Grand Valley State University

ScholarWorks@GVSU

2013

The Food Maverick Project

Hilary Karnatz
Grand Valley State University

Christina Ober
Grand Valley State University

Alison Sells
Grand Valley State University

Carlton Sumner
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems

The Food Maverick Project (www.foodmaverick.org)

Authors: Hilary Karnatz, Christina Ober , Alison Sells, Carlton Sumner

Abstract

In our quest to get healthy food in the hands of school children and improve their life-long healthy eating habits, we have utilized a Wicked Problems framework approach. There isn't one solution that can get this done, but we can develop a number of solutions that can help alleviate the issue. One of the key aspects of this wicked problem is getting children to actually *want* to eat healthier.

The Food Maverick project aims to reach children where they already are… on the web. Using the power of the internet and social media, we have developed a marketing campaign geared towards making a healthy lifestyle more appealing to school age children. Our plan is to create and aggregate media from around the web to provide educational, yet entertaining information about food. Utilizing a combination of blogging, videos, recipes, and guerilla marketing stunts, we will create a website that not only actively promotes healthy eating, but also gets kids thinking about advertising in general. By using technology in this manner we are reaching out directly to children using a style and method that they are familiar with. As we expand, we plan to continue reaching out to the community for support, bringing together schools and local businesses to sponsor events. These events and partnerships help to make a unified front in the battle for healthy food. We cannot do this alone, collaboration is key! Together, we can create a call to action. We are putting the power directly into the hands of children to make knowledgeable decisions about the food they eat.

Introduction

A wicked problem is a complex and contextual problem that has many causes, consequences, and stakeholders. Wicked problems are contrasted with simple problems, which have clear causes and solutions.[1] In these high-stake problems, serious consequences are likely whether actions are attempted or not. Wicked problems affect everyone to some degree and are often buried deep within our personal identities. In other words, when confronting such problems we are likely to take opposing opinions very personally; when others try to "attack" these problems, we are likely to feel our identities are being attacked.[2] Some examples of these types of problems include: poverty, healthcare, and food systems. When addressing wicked problems there is no simple, foreseeable solution that satisfies all parties involved.[3]

In this project we are tackling a small, but significant, area within food systems: Getting healthy food into the hands of children. Associated with this problem are a number of stakeholders (people that are concerned or affected by the issue): schools, parents, the government, food companies, budget committees, farmers, kids and many

more. These stakeholders are comprised of people that have a deep and intricate involvement within the issue. If you change something within this system, all are affected. Some stakeholders will gain while others will lose.[4] Deciding who should win or lose is part of the reason this is a wicked problem. Wicked problems have no solutions, but we can help alleviate the problem through transdisciplinary collaboration.[5] With many people working on the same issues, we can begin to chip away at the larger problem.

As with any wicked problem, stakeholders are at odds with one another. Since the stakes are so high, much of the collaboration is lost. Schools feed lunch to millions of children each day, but small budgets and limited resources have led to an abundance of processed and frozen convenience foods. Many schools simply rely on these pre-made foods because they cost less and are easy to prepare. While an optimal lunch would be freshly prepared and healthy, schools argue that children prefer fast foods. Schools often blame parents for an unhealthy lifestyle, while parents argue that their kids deserve better than reheated convenience foods. Another stakeholder to

[1] Salwasser, Hal. (2004). Confronting the Implications of Wicked Problems: Changes Needed in Sierra Nevada National Forest Planning and Problem Solving. *USDA Forest Service Gen Tech*, 7-22.

[2] LIB 322 Fall 2013, GVSU

[3] Alpaslan, Can M. and Ian I. Mitroff. 2011. *Swans, Swine, and Swindlers: Coping with the Growing Threat of Mega-Crises and Mega-Messes.* Stanford University Press.

[4] Brown *et al.,* 2011, Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination Philosophical Framework for an Open and Critical Transdisciplinary Inquiry, pg 64

[5] Brown *et al.,* 2011, Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination Philosophical Framework for an Open and Critical Transdisciplinary Inquiry, pg 36

consider is the food and beverage industry. Processed food companies spend billions of advertising dollars persuading children to eat their products and it's working. Collaboration along with dialogue is necessary to get stakeholders to tackle this wicked problem.

