSBs were targeted as a major contributor to the city’s obesity epidemic (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2008):

One of the major contributors to excessive weight gain and subsequent diabetes is the consumption of soda and other sugar-sweetened drinks… ‘When people count calories they too often forget to include drinks, which can account for a large number of extra calories,’ said Cathy Nonas, the Health Department’s Director of Physical Activity and Nutrition Programs. ‘We think of the calories in soda as ‘empty ones’ because they provide no nutritional benefits. In the middle of this epidemic of obesity, people should choose water and zero-calorie drinks, no sugar-sweetened soda and other sugar-sweetened drinks.

In a two-year period, New Yorkers collectively gained 10 million extra pounds (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2008). The growing heft of New Yorkers was costly. According to the city’s Health Department, nearly 6,000 deaths and $4 billion in direct medical costs could be linked to obesity annually (New York City Government, 2012). New York City’s first anti-obesity educational public health campaign Are You Pouring on the Pounds? campaign was launched by the city’s Health Department August 31, 2009, and included paid advertising, media relations tactics and an Internet video.

**Literature review**

**Social marketing**

Social marketing is a planning model based on a theoretical framework frequently used by health organizations for promoting health or changing health behaviours. Theories include the health belief model, stages of change model, theory of planned behaviour, social cognitive theory, diffusion of innovation theories, media effects theories and, more specifically, agenda setting. Agenda setting is a theory that posits the public pays more attention to topics which are prominently and regularly reported on by the news media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Social marketing uses traditional marketing techniques but differs from commercial marketing by benefiting the audience rather than the campaign’s sponsor. Another difference between traditional commercial marketing and social marketing is that social marketers evaluate campaign success in terms
of positive social effects rather than financial gain. Social marketing also differs from public health education tactics by reinforcing behaviour with incentives and other benefits (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

Alan Andreason defines social marketing as “the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society” (Andreason, 1995).

The social marketing planning model is infused with research – formative research, competitive/ environmental analysis and evaluation research that help determine the right marketing mix from marketing’s traditional “four Ps”- product, price, place and promotion (National Cancer Institute, 2005). While promotion, the fourth of the four Ps, does include delivering the message to the audience, it usually denotes paid forms of publicity, media relations is also part of the promotion mix and can play a major role in agenda setting by helping to build the agenda.

**Media relations**

The relationship between reporter and public relations practitioner has been characterized as prickly but also as interdependent (Davis, 2004); one in which both parties can get something out of the relationship similar to an economic exchange (Gandy, 1982). News reporters need good stories while public relations practitioners need their organizations’ name, product or message featured in trusted news products that are read, viewed or heard by large audiences.

Effective media relations practitioners develop “valuable strategies to meet media expectations, gain credibility and legitimate critical knowledge” (Motion & Weaver, 2005, p. 247). In other words, they provide credible, timely, accurate information that corresponds with commercial news values. Successful media relations activities enable organizations to raise awareness, influence public opinion and gain support for particular causes (Motion & Weaver, 2005).

News stories that carry unfiltered messages or the essence of the organization’s message to large audiences inexpensively have the added benefit of being legitimized by a trusted independent arbiter of noteworthy events and issues. The prized media endorsement is not without downside since the reporter can examine other sources beyond or in place of the organization’s information subsidies. The resulting story can change from the original practitioner’s intent. Davis (2004) noted: “there is something of a gamble about communication via the media, and it is the elimination of this hazard that drives media relations practice” (p.163).
Framing theory, information subsidies and agenda building

Media relations was described by Zoch and Molleda as “an active process in which the public relations practitioner has, at least, a modicum of control over the message she wishes to reach the public, its timing, the source of the information, and the effect on the media agenda of the issue presented” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 280). Media relations' theoretical framework consists of “framing theory, the concept of information subsidies and the agenda building paradigm” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 280).

Media framing was described as selecting “… some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendations (Entman 1993, p52). Entman noted that framing strategies are more effective when practitioners are defining problems and suggestion solutions (Entman 1993, p52). Hallahan said public relations practitioners are “framing strategists” who purposefully select words and information and formulate them into messages that “focus selectively on key attributes and characteristics of a cause, candidate, product, or service” (Hallahan 1999, p224) while at also fitting into a socially or culturally relevant context, such as an important healthcare issue (Zoch and Molleda, 2006).

