

Healthy Bites- Consumer Pilot Summary of Evaluation Results

Approach and Methodology

The qualitative review of the *Healthy Bites* messages was one of the final research components of the Food and Fitness in Focus initiative.

The Healthy Bites Consumer Pilot of the e-mail messages took place in 2002-2003, with volunteers from across Canada, including a closed-ended questionnaire (over 650 people) and an open-ended questionnaire (nearly 300 people). Participants responded to advertisements placed by the NIN in a variety of health- and nutrition-related publications and web sites — including those of national, provincial and territorial organizations. It should be noted that some of the publications and web sites in which recruitment ads were placed are aimed at public health employees — including dietitian and public health nurses. Results suggest that at least some respondents responded to the questionnaires as nutrition/health experts.

The pilot test results presented here include results collected through two survey questionnaires, as well as from a small number of unsolicited responses.

RESULTS

1. Respondent Demographic Information

- Ontario and British Columbia make up the majority of respondents (over half) followed by New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Alberta.
- Of Canada's 13 provinces and territories only Nunavut is not represented
- The majority of respondents fall into the 35-55 age group
- Over 8 in 10 respondents are women

2. Impact of the Messages

Reading the messages

- Nearly half of the respondents read all of the messages, while another one quarter say they read between 7 and 11 messages. Only a handful say they had not read any of the messages at all.
- Almost 9 in 10 respondents say they spent 10 minutes or less reading the messages each week.

Action taken after reading the messages

- More than half did something after reading the messages
 - thinking about the messages

- looking for more information
 - talking to someone about the messages.
- One in five took some action to improve their “physical activity” and/or “eating habits”.

3. Content of the Messages

Effectiveness of messages at achieving stated goals

- more than three-quarters answered positively said “yes”, (completely or partially)
- Frequent comments from respondents include:
- useful information is bogged down with too much detail
- information isn’t new but is thought-provoking, useful
- certain content is repeated in different messages, lengthening the message unnecessarily

Suggestions for change to content

Many suggestions offered, even from those who like the content as it is:

- many want more tips and ideas about physical activity and healthy eating:
 - How to work out at home/work
 - Meal planning, recipes
- Many like the idea providing links to Web sites/other sources of information
- There is mixed response to idea of using testimonials. (Suggest linking document to testimonials for those who do like them)

4. Style and Length of the Messages

Language and style of the messages

- The majority reported that the language “is just about right — it is easy and interesting to read”.
- Nearly one-third indicated that the language “could be improved — [it] is generally okay, but it is not very interesting or inspiring. It doesn’t make me feel like I should make any changes”.
- Most negative comments and suggestions for improvement concern the format/design/presentation of the information.

Length of the messages

Most people indicated that the messages were the right length. At the same time, it is clear that the format/presentation concerns of respondents, if addressed, would also address the problem of the messages being “too long”, for some respondents. Some of those who say the messages are too long also suggest

that the length should be set so that the reader to scan it in one sitting (not longer than one page). As suggested above, most negative comments about length were directly related to with format and style (more information below).

5. Delivery and Format of the Messages

Delivery and frequency of the messages

- A large majority indicated that they are in favour of e-mail delivery. Accessing information from a Web site was selected by far fewer respondents, but was the second-most frequent selection.
- Most respondents indicated that once a week is the optimal rate for receiving these messages. Comments include:
 - A number of respondents mentioned that the once-a-week delivery allowed time for them to put some of these ideas into practice and hopefully see some results before the next message came along.
 - “Once a week is perfect — not overwhelming and also not forgotten.”

Format and presentation

The appearance of the e-mail messages – their format and presentation – is clearly disliked by many respondents. Many negative comments about the appearance are offered, and many suggestions are provided to improve the look. Even in questions related to content, length and delivery, many of the comments relate to format and presentation. As a cross-cutting issue, the appearance of the messages may well be affecting respondents views of the content and delivery method (e-mail).

