The goals of mass media campaigns such as ParticipACTION are to:

- increase awareness of a problem (high levels of physical inactivity)
- provide useful information (physical activity guidelines)
- demonstrate the need for change
- stimulate discussion
- positively influence attitudes and behaviours

Specifically, NG ParticipACTION aims to involve all Canadians in improving their health by:

- creating communications programs and disseminating information about physical activity and sports participation
- encouraging and supporting the coordinated actions of partner organizations
- contributing to community capacity building
A review of effective interventions (Kahn et al., 2002) found mass media campaigns may be an important method of increasing awareness of the benefits of physical activity, and certainly ParticipACTION appears to have had a major impact. Bauman et al. (2004) synthesized the results of six national surveys and found high levels of unprompted and prompted recall of ParticipACTION among Canadian adults over the course of two decades.

**Highlights of Bauman’s analysis:**

- When asked to list fitness and physical activity organizations (unprompted recall) during the years 1978 to 1994, between one-sixth and one-third of Canadians consistently mentioned ParticipACTION.
- Prompted recognition rates of the ParticipACTION logo or messages ranged from 77 per cent in 1977 to over 80 per cent from 1980 to 2002.
- Of those aware of the campaign, 83 to 95 per cent thought it useful in promoting physical activity.
- The prompted recall rates of other physical activity campaigns around the world were 70 per cent on average (Cavill & Bauman, 2004).

Since there is a growing emphasis on the evaluation of public health mass media campaigns for physical activity (Bauman et al., 2006), an international team of researchers including the Sedentary Living Lab at the University of Alberta obtained funding to evaluate the NG-ParticipACTION program in order to learn more about the operation of the campaign as well as its influences on the public.

**Assessing the Impact**

**Purpose and design**

This evaluation project was designed to assess:

- the level of awareness and knowledge of NG-ParticipACTION among Canadians and within population subgroups
- the efficacy of NG-ParticipACTION for promoting physical activity intent and behaviour

We conducted a population-based survey each month for six months between July and December, 2007. We sampled all provinces and territories, and our total sample size was 4,590.

The survey questions were designed to probe people’s awareness of the ParticipACTION campaign. For example, we asked, “When you think of physical fitness, what group or organization promoting fitness in Canada comes to mind?” The survey also asked if people had seen any of the new ParticipACTION advertising or messages in the past month.

Other questions assessed people’s physical activity behaviour as well as their beliefs about physical activity. These included questions about their self-efficacy for participating in moderate and light physical activity on a regular basis, and their intentions to be physically active over the next six months.

**What we found**

The results of the 2007 survey suggest that ParticipACTION still has a presence in the vocabulary of Canadian adults, even though the campaign has not produced new national public service messages since 1999. However, awareness levels have declined. When prompted, approximately...
three-quarters of Canadians (76 per cent) indicated that they had heard of ParticipACTION. This is down from approximately 85 per cent in 2002. Additionally, unprompted awareness of ParticipACTION has declined since 1994 (17 per cent) with only 8 per cent naming ParticipACTION when asked.

Also, awareness varies within the population, according to a person’s age, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy (positive beliefs), access to facilities and current level of physical activity.

**Age.** Adults between 25 and 64 showed greater awareness of ParticipACTION than those 18 years of age or younger. Since the campaign has not been active for approximately 10 years, this difference should not be a surprise.

**Socioeconomic status.** In general, Canadians with higher levels of education and income were more likely to report hearing about ParticipACTION and more likely to cite it when answering the unaided recall question. One explanation for this result is the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), which proposes that people of higher socioeconomic status (a combination of income, education and employment) benefit more from information flowing into a social system (e.g., through media campaigns).

Interestingly, this means that campaigns and initiatives such as ParticipACTION may actually increase the differences between groups with different socioeconomic status, both in behaviour and health.

**Positive beliefs and access.** People who reported more positive beliefs about physical activity and greater access to facilities were more likely to be aware of ParticipACTION.

**Level of activity.** People who were aware of ParticipACTION were also more physically active. The most physically active Canadians were twice as likely to be aware of ParticipACTION as the least physically active.

### Media Campaigns: Things to Consider

A media campaign is effective if it first increases knowledge about and awareness of the topic of interest, which may then lead to changes in intentions and behaviour (Bauman et al., 2006).

If you plan to use a mass media campaign to promote physical activity locally:

- consider integrating the message into your work
- try to include the “brand” with your programs and services (partnership)
- create excitement about the media campaign
- answer questions such as the following will help you to identify these factors:
  - Who does and does not have access to media (television, radio, billboards, Internet)?
  - Do cultural differences exist among the target group? For example, are you trying to reach new Canadians?
  - What beliefs, attitudes and current behaviours regarding physical activity do the members of the target group typically have?
NG-ParticipACTION already has some recognition within the Canadian population. This is great news, but it can’t change Canadians’ behaviours alone. Mass media campaigns like NG-ParticipACTION are only one component of many important interventions that may lead to population health changes (Kahn et al. 2002).

Campaigns need to be reinforced by policy and environmental changes that support physical activity (Cavill & Bauman, 2004). Comprehensive community-based initiatives still remain one of the best ways to see changes in physical activity (Kahn et al., 2002).

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References