Practitioners suggest stories and provide pre-packaged materials, which Gandy (1982) called information subsidies, to reporters who to aid in the creation of news stories. Information subsidies include the news release as well as other materials such as backgrounders, biographies, Q&As, fact sheets, research reports, photographs, graphics, slideshows, video and audio recordings, testimonials and case studies. Factors that influence the value of information subsidies to reporters may depend on source credibility, the diversity of competing information, and the level of self-interest projected (Gandy, 1982); the practitioner’s educational training in news values (Kopenhaver, 1985, p. 41); source prominence (Weaver & Elliott, 1985), and the perceived objectivity of the information (Gandy, 1982). Well-crafted messages and high-quality support materials are more likely to get recognized and used (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 287). Information subsidies, according to Albaek, Christiansen, & Togeby (2003), can increase the organization’s prestige, attract funding and preserve its viability.

The concept of agenda setting, news reporting’s impact on public opinion formation, originated with McCombs and Shaw (1972). Weaver and Elliot (1985) investigated the impact of public relations activities such as story pitches, news conferences, news releases, on reporters’ news content, which was called agenda building. According to one study, media relations activities have influenced 25–80 per cent of all news content (Cameron et al., 1997). Scholars have connected information subsidies and agenda building (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986) as well as framing to agenda building (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). Therefore, public relations practitioners play an important role in what a reporter reports.
(Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Curtin, 1999; Gandy, 1982; Kiousis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Turk, 1986). Public relations’ influence on the media’s agenda therefore affects setting the agenda for public discourse (Berkowitz, 1987; Cameron et al., 1997; Curtin, 1999; Tanner, 2004).

**New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), established in 1866, is a massive governmental agency responsible for protecting the well-being of the city’s 8.3 million citizens with hundreds of services provided by its 6,000 employees.

The communications function is housed within the bureau of external affairs, which contains the departments of communication and public affairs, among others. Housed within the communications department is its health media, marketing and digital communications and media relations offices.

Topics of past public health campaigns include tobacco use, nutrition, physical activity, alcohol and drug abuse, heart health, HIV prevention, mental health, and teen pregnancy prevention.

While the New York City’s DOHMH communications staff has produced dozens of successful public health campaigns, often meeting or exceeding its own published benchmarks, there has been no published research of its advertising or media relations functions, specifically on how it produces its public health campaigns or on the effectiveness of its media relations for those campaigns. This knowledge could be helpful to other urban health departments especially because the health issues surrounding obesity and diabetes are more prevalent in urban areas and are expected to grow in the future (New York City Government, 2010).

This case study examined DOHMH’s first anti-obesity campaign focused of SSBs (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2009). It should be noted that this study preceded by nearly two years the political firestorm that erupted when Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a far-reaching municipal ban on the sales of large-size sugary drinks by restaurants, mobile food carts, movie theatres and delis.

**Research questions**

RQ1: How did the New York City’s DOHMH’s communication team create its first public health campaign addressing sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) consumption?

RQ2: How did New York City’s DOHMH’s communication team use media relations for its first public health campaign addressing sugary drink consumption?
RQ3: How effective was New York City’s DOHMH’s news media efforts?

**Method**

This descriptive case study used two qualitative data strategies: in-depth interviews with three communication officials with New York City’s DOHMH and an analysis of the news media coverage.

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted to better understand how the advertising and media relations campaign were developed. Interviews included Susan Craig, DOHMH’s press secretary and deputy director of communications, November 6, 2013; Jeffery Escoffier, DOHMH’s director of health media, marketing and digital communications, October 11, 2013; and Geoffrey Cowley, DOHMH’s associate commissioner of communications, interviewed November 8, 2013; each interview lasted between one and two hours.

News coverage was operationalized as all staff-written editorial content, including news blogs, available online in the New York City media market between August 31, 2009 and September 14, for the first news release announcing the campaign, and the period between December 14, 2009 and December 28, 2009 for the second news release, announcing the campaign video. News organizations were operationalized as New York City newspapers, radio and television, as well as national wire services, such as the Associated Press, and news organizations such as National Public Radio and USA Today. Industry publications, such as Ad Age and Advertising Week were not included. Search terms used to locate stories and blogs included “don’t drink yourself fat campaign,” “are you pouring on the pounds,” New York City health department obesity campaign,” “man drinks fat,” and “are you pouring on the pounds video.” A total of 27 print and broadcast stories from newspaper, television and radio station Websites were analysed.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the media relations effort, a textual analysis was conducted on the news stories and blogs for the presence of the following key messages from the first release dated August 31, 2009 entitled “New Campaign Asks New Yorkers if They’re ‘Pouring on the Pounds’” (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2009):