Along with stakeholders we must consider the economic and systemic issues when dealing with food and children. Access to fresh food in some areas can be difficult due to location, money, and storage issues. Many urban areas are considered food deserts because there are few places to purchase foods, and the few places that are available (such as gas stations), offer little in the way of nutrition. Limited transportation often leads to limited food choices. In these situations fresh food is often more expensive simply because it takes more effort to get. Food storage and preparation become labor intensive in an already stressful situation. Many children rely on school lunches to provide them with much of the nutrition that they need. These children are stuck with what the schools provide, which is often inadequate, especially if they refuse to eat it.

Getting healthy food into the hands of children is a truly wicked problem with a large number of stakeholders and obstacles. We can chip away at this problem by working together with stakeholders, creating communication between parties, and by identifying smaller issues within the greater problem

Research Questions

Guiding Research Question:
How can we empower children to make choices which best promote a long and healthy life?

We believe that one of the most important stakeholders are the children. They are the ones most affected by any decision; therefore children must be at the forefront of efforts for change. One of the key issues with this wicked problem is that children don't seem to want to eat healthier. We want to know how they feel about nutrition and a healthy lifestyle. Without children leading the change for healthy food, any progress to this wicked problem is likely to fall flat. Working closely with those that are most affected by the problem, and giving them the power to make decisions, increases the chances for success. [6] By working through a bottom-up approach to this problem, we hope to reach out to the children and empower them to make changes within the system that they are surrounded by. We need to give children the power to make healthy food and lifestyle choices for themselves.

Sub Questions:
Who currently has the power?
From the moment that children are born, the adults that make up their world feed them. Along with these well-meaning adults, advertising companies infiltrate the brains of children from all directions. The average

---

[6] Fischer, Frank. Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge.

child is exposed to 3,000 advertisements every day and over half of those messages are advocating for unhealthy food. [7] Advertising persuades children that eating unhealthy food is a good lifestyle choice. Even the most health-conscious parent or well-meaning school has a hard time competing with this kind of mass marketing. It's obvious that children are not in total control, so who is?

What drives children to make certain food choices?

The mind is a powerful thing. Children are governed by more than just their taste buds. Did you know that preschool children report that their carrots taste better when placed in a McDonald's wrapper[8] or that cereal tastes better in a box displaying a cartoon?[9] Food preference has to do with the name and appearance too. When children were given the same cereal in two bowls, but one was named "Sugary Bits" and the other was named "Healthy Bits", children overwhelmingly favored the Sugary twin (Lapierre MA, 2011). We can safely assume that children don't choose food strictly by taste, but what guides their preference? How can we nudge them to make better choices?

What is appealing to kids in regards to healthy lifestyle choices?

Cartoons and targeted advertising help convince children to choose unhealthy food. If cartoon characters sell food to children, can we use this to promote healthy eating? Some things become wildly popular, while others fall short. What separates an Annoying Orange from the plethora of other characters that are created every day? Who chooses the winners and losers?

Is it ethical to advertise to children even if it's for a good purpose?

Is it ethical for us to use advertising on children when we know that we are essentially just persuading them into another direction? Does advertising for good justify our use of persuasion? Can we create a campaign that accomplishes our goals while also making kids think for themselves about advertising? Our goal is to put the power of healthy choices back into the hands of children. Our project should challenge children to actively consider their choices rather than to fall for tricky marketing techniques.

Collaboration and Process

Much of the blame for unhealthy eating is placed directly on children. Parents and schools complain that even if children were given more healthy foods, they wouldn't eat them. Children *like* unhealthy foods; but do they really, or have they been

[7] PEDIATRICS Vol. 118 No. 6 December 1, 2006 pp. 2563 -2569

[8] Robinson TN, Borzekowski DG, Matheson DM, Kraemer HC. Effects of Fast Food Branding on Young Children's Taste Preferences. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.2007;161(8):792-797

[9] Lapierre MA, Vaala SE, Linebarger DL. Influence of Licensed Spokescharacters and Health Cues on Children's Ratings of Cereal Taste. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.2011;165(3):229-234.

persuaded to think that way from unhealthy advertising? The food and beverage company spends over 2 billion dollars advertising to children each year. Fast food companies spend 5 million a day marketing to children. 98% of food advertising directed towards children is for foods that are unhealthy.[10]

The first step to healthier eating is recognizing there is a problem and wanting to change. If children do not see a problem with the way they are eating, they have no reason to change. Even if change is forced upon them, they are likely to rebel and resist if not given understanding and choice. Kids need the opportunity and power to make healthy choices for themselves. Also, if children cannot break down these advertisements and understand that they are being persuaded, then they lack the knowledge needed to combat them. We need to give power back to the ones that are most affected by the decisions made. We need to give the power of healthy eating back to kids, but getting kids to realize this power is a challenge.

