

VegMichigan College Campaign Proposal

Goal:

The goal of this campaign is to encourage college students to see meat-free meals as tasty, healthy, and something they value and seek out. To create a big change to, "I eat a plant-based diet," we must first create a small change, such as "I enjoy and value eating meat-free meals." A person must perceive this change as beneficial in their own life, and they have to decide this for themselves without feeling coerced. It must become part of one's identity to foster long-term change. Studies confirm that small initial changes can lead to more substantial changes in the future.

Target Audience

For us to have the greatest possible impact with our limited resources, we will focus on the audience that is most likely to change behavior. Research has shown that young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 are the most open to eating meat-free meals and/or moving towards a plant-based diet. Women are more likely than men, and Democrats are more likely than Republicans to eat plant-based meals. Focusing on college campuses will be a good way to reach our target audience, and this controlled area will help simplify the evaluation process and determine if our campaign is successful or not.

Social Norms, Identity, and Food

A social norm is what is prevalent, common, and what most people do. Social norms are the unwritten rules about how to behave in society and they are extremely influential in the individual decision-making process. Currently, most people eat meat, and this causes our society to infer that it must be a reasonably healthy, tasty, and efficient food source. As a result, it receives the "normative status" in virtually every regard. It is important to recognize that social norms can and do change over time. When a new norm takes the place of an old norm, we see big changes take place. In addition to the power of social norms, individuals have a food identity that begins to form during early childhood and continues throughout our adult life. This part of our identity is made up of everything we are exposed to in the kitchen at home, in school cafeterias, etc. Most people are resistant to changing their food identity rapidly. Social norms and individual identities are important concepts to understand; they will help us tailor a message that appeals to our target audience and does not make them feel judged or criticized.

The Standard Approach

Organizations and individual activists in the vegan community typically take the approach of explaining why eating meat, eggs, and dairy is unhealthy, unethical, and/or unsustainable, and that a better option is to switch to a vegetarian or vegan diet, or to reduce the consumption of animal products. This seems like a reasonable approach, but when attempting to persuade individuals to change their diet, this tactic only works with a small percentage of the population. Most people do not want to hear information that is negative about their current behavior or that makes them feel bad. People want affirmation, not information, and when we begin with an appeal that implies their current behavior is wrong, our message is often disregarded. In general, people want to maintain a positive sense of self and when they feel attacked, they become defensive and disregard the message.

A New Approach

Using messaging that does not challenge our target audience's identity and that uses social norms to our advantage can result in more people listening to our message and changing behavior. Messaging that focuses on the fact that more people are choosing meat-free meals, and that norms are changing, can be more effective than attempting to explain why an individual should change their behavior in the first place. Today, more restaurants are adding plant-based options, non-dairy milk is growing in popularity, Beyond Meat has become a household name, and many high-profile celebrities and professional athletes are promoting the benefits of eating plant-based meals. Stating that the biggest meat company in the United States, Tyson Foods, is offering plant-based options, creates powerful messaging and demonstrates that social norms are changing, and the future will be different. By sharing these positive developments, we can help accelerate the pace of change. As individuals begin to think and believe that social norms are changing, they often change behavior to adjust to the new social norm. Remember, social norms constitute one of the most reliable and powerful sources of influence on human behavior and when they change, society gravitates toward the new norm.

Key Aspects of the Campaign

1. Create messaging that will convey that eating less meat is becoming a social norm and will continue to grow and be the norm in the future. It is less important to convey the problem, which will make people feel bad and cause them to tune out. Showing celebrities, pro athletes, businesses, and community leaders who are choosing a plant-based diet shows that norms are changing. Promoting Beyond Burgers at Costco, Impossible Burgers at Burger King, and Violife Cheese at Cottage Inn also demonstrates how social norms are changing. Instead of saying that *your cheeseburger is destroying the Amazon Rainforest*, we could say,
 - *America's biggest meat producer, Tyson Foods, is adding plant-based meats to their offerings and the current CEO said that most of the meat could come from plants in the future.*
 - *One in three college students are currently changing their diets by reducing or eliminating meat and other animal products.*
 - *More pro athletes have decided to change their diets and now reduce or cut out animal products to improve their performance.*
 - *According to the MSU Food Literacy and Engagement Poll, 35% of Americans have consumed plant-based meat in the last year and 90% say they would do so again.*

The above messaging allows our audience to envision that our society will eat less meat in the future and that social norms are changing without putting them on the defensive. Appropriate messaging within a well-planned campaign can speed up the process of change.