- SSBs contain high sugar content or references to teaspoons of sugar in drinks
- American consume between 200-300 more calories each day than 30 years ago
- SSB’s consumption is associated with obesity/getting fat
- Fruit juices and energy drinks also contain high sugar content
- Avoid or limit SSB and drink water or other non-SSBs
The following key messages from the second news release dated December 14, 2009 entitled “Health Department’s Anti-Obesity Poster Inspires a Video Sequel” were included in the textual analysis of editorial coverage:

- Drinking one soda a day can make you 10 pounds fatter in a year
- Drinking soda is linked to obesity
- Drink non-SSBs such as water
- American consume between 200-300 more calories each day than 30 years ago
- Fruit juice/energy/sports drinks are loaded with calories – avoid them

In addition to the presence of key messages, the size or length of the editorial content was measured in words or seconds. Also, the editorial content was analysed for the presence of DOHMH embedded graphics and html links, graphics from the video, the html link for the video or for the health bulletin. Finally, the overall tone of the story or blog was examined. Positive stories had the majority of content favouring the DOHMH’s point of view rather than its critics. Negative stories had the majority of content favouring critics of the campaign (i.e., the beverage groups). Neutral stories equally contained positive and negative aspects of the campaign.

Findings

RQ1: How did the New York City’s DOHMH’s communication team create its first anti-obesity public health campaign addressing SSBs consumption?

Susan Craig, DOHMH’s Press Secretary and deputy director of communications, and Jeffrey Escoffier, Director of DOHMH’s in-house marketing service called Health Media and Marketing Group said each public health campaign originates from the department’s strategic five-year plan that contains action plans and benchmarks for achieving and measuring success. Requests for public health campaigns come from DOHMH bureaus responsible for the strategic health initiatives identified by the long-range plan. Campaign development is grounded in science and guided by the agency’s subject matter experts who ensure its communication messages, both graphic and textual, accurately reflect the latest scientific knowledge. Focus groups test various creative approaches developed by outside advertising agencies. The mayor and the health commissioner reviewed all campaigns before they are activated.

New York City DOHMH’s “Pouring on the Pounds – Don’t Drink Yourself Fat” subway campaign advertising featured three graphic depictions of globule-like liquid pouring from either a soda, energy drink or tea container that looked like liquid fat overflowing from a glass. This eye-catching “in-your-face” visual was developed by Bandujo, a small New York City advertising agency at a cost of $277,000 that included the creative work, production and focus group
research. The three-month subway campaign cost $90,000 and appeared on 1,500 subway cars, according to Escoffier. Subway advertising is used in nearly every DOHMH campaign because it is an “incredibly inexpensive” medium. He further explained the outdoor strategy (Escoffier, 2013):

> We’ve done a series of surveys of our campaigns in the last two years that has confirmed for us that there are really two tent poles in our media market here – television and subway. Subway reaches everybody on their daily commute and television reaches an even larger audience… We have a minimum buy that consists of roughly 20% of subway cars in the New York subway system so we have our posters in 20% of the subway cars for most health campaigns. If we’re targeting a particular neighbourhood we buy bus shelters or some other locational outdoor platform. But when we want to reach all New Yorkers we use subway and TV.

While the first New York City anti-obesity/SSB campaign had a small advertising budget for subway posters, the initial campaign added an Internet video that went viral with more than a million hits in the first few months, Escoffier said. The video cost about $50,000 to produce and was paid for by a private donor two months after the initial subway campaign started. He said “We have gotten more requests to reuse these ads,” than for any other campaign the department has ever launched.”

Escoffier explained that DOHMH relied on a variety of advertising agencies, mostly small boutique operations, to competitively bid for campaign work. Beyond the requirement that campaign concepts had to align with current scientific evidence, Escoffier said the creative process was left to the agencies. He said the department wanted a “hard-hitting” message because past tobacco cessation campaigns had shown significant behavioural changes with New Yorkers using graphic content. Escoffier said that creativity drove the process to ensure attention-getting ideas that could cut through the clutter of one of the largest media capitals in the world.

**RQ2: How did New York City’s DOHMH’s communication team use media relations for its first public health campaign addressing SSB consumption?**

New York City’s first anti-obesity campaign *Are You Pouring on the Pounds?* was launched August 31, 2009 with a news conference and media kit that included a multi-media news release and a consumer publication about SSBs. The news release had two embedded graphics and an html link to the campaign’s consumer brochure called “Health Bulletin.” The second phase of the campaign included a multi-media news release issued December 14, 2009 announcing an Internet campaign video. It contained a link to its video and contained two graphics.