One of the first ideas that came to mind was creating some kind of healthy eating campaign that kids could come together on. We thought about creating posters that would get kids thinking about food. By creating healthy messages with fun and humor, we thought kids would be more likely to pay attention to the posters and consider their food choices. The ideas of posters sparked a thought on field trips and food tastings to get kids more connected with the food that they eat. Field trips can provide meaningful experiences in how food is grown and where it comes from as well as ethical practices. Food tastings can provide a low-pressure way for kids to voluntarily try new foods. This offers exposure to different foods and ways to prepare them. When we started to talk about these two events (field trips and food tastings), it led us to other kinds of events. One fun event idea was to create the World's Biggest Salad! We thought we could have people from the community come together, bring a variety of vegetables and try to break the world record for largest salad. An event like this could bring people (like stakeholders) together and get them talking about healthy food. A fun, collaborative and engaging event, like creating a big salad, got us thinking about guerilla marketing. Guerilla marketing is an unconventional, and low-cost marketing technique that is aimed at obtaining maximum exposure for a product.[11] One of these marketing ideas included hanging broccoli on trees outside of schools. The main idea with all of these thoughts was to reach out to kids and deliver a campaign that would inspire. That's when we finally came up with the idea to create a website and incorporate all of these ideas into one plan.

[10]) http://www.preventioninstitute.org/focus-areas/supporting-healthy-food-a-activity/supporting-healthy-food-and-activity-environments-advocacy/get-involved-were-not-buying-it/735-were-not-buying-it-the-facts-on-junk-food-marketing-and-kids.html

[11] Google dictionary

We discussed the initial idea about creating a website with several experts and stakeholders. One of our first experts was our own professor Anne Marie Fauvel. When we announced that we would be creating a website and wanted to create videos, she showed us some great content that was already available on Youtube. The realization hit that we did not have to create all of the content ourselves. We decided that the website should aggregate content from around the web and create a resource hub for kids to turn to.

Throughout creating a project plan, we also spoke to several people in the food management industry. These people were stakeholders in the process. They helped us to understand what the situation in schools was really like. One of these people managed the lunch program for a local school district and said that food decisions were made based largely on budget constraints, what kids will eat, along with nutrition guidelines. She told us that if kids started demanding different foods, these powers would be more likely to listen than if parents requested this change. This was important to us and validated our idea because we were hoping that we could spark a revolution through our website that would get kids involved in changing the food system within their schools.

Expert creative thinkers were also of vital importance to this idea. Several of these people helped us think outside the box. One told us the importance of creating a call to action. She wanted to make sure that we didn't just hammer kids with information. She insisted that kids be able to do something. By including a place to submit ideas and comments on the website, we invited kids to be a part of the project itself. Another creative thinker told us that we should keep local businesses and organizations in mind. We shouldn't limit our thinking to only the internet. We can aggregate local events, businesses, farms, and other resources.

Logos and branding were central to our idea. We located experts in graphic design and marketing. One provided us with our current logo. The development of tag lines and target audience came from meeting with local experts in this area.

Finally, our most important stakeholder: the kids. We spoke to several children ages 9-14 and had them view content that we picked out for the website as well as give us feedback. None of us are "coolness" experts. Making sure the information met our goals of being informative, but also entertaining was a key part of the plan. In other words: if the kids gave it a thumbs down, we would need to start from square one. Luckily for us, the kids only had minor issues with the website and helped us make it more user friendly and appropriate for our target audience.

