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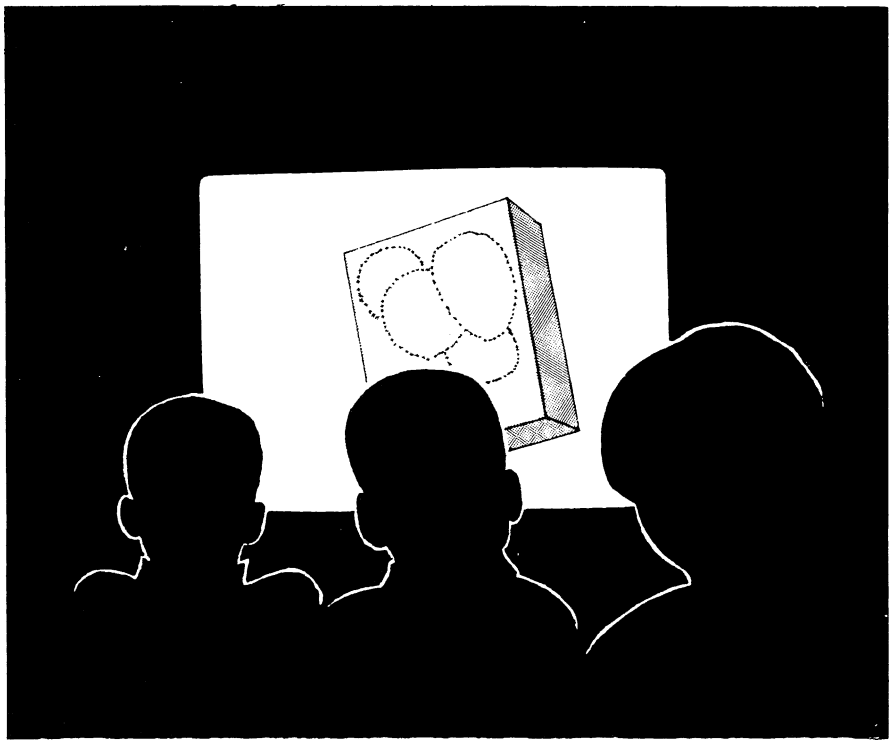

USDA MASS MEDIA NUTRITION EXPERIMENT

By Paul Geffert

Mention nutrition education to a random sample of parents and they will probably think of students sitting in health class listening to a teacher explaining the basic four food groups.

But, if you visit the homes of these parents after school or on Saturday morning, you are likely to find images of children watching a seemingly endless parade of food spots on television.

Some people may question whether or not TV food commercials are presenting nutrition information, but few will deny that TV food ads are influencing the eating habits and patterns of children, not to mention adults. A 1976 Yankelovich survey found that two of the most nagging problems parents mention about raising children (under 12 years) are children filling up on snacks between meals and always aksing for things they see advertised on television.[1]

There is a growing consensus among USDA officials, Congressional leaders, and nutritionists that television could be used effectively for reaching large segments of the American population with nutrition messages. The average American child, by the time he or she turns 18, will have spent more than 15,000 hours watching TV, compared with 11,500 hours spent in the classroom.

Children (2-11 years) see an average of 240 food ads each week—that's 2 hours of time. By the time they reach age 18, they probably will have seen 175,000 food commercials.

Two studies have evaluated the nutritional content of the foods advertised on television. An Action of Children's Television study found that less than 2 percent of the food commercials aimed at children promoted healthy products like meats, breads, fruits, and vegetables.[2] A Northwestern University Medical School study monitored food ads aired throughout the day and found that 70 percent of the weekday and 85 percent of the weekend food ads promoted edible stuff that was negatively related to the Nation's health needs.[3]

USDA Program

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is planning to begin a nutrition awareness campaign this fall, to determine what communication techniques can effectively inform children (kindergarten through 8th grade) about good nutrition.

The campaign will use a full range of media, marketing, promotional, and educational techniques. The nutrition messages to be presented via television, radio, newspapers, and other printed materials will be designed to reinforce nutrition messages children will hear in school and they and their parents will see throughout the community.

The proposed FNS research project will be conducted in three stages within three selected urban-/suburban communities with their own distinct television market areas as well as a proper mix of key population segments which are to be studied. During the campaign's 7-month testing period, the target group in each of the three communities will be treated as follows:

1. One community will receive "extensive exposure" to nutrition messages only through TV, radio, and newspapers;
2. The second community will receive the same level of mass media as above, plus the nutrition messages will be reinforced by activities in the school classrooms and cafeterias, grocery stores, medical facilities, and the Food Stamp Program, etc.
3. The third community will receive only a limited level of TV and radio spots—"the usual" exposure of public service announcements.

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[1]Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc. *The General Mills American Family Report 1976-77, Raising Children in a Changing Society.* Minnneapolis: General Mills.

[2]Barcus, F. Earle. *Television in the Afternoon Hours, Weekend Commercial Children's Television.* Newtonville, Mass.: Action for Children's Television.

[3]Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, United States Senate. *Dietary Goals for the United States.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977, p. 59.

Stage I:
Focus Groups

The first stage of the research calls for multiple focus group interviewing sessions with children, parents, teachers, pediatricians, etc. The primary purpose of these focus sessions is to gather information to guide the development of the different messages to be disseminated by television, radio, newspapers, the classroom, the school cafeteria, health professionals, grocery stores, and USDA's Food Stamp Program.