While the anti-obesity/SSB campaign budget was considerably smaller in comparison to other city campaigns such as its anti-tobacco campaigns, the media relations strategy was typical of previous DOHMH campaign launches. It
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included development of two news conferences and two news releases (one for the subway poster campaign and another for the Internet campaign video) with electronic distribution to the news media and other influencers, such as popular health and fitness bloggers. The communication team embedded additional news release materials to increase the attractiveness and use of the news release, Craig said. Campaign graphics were included as well as html links to a DOHMH website for a consumer campaign brochure or to view the video. The news release focused on the campaign’s hard-hitting message, the ad’s repulsive graphic that showed liquid fat pouring out a drink container, as well as the newness of the campaign as its newsworthy elements, said Craig. The campaign’s news conference included the mayor, health commissioner and departmental subject matter experts. The news release was mailed to local city news reporters covering health issues and it was available on the DOHMH’s website’s news release page. Later, a separate webpage would be created to host a growing number of supplemental materials for the Pouring on the Pounds campaign.

The first news release titled New Campaign Asks New Yorkers if They’re “Pouring On the Pounds”; Health Department encourages consumers to choose beverages with less sugar New York issued August 31, 2009, contained three embedded supplements: Are You Pouring on the Pounds campaign subway poster (Figure 1), an info graphic that compared popular SSBs with their corresponding calories and teaspoons of sugar; and a hyperlink to www.nyc.gov/health/obesity (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2009). This webpage contained DOH Health Bulletin Are You Pouring on the Pounds, available in English, Spanish and Chinese. It provided consumer-friendly information and graphics on the connection between weight gain and SSE consumption and simple strategies on how to reduce SSB consumption. The news release featured data from the DOH’s Health Department’s 2007 Community Health Survey and Youth Risk Behaviour Survey on New Yorkers’ SSB consumption, carried quotes from DOH officials and suggested simple strategies for reducing SSB consumption.
The second media relations effort occurred December 14, 2009 to announce the new Internet video for the anti-obesity/SSB campaign. The media relations effort included a news conference with the video’s star and other health officials available for media interviews. Another multimedia news release was issued titled “Health Department’s Anti-Obesity Poster Inspires a Video Sequel; New 30-second Spot Graphically Depicts the Effects of Over-Consuming Sugary Beverages.” The news release embedded the poster from the advertising campaign as well as a photo illustration from the Internet video. As embedded was html links to the video on YouTube or the department’s website. Another html link directed people to a department website for additional resources, such as the Health Bulletin.

RQ3: How effective was New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s news media efforts?


The KM that said SSBs contain high sugar content or referenced the teaspoons of sugar chart and the KM that said American consume between 200-300 more calories each day than 30 years ago was present in 58 per cent of stories; the KM that said SSB’s consumption is associated with obesity/getting fat was present in 67 per cent of stories; the FM that said Fruit
juices and energy drinks also contain high sugar content was present in 92 per cent of stories; and the KM that said to avoid or limit SSBs and drink water or other non-SSBs was used in 75 per cent of stories.

The average word count for each print story was 342 with the longest story 755 words (New York Times blog) and the shortest was a story by the Associated Press. Two broadcast stories included one that was two minutes long and the other was 55 seconds long.

The tone of the editorial content was 75 per cent positive, although 25 per cent contained statements or quotes from outside organizational sources, such as the beverage industry association, that were critical of the advertising campaign. Forty-two per cent of the stories contained quotes or statements from people outside the DOHMH that were positive about the campaign. Thirty-three per cent of the stories did not feature any quotes or statement from outside the DOHMH. Eighty-three per cent of the editorial content used the advertising campaign art with their story; just 25 per cent used the graphic with teaspoons of sugar. Seventy-five per cent of the stories contained a html link to the DOHMH website that connected people to the news release, the campaign ads or the Health Bulletin.


Figure 2 – Internet Video – Man Drinking Fat

The KM that said drinking one soda a day can make you 10 pounds fatter in a year was used in 93 per cent of the stories; the second key message that
said drinking soda is linked to obesity was used in 60 per cent of the stories; the KM that encouraged the consumption of non-SSB drinks such as water was found in 36 per cent of the stories; and the KM that said fruit juices/energy/sports drinks are loaded with calories was used in 7 per cent of the stories. The KM that said Americans consume between 200-300 more calories each day than 30 years ago was not used.

The average print story for the second news release contained 224 words, with the longest story 403 words long and the shortest story was 86 words long. The only broadcast story analysed was produced by The Associated Press and was 108 seconds long.