Project Plan

Our plan is to create an edgy, viral campaign to promote healthy foods. Utilizing a combination of blogging, videos, recipes, and guerilla marketing stunts, we will create a website that not only actively promotes healthy eating, but also gets kids

thinking about advertising in general. We know the power and influence of successful marketing campaigns. With the virtual environment today, marketing is not always about money. Obscure characters like Annoying Orange, can be created by an everyday person and can become a mainstream phenomenon.

There are many healthy food related websites floating around the internet, but few (if any) are intended directly for children. Most of these websites are designed for parents or educators.

Website Design

Name - FoodMaverick.org

A maverick is a person who thinks unconventionally. It is an independent-minded person. We are challenging children to think about food differently than they ever have before. We want to bring an element of advertising healthy food while also encouraging them to look at advertising in a new way. FoodMaverick.org is about giving kids a voice, spreading good ideas and having fun!

Target Audience – The target audience for this website is children and teens in 6th-8th grade.

Website Content
The website will do several things:
1. It will include videos and content created by FoodMaverick.org – Creating our own content is important because it gives us legitimacy. It also allows us to work on

things that may not be available yet. We want kids to have honest and accurate information that makes them think. Some videos and content currently on the web may be inappropriate because they contain misleading or one-sided information. Creating our own content gives us the power over the message being delivered.

2. It will aggregate videos, news and information from across the web that share a similar message (such as Grocery Store Wars)- There is a lot of content floating around the internet that shares our message to children. We can connect these resources for kids and share this information in one place. This not only lifts the status of FoodMaverick.org, but it also lifts up other organizations that share our passion.

3. It will share recipes that are fun and healthy, either in video or text format (such as zombie pizza)- After children receive all this information about food, recipes and cooking ideas will give them something to do with the knowledge. Recipes included on the website should require little or no adult help. They should be simple and healthy.

4. It will include coverage of guerilla marketing stunts and news that we create-Food Maverick intends to work with events and hold guerilla marketing stunts. We will report these on the blog along with other relevant news.

5. It will allow for submission of outside content- This will include children's submissions of their own creations or recommendations of new material (such as videos) from around the web. This allows

children to become involved and an active part of the website.

6. It will serve as a hub-point for social media:

Social Media included in this project are: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Youtube – Many kids and teens are on social media. Social media gives kids a way to pass on information and help us spread the word. This also gives kids a voice and allows us to monitor if our message is affective through sharing.

7. A parent resource button – We suggest labeling this area something like "boring stuff for parents" to send the message that the site was designed for kids. This area should include helpful resources for parents such as local events, places to go for healthy food and organizations.

8. It will allow for branding of Food Maverick – Food Maverick has the opportunity to develop a brand for a revolution. Branding brings legitimacy to an idea that children can understand and come together on.

We live in an era of social media and viral marketing and yet we have not seized this opportunity to teach kids about healthy eating. Current healthy eating campaigns talk down to children. We intend to change the way we talk to children about healthy food, by reaching out to kids in their own language and including them in the conversation.

Special Challenges

Food Maverick attempts to successfully combine many different aspects of this wicked problem. It tries to do so many things. With all of these ambitious goals, there have been many challenges:

Not resolving the problem - As college students taking a class on sustainability, time is a huge issue. This project could take years of planning and collaboration to reach its full potential. This was something our group struggled with. We didn't like the idea of not finishing something we started. We had difficulties realizing that there was no end to the project….no solution. We had to continually remind ourselves that this is a wicked problem and that we could not fix it in a semester. If the problem were that easy to solve, it would not be wicked.

Realizing we couldn't do it alone - With a large portion of this class dedicated to identifying stakeholders and the importance of collaboration, one may think that we jumped right in and started talking to people, but we didn't. The fact is, knowing the philosophy behind collaborative thinking, we still attempted to solve the problem ourselves. We couldn't. We had to give in and start realizing that we needed to work with others to tackle the problem. That is why so many people fail when working on wicked problems. It is so easy to think that you have all of the answers. We had to reach out to find the missing pieces!

Trying to see the big picture - This idea came to us in pieces that we had to put

together and we were missing some portions. It was definitely a process. We had to remember that the best way to work on a wicked problem was through collaboration. Speaking to stakeholders and experts in the field helped connect our ideas and really make them take off.