Stage II:
Baseline Surveys

The second stage of research calls for a variety of baseline surveys in each of the three communities among representatives cross sections of the children from the target age group, their parents, medical professionals, teachers, etc.

These surveys will be conducted via indepth personal and group interviews in the schools, homes, and offices in order to measure and evaluate children's, parent's, and other people's nutritional knowledge, attitudes, and dietary behavior.

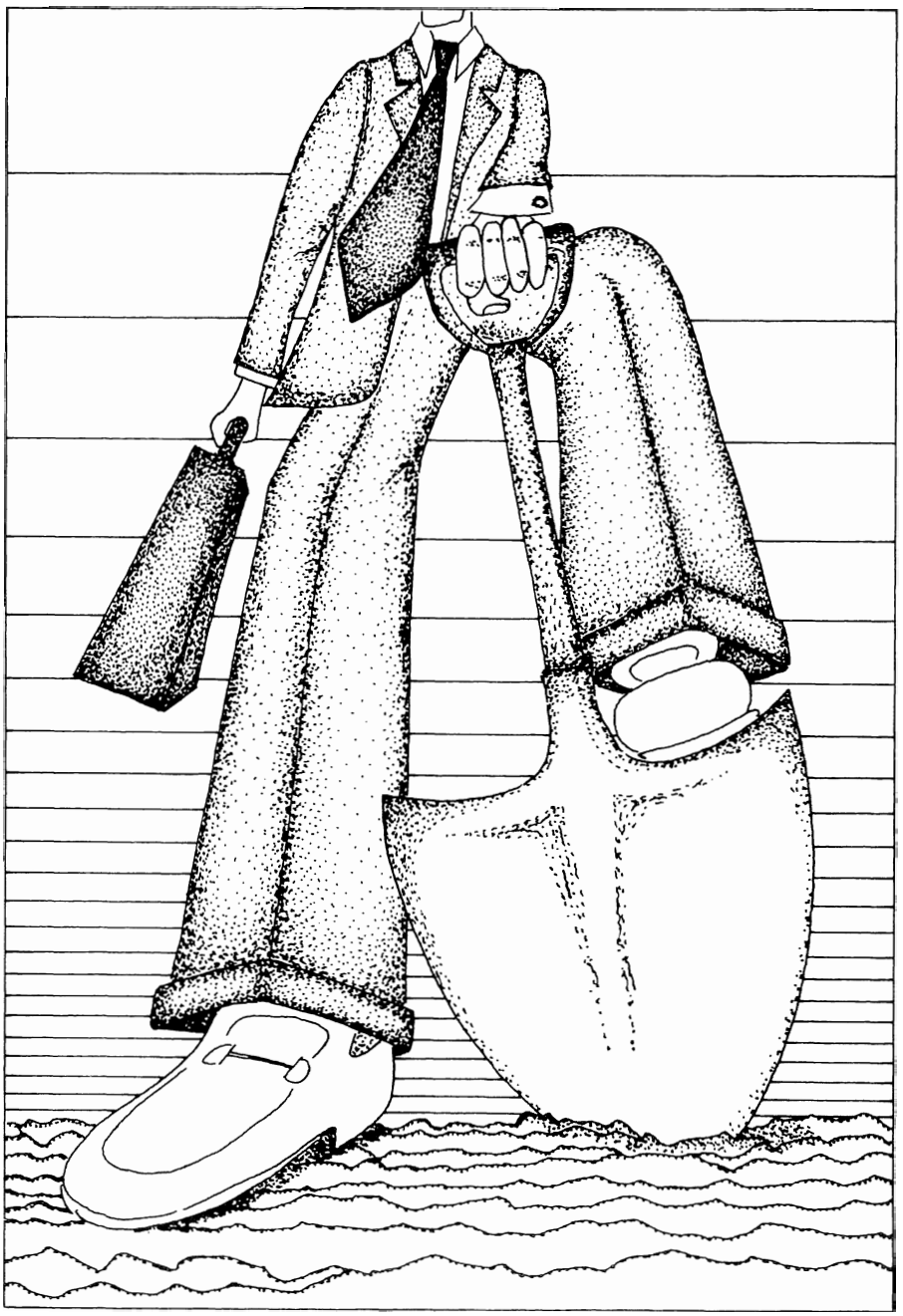
Stage III:
Post Treatment

The third stage of the research will be conducted in each of the three communities approximately 7 months after the start of the campaign. The same respondents as interviewed in the second stage will, to the extent possible, be re-interviewed and re-tested in this stage. Thus, the results from this stage will measure actual attitudinal and behavioral changes which occurred during the various campaigns.

These measurements will indicate which communication strategies can be used to reach each important population segment at the most advantageous times. The data should also help USDA, other government agencies, and outside groups to better understand the influence various channels of communication can have on our choices of food.

GARDENING — AN IMPACT ON THE FOOD SUPPLY

By Evelyn Kaitz

Is home production of fruits and vegetables an important source of food in our national diet? Does it affect demand in the marketplace? What proportion of the household population grows, and also cans and freezes home grown fruits and vegetables? Is increased interest in home food production a passing fancy, or will it continue long enough to have a significant impact on the food supply?

These and other questions were investigated by ESCS in surveys of Consumers' Food-Related Behavior, Attitudes and Motives in the spring of 1976, the first quarter of 1977, and the first quarter of