The tone of the editorial content for the second news release was 100 per cent positive in tone, although 33 per cent contained statements or quotes from outside organizational sources, such as the beverage industry association, that were critical of the advertising campaign. Just seven per cent of the stories contained quotes or statements from people outside the DOHMH that were positive about the campaign. Sixty per cent of the stories did not feature any quotes or statement from outside the DOHMH.

The news organizations used the Internet video has a graphic in its story 73 per cent of the time and 80 per cent of the stories offered either a link to the video or embedded the video in their stories.

**Discussion**

This social marketing public health campaign, with a very modest budget, relied on relatively simple tactics – news releases, news conferences, paid advertising and a “cheeky” Internet video. Yet, it was successful in penetrating a notoriously difficult media market with positive reports in the mainstream news media. The campaign’s minimal cost and positive return on investment should encourage health departments to add media relations to all public health campaigns, especially for campaign launches, although media relations should be ongoing throughout a campaign. The idea that media relations should accompany a paid advertising campaign, such as a subway poster campaign, may not occur to some health departments but it “pays” to take advantage of all media relations opportunities even in a tough urban media market. Turning text-only news releases into multimedia news releases with embedded html links for supplemental materials and creative visuals (campaign posters, logos, etc.) and info graphics enhances their appeal to the news media. If resources permit, health departments should consider additional media relations activities such as feature stories, more educational materials, and a community action kit, which were later developed by DOHMH after the first phase anti-obesity (sugary drink) campaign was completed. Social media, while somewhat new in 2009, is now a common media relations tool to extend messages and build relationships with stakeholders. Apparently, gross and disgusting images, when properly developed in a humorous way, such as the
Internet video ("Man Drinking Fat") in this case study, can also extend the message massively.

In 2012, 28.2 per cent of New Yorkers reported drinking one or more sugary drinks a day (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2013) down from 32 per cent in 2009 (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2011). It should be noted that SSB consumption was already trending downward prior to the Pouring on the Pounds campaign with a 12 per cent decrease in adults consuming an average of one or more SSBs per day from 2007-2009. Presumably, this pre-campaign drop in SSB consumption was due to national media coverage of skyrocketing obesity rates, the growing awareness of high-fructose corn syrup in many food and drink products or other factors. Complicating the evaluation of the SSB campaign’s effectiveness (after the initial anti-obesity/SSB campaign was launched and concluded) was the later politicization of the SSB issue. This occurred when the New York City Mayor and Health Commissioner endorsed a state-wide soda tax in 2010, a proposed two-year pilot to eliminate sugary drinks from the list of allowable products for food stamps, and a 2012 portion size limit on SSBs sold in the city, all of which failed, but received large amounts of mostly negative coverage in the news media.

Limitations

Due to on-going lawsuits connected with the anti-obesity/SSB campaign from beverage industry supported groups, internal DOHMH documents about the campaign’s development and evaluation were not available. It is likely that I captured only a portion of the news media reporting that occurred on this subject that was available from Internet searches of news organizations. Also, this study was unable to capture the news media activity from New York City’s vibrant non-English newspapers and broadcasters. Blogs were also beyond the scope of this study. Still, the available news coverage analysed showed that simple media relations efforts (news releases with graphics and embedded links and news conferences) when combined with clever and creative advertising visuals can attract significant news media attention, even in hard-to-penetrate urban media markets.

Future studies should include bloggers’ influence on the public discourse. In this case study, I encountered many blog sites that were using the DOHMH’s information subsidies, similar to news organizations. Nearly all of the bloggers reviewed used DOHMH’s subsidies positively without adding the beverage industry’s counter viewpoint. Opportunities abound too with easy access to talented individuals and a large variety of news outlets and bloggers.

Other areas for future investigation are the constraints and opportunities that urban health departments such as DOHMH confront such as managing effective campaigns for numerous health issues, limited budgets, limited staff time, and operating effectively within large bureaucratic and political
organizations. In New York City, the Mayor’s Office exerts significant influence on healthcare priorities and approves all DOHMH's educational campaign content, although the Mayor does not dictate campaign development. In this case, the 2009 educational campaign on sugary drink consumption was not affected by the highly controversial 2010 soda tax proposal (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2010) or the 2012 proposal to ban large-sized sugary drinks (New York City Government, 2012). Future research should examine the issues management activity of the media relations staff within the DOHMH’s department of policy and external affairs, which was responsible for the agency’s city, state, and federal legislative healthcare agenda and communication efforts, including media relations and health media and marketing.

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