2. Messaging should be delivered by fellow students or people who look like our target audience whenever possible, with the only difference being that the students in our marketing materials enjoy eating meat-free meals. According to The College Marketing Group, *college students are more likely to trust their peers than a school rep or vague brand voice*. We should use a medium that is familiar to students to deliver our message. College students are highly engaged on YouTube (93% use it). Gen Z, which represents today's college-age population, grew up with the internet but will unplug and engage with print media through niche magazines and newspaper advertising.

3. We must bring value to our target audience. How will eating more plant-based meals benefit them and improve their life? Different groups within each university will respond to different messages and we need to find a way to connect our message to topics of interest to them. Individual students will connect with the message that is most relevant to them. An example of general topics of interest to a college student include:
 - What to eat before a big test to help improve focus
 - How to save money while grocery shopping or eating out
 - Foods that are quick and easy to make in a dorm room
 - What to eat to improve athletic performance (Many college students participate in sports by playing for the school team or an intramural league within the school.)
 - Choosing foods that are better for the environment
4. Make it easy for students to locate meat-free options.
5. According to The Center for Public Interest Communications at the University of Florida, we can ask students to do something but our “ask” must be specific and reasonable.
6. Asking students to fill out surveys with simple questions is a powerful tool. Surveys have been shown to encourage students to articulate the reasons why they think people are eating less meat and/or dairy. The survey materials should lead observers to generate a persuasive argument to change on their own, rather than explain the reasons to them. No one wants to be told what to think or do and they do not want to feel coerced into making a decision. Questions such as, “Do you think students are eating more or less meat?” and “Why do you think this is?” invite participants to articulate the reasons they find most compelling.
7. A foot-in-the-door strategy is an important concept to remember. When an individual takes the first step toward behavioral change, they are more likely to make a bigger change in the future if they feel the initial small step was positive and beneficial. Our goal is for college students to take the first step by eating more meat-free meals.

Campaign Details

Based on the key aspects of the campaign, we will do the following:

1. Each school will have a student ambassador (paid intern) who is a current student. The College Marketing Group is seeing a rise in student ambassadors and interactive social media campaigns highlighting individual student experiences. The student ambassador will assist VegMichigan’s Community Outreach Coordinator in tracking plant-based options on and off campus, working with foodservice to promote plant-based options, organize free food tastings, enlist other ambassadors, and promote a positive message.
2. Create a website for college students. The website will include:
 - A detailed list of plant-based food options available on and off campus for each school involved in the campaign (e.g. restaurants and grocery stores)
 - Recipe videos that students can make in their dorms or apartments with simplicity being the focus
 - Interviews of students explaining why they choose to eat plant-based meals
 - A place for students to ask questions and/or request a mentor

- Useful information about being healthy (e.g. B12, omega 3s), positive movies (e.g. *The Game Changers*), popular packaged items (e.g. Vegemise, Beyond Burgers)
 - Promotions and giveaways for plant-based foods
 - Photos of students, football games, local hangouts with meat-free options, prize winners, etc. to provide a fun and inviting feel
3. Offer free food tastings at sporting events, student group meetings, Greek organizations, parties, and other popular events. An example would be grilling Beyond Burgers at a football game or delivering Cottage Inn vegan pizza to a student organization meeting. We will also attend orientation events at the beginning of the school year to give out free samples, promote the website, and share handouts that list meat-free options on and off-campus.
 4. Share positive “dynamic norm messaging” via the school newspaper, sporting events, social media, YouTube ads, YouTube videos, mailings, and other advertising methods. A variety of messages will be created to target different groups on campus (e.g. student athletes, environmental clubs