

A Talking Vending Machine? Encouraging Young Adults to Make Healthier Decisions

Planning/Content

The Independent Health Foundation (IHF) is the charitable arm of Independent Health, a health insurance provider in Western New York. IHF created the Healthy Options program to help the community make healthier choices. While there is plenty of local and national conversation about this, there is not nearly as much action – especially among young adults. Both content and delivery of such a message requires a fresh approach. So Gelia was enlisted to create an impactful idea that would accomplish this.

To promote the program and healthier habits among young adults, Gelia sought to reach them when they're most likely to make a poor food choice. They knew one of the best ways to earn the attention of a younger crowd was through social media. Given the success of viral campaigns such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and others, Gelia proposed to create an organic, authentic video rather than something scripted or staged.

They began with an overall goal of encouraging healthy changes among young adults as well as increasing awareness of the Healthy Options program, validated by these objectives:

- Generate awareness of program among young adults through at least 1,000 video views within one month, since an average YouTube video receives 500 views.
- Inspire action among young adults, as demonstrated by an engagement value of 2,000 through comments, retweets, likes, shares, etc.
- Increase awareness of program by securing coverage in at least 5 local and 10 national news outlets.

Creativity/Quality

After several brainstorming sessions, Gelia moved forward with the "talking vending machine." This idea used hidden cameras to catch people by surprise when they approached the machine to purchase a snack. A lighthearted dialogue with the machine began about the unhealthy selection. The voice actor was in a separate room with a monitor to see the participant.

And that voice was crucial, as the quality of these interactions relied heavily on dialogue. The actor needed a friendly tone and improvisation skills to elicit entertaining reactions. After numerous auditions to find the best person, local comedian, Pete Cumbo, rose to the top for his quick wit and impressive character voices.

But finding the right location was no easy task. The vending machine had to be in a heavily trafficked area with a built in audience full of young adults, but it couldn't be too loud where it might interfere with audio. Gelia considered five locations before deciding on Knox Lecture Hall at the University at Buffalo (UB), a guaranteed busy scene as classes started and ended on the hour.

Technical Excellence

As a first-time hidden camera project for Gelia, there were some technical details to iron out before the shoot. To ensure all angles were covered, Gelia placed a GoPro camera inside the vending

machine to capture facial expressions and two cameras inconspicuously held by Gelia associates to record crowd reactions. They also hired a security company to setup cameras from higher view points, which were made to look like fire alarms.

The prank on UB students was wildly successful, turning a planned two-day shoot into only one. Participants eagerly filled out release waivers – a promising sign that meant they were happy to share their involvement. Even while filming, students alerted others of the talking vending machine on Yik Yak (a social network to share location-based updates), which recruited more participants.

Gelia received so many funny reactions they created three separate videos. Viewers were driven to [IHF's website](#), where they could explore more resources to help make healthier decisions.

- ["Work Off Your Snack" – Students doing jumping jacks and jogging in place.](#)
- ["Read the Ingredients" – Students reading off the hard-to-pronounce chemicals in their snacks.](#)
- ["Eat Healthier Promise" – Students promising the vending machine they'll pack an apple and stop by for a snack only once in a while.](#)

Assessment/Results

From an overall budget of \$46,000, Gelia used \$30,000 for execution costs including location, talent, cameras, creative direction, editing and production. \$11,000 was allocated for pitching, distribution, social optimization and keyword research. \$5,000 helped supplement existing traffic with sponsored posts on Facebook and ads within YouTube and Google's display network.

Ultimately, the videos were uploaded to IHF's YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts. Independent Health and UB also shared the videos with their unique audiences. Gelia then contacted several popular online sharing sites to encourage additional traffic.

In just three weeks, the videos garnered 135,000 views with approximately 100,000 minutes watched; a monumental increase over their original goal of 1,000 views. The total engagement value was 4,237, resulting from 385 comments, 1,346 shares and retweets, 2,507 likes and favorites, completely surpassing our original goal of 2,000. Overall sentiment was widely positive, garnering remarks from hundreds of young people, with comments such as, "OMG that's great, it has you at least thinking of making a healthier choice. Love this!"

In the first week, the videos received local broadcast coverage on major news outlets, including WGRZ, WIVB, WKBW and Time Warner Cable – a combined viewership of 263,900. News radio, WBFO, broadcasted the story to its audience of 10,735 listeners and other radio stations including WBEN, WKSE, WYRK and WMSX shared it with their online audiences. The videos were also picked up by 33 other online outlets thanks to Gelia's outreach including BuzzFeed, Reddit, Ads of the World, Viral Videos 365 and more, exceeding both broadcast and online projections of 5 and 10 respectively. But beyond that, a wisecracking vending machine successfully renewed conversation on healthier eating to inspire real action among an unlikely demographic.