Future Considerations

A lot of work needs to be done to realize the Food Maverick vision. With limited time, the entire plan for the website could not be fulfilled. We focused on outlining a plan for the website and a goal. Building a successful web marketing campaign takes a lot of time, commitment and energy. There is significant time invested in finding and sharing information through the website and various social media. A future team needs to be in place to transform Food Maverick into the website we know it can be!

Collaborate with other majors to create content - Creation of our own material is necessary to push the Food Maverick brand. Food Maverick should partner with other GVSU departments to help accomplish this goal. It is our hope that in the future, students from the film, technology or graphic arts department could collaborate with this website for a mutually beneficial relationship. Information should be given to department heads to see if this is a possibility.

Cost – Websites can be very inexpensive. The cost to run the website in its current stage is about $10 year. This is hosted on Wordpress.com. However, if the website should get very popular, we would need to consider hosting options.

Additional costs - Another issue with cost has to do with non-digital elements to the project. Distributing things like stickers or pamphlets, cost money to produce. Events and programs are also costly and since the website is not currently designed to bring in an income, we do not have a way to monetarily support these endeavors.

Branding - Branding is essential to the success of the website and the movement that the brand represents. Branding brings legitimacy to the idea that children can understand and come together on. Although a logo and tagline were created during the design process of this project, future students could update this to fit their needs. Items like t-shirts and wrist bands could help spread the message of Food Maverick.

Include local schools - Collaboration could be expanded to include schools. With schools on board, we can provide resources that teachers can present in class and encourage young people to make changes in their lives and in their schools. We want parents and schools to partner with us, but our website is designed to get kids to think outside the system. We are asking kids to ask questions and rebel against common assumptions about schools. We wonder whether parents and schools will respond positively or

negatively to these issues. Will schools and parents approve of our revolution?

<u>Creating events</u> - We can provide information through the website, but giving kids a way to physically be involved is the next logical step. Some of the events outlined in the processes above require a great deal of planning and collaboration, but would be well worth the time.

<u>Connecting with local businesses and organizations</u> - This brings the website to life and helps empower the movement towards healthy eating. Local business like Downtown Market, Fulton Street Farmers market, and Harvest Health have a stake in kids eating more healthy foods. They also can provide venues and an outlet for marketing! Local businesses help shape a community. They can be valuable partners for some of these projects, but what will we provide them in return? We must carefully consider whether (and how) we would advertise for local businesses on the website given our goal of encouraging to see through advertisements aimed at them. So how should we approach local businesses about helping us with this project moving forward?

<u>Quantification</u> - How can we quantify the results? Using built in statistics for the website, we can accurately count webpage views, page-views and what content is most popular. We can also track shared information across social media. We currently do not have a systematic way to know if our plan is working. How will we know if we succeeded in empowering kids to make healthy choices?

Bibliography

Salwasser, Hal. (2004). Confronting the Implications of Wicked Problems: Changes Needed in Sierra Nevada National Forest Planning and Problem Solving. *USDA Forest Service Gen Tech*, 7-22.

Alpaslan, Can M. and Ian I. Mitroff. 2011. *Swans, Swine, and Swindlers: Coping with the Growing Threat of Mega-Crises and Mega-Messes.*Stanford University Press.

Fischer, Frank. Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2000. p 32.

Brown, Valerie A; Harris, John, Russell, Jacqueline (2011). Tackling Wicked Problems : Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination. Retrieved from http://www.eblib.com

Lapierre MA, Vaala SE, Linebarger DL. Influence of Licensed Spokescharacters and Health Cues on Children's Ratings of Cereal Taste. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.2011;165(3):229-   234. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics. 2010.300.

PEDIATRICS Vol. 118 No. 6 December 1, 2006 pp. 2563 -2569 (doi: 10.1542/peds.2006- 2698)

Prevention Institute. (2011). The facts on junk food marketing and kids. Retrieved from
http://www.preventioninstitute.org /focus-areas/supporting-healthy-food-a-
activity/supporting-healthy-food-and-activity-environments-advocacy/get-

involved- were-not-buying-it/735-were-not-buying-it-the-facts-on-junk-food-marketing-and- kids.html

Robinson TN, Borzekowski DG, Matheson DM, Kraemer HC. Effects of Fast Food Branding on Young Children's Taste Preferences. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2007;161(8):792-797.
doi:10.1001/archpedi.161.8.792.