6. Overall Comments and Suggestions

The vast majority of comments and suggestions in the final section of the questionnaire mirrored the comments and opinions provided by the respondents in the previous sections. Many of the respondents used exactly the same wording or highlighted versions of key suggestions provided to the earlier questions. In broad terms, respondents say that they:

- are very much in favour of the e-mail format, and the frequency of delivery (once a week)
- generally like the content of the messages – with many suggestions for improvement
- would like more detail and/or more sophisticated information (less of the basics, with more emphasis on specialized information)

- do not like the appearance and presentation of the information – graphic design, including use of colour, would make the messages much more inviting, readable and enjoyable.

Three observations or suggestions were not prominent in the previous responses – to add a few more humorous or light-hearted quotes or stories, to respond to issues in the current media, and to examine emotional and psychological issues.

Consultant Recommendations

This final section includes recommendations developed by the consulting team, Allium Consulting Group, involved in developing the open-ended questionnaire, and analyzing the results of all data collected. While based on the data, the recommendations reflect the team's view of the steps to be taken to ensure that the *Healthy Bites* initiative is launched to achieve its full potential.

1. Proceed with a full national launch of the *Healthy Bites* e-mail message delivery.

The results of the pilot test show clear interest in and support for the *Healthy Bites* initiative. Given the amount of effort put into developing and testing the messages, and the clear direction resulting from the pilot test process, we strongly recommend that NIN, Health Canada or one of the other partners in the initiative take the lead in continuing and expanding the service. This would require a commitment to improving the messages (see other recommendations), and promoting and maintaining an active e-mail program to meet the clear demand for useful and practical information on how to develop and maintain a healthy, active lifestyle.

2. Improve the graphic design (look and feel) of the *Healthy Bites* messages.

Reviewers comments on the *Healthy Bites* messages were clearly coloured by their negative view of the look and feel of the messages. Technological developments have rendered the plain text look of e-mails to be so far from acceptable that they are virtually never used to promote a message or product. For a relatively small investment in graphic design, the e-mail messages should be developed in colour, with graphic images, photos, links to additional information (see recommendation 3), and even interactive sections (to measure BMI, track physical activity and eating patterns, etc.).

3. Rewrite messages to include the same content, but in a shorter, more focused and “deeper” format.

E-mail messages tend to be most effective when they are kept short. While study respondents did not specifically identify the current length as a problem in its own right, their comments clearly indicated that reorganizing the message content into shorter messages with layers of information would be preferable to the current format of several long paragraphs. Moreover, we recommend keeping each message focused on one specific issue – again, this was suggested by numerous respondents to Questionnaire B, and is a technique increasingly used in electronic media. Ideally, the first message text would be a maximum of three or four sentences, with links to additional information, tips, recipes, ideas and other Web sites for readers with an interest in the topic.

4. Revise the language to include variety of styles and tones.

An important element of revising the text to better meet reader needs and to make the most of the electronic media is variety. A review of current Web sites and e-mail messaging shows that variety is important – from style of text (a mix of bullets, sentences, even one-word statements), to tone (including upbeat, encouraging tone, humour) adds interest. The use of graphic variety (Recommendation 2) goes hand in hand with text variety. With the huge increase in the number of Web sites and e-mail messaging services, attractive style and look are now considered essential.

5. Actively promote the *Healthy Bites* e-mail messaging service.

Results of the pilot test point to the advantages of sending e-mail messages directly to the desktop of readers. Readers like the direct approach, and it removes the task of remembering to go to a Web site from their list of things to do. At the same time, this approach calls for continuous promotion on behalf of the “host” organization. We recommend advertising the service on community Web sites and in community newspapers throughout the year. Almost certainly these placements will be free of charge, although there will be costs in developing small ads and ensuring that they are updated (including variety in content and look) to continue to attract readers’ attention.

6. On-going maintenance, updating and evaluation of messages and e-mail lists.

We recommend that reader feedback be solicited at the end of the 12-week delivery period for each subscriber – this data could be collected and analyzed twice a year, ideally feeding into the process of updating and revising the content and look of the messages. Similarly, we recommend that the automated service be reviewed periodically to ensure that readers stop getting messages (if they so request), and that new subscribers are receiving the slate of messages. A

contact person (e-mail address) should be provided and monitored to gather feedback, answer questions, and handle requests as promptly as possible (in both English and French).