Marketing Youth Running Events: Targeting Parents

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Friday, June 3, 2016
Poster (Legacy North)

In the United States, there is great concern over the prevalence of childhood obesity. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2013), childhood obesity rates have doubled in the past 30 years. A contributing factor of childhood obesity is physical inactivity. A potential intervention that carries the possibility of increasing the level of physical activity are large scale community running events (Bauman, Murphy, & Lane, 2009). Large scale running events are gaining popularity with young runners. A number of studies have investigated consumer and charitable motives of adult participants in community and charity running events (Filo, Funk & O’Brien, 2008; 2009; 2011; Jeffery & Butryn, 2012); however, no studies were found focusing on reasons why children participate in these types of events.

Community based mass participation sporting events (e.g., running, cycling, triathlons) have seen considerable growth in terms of participation rates among adults and the recent trend of non-traditional running events (e.g., obstacle courses, mud runs, themed races) had an estimated 4 million finishers in 2013 (Running USA, 2014). The sport of running in general has seen solid growth over the past 20 years due to multiple factors including the surge of non-traditional running events, additional access to training programs, a large increase in female runners, and more family-centered community events (Running USA, 2014). The addition of youth events specifically, enables event managers to attract more participants, expand events, and encourage race participants to extend their stays in the community, which can lead to higher levels of economic impact for the host community. Children’s events also provide an opportunity to promote healthy and active lifestyles for youth.

One youth event that has seen extensive growth over the past decade is the Operation Smile Shamrock Final Mile. This event was developed by J&A Racing as a way to promote lifelong fitness and combat childhood obesity. J&A Racing has partnered with local elementary schools to offer 10-week running programs at schools. The children accumulate 25.2 total miles through the running programs at their schools or on their own at home and then they run the “final mile” of their 26.2 mile marathon distance on race day at the Virginia Beach boardwalk, the same finishing location of the Shamrock Marathon. Many children also raise money for the event’s title sponsor, Operation Smile. Some schools have much higher participation rates than others. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest the parental involvement (both behavioral involvement with running and psychological involvement with the Operation Smile Shamrock Final Mile product) is a key factor tied to participation rates of children, but no empirical evidence exists. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between parental involvement with Operation Smile Shamrock Final Mile and participation rates of children in the event.

Marketing trends indicate more advertising dollars are being spent to directly influence children’s product choices (Lagorio, 2007). However, research suggests young children are susceptible to socializing agents that have the power to influence their consumer behavior (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005). In particular, parents are a main source of influence on children in their activity choices (Brustad, 1993; Carr & Weigand, 2002; de Martelaer, van Hoecke, de Knop, van Heddegem, & Theebom, 2002; Dempsey, Kimiecik, & Horn, 1993; Serra Puyol, Zaragoza Casterad, & Generelo Lanaspa, 2014; Trost et al., 2003). In regard to a community running event coupled with a school training program such as Operation Smile Shamrock Final Mile, it seems logical to assume the parental involvement with this product and their own personal running values and behaviors would be salient factors influencing the choice of children to be consumers and participate in this event.

Although the construct of involvement has its roots in the field of social psychology (Rothschild, 1984), this framework has been used heavily in the advertising, marketing and consumer behavior fields (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement is defined as “A person’s perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values, and interests” (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). Personal relevance is the common thread found in involvement research where the product has to personally touch the consumer in order for some level of involvement to occur (Zaichkowsky, 1986). Zaichkowsky (1985, 1986) developed and revised the personal involvement inventory (PII) to
measure consumer behavior and purchase intentions. The revised PII is a 10 item semantic differential scale designed to assess the cognitive and affective dimensions of a person’s involvement with a product or service.

In relation to sport and recreation, involvement has gained popularity in the leisure literature to gauge intention to participate in a variety of activities including recreational running (McGehee, Yoon, & Cardenas, 2003), marathons (Ridinger, Funk, Jordan & Kaplanidou, 2012) and ultra-marathons (Mueller, 2012). The sport management literature has also used involvement to examine college athletic donor involvement (Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011). However, there was no literature found addressing how the involvement of adults with a sport product such as a running program or event can influence their children’s decisions to participate in the event. Therefore, the current study was developed to investigate if parental involvement with the Operation Smile Shamrock Final Mile can impact children’s consumer behaviors associated with this product (i.e., participation in the race day event, participation in the school running program, and raising funds for the charity connected with this event).

This study is currently in the data collection phase. It utilizes a cross sectional survey design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Zaichkowsky’s (1994) revised Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) is being used to assess the personal involvement of parents with the sport product. The revised PII has been found to be a valid and reliable instrument in the sport and leisure fields (Mueller, 2012; Kim, Scott & Crompton, 1997; Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011). The survey also includes questions about participation rates and the parent’s personal running behavior. Regression analyses will be used to examine the relationships between parent involvement with the product and participation rates of children in (a) the running event, (b) the school running programs associated with this event, and (c) the fundraising efforts for Operation Smile. Discovering if there is a relationship between the level of parent involvement and participation rates could aid event managers with designing and promoting youth running events. Perhaps the best marketing strategy is to target parents who have the power to influence children’s consumer behavior. Results and implications of this study will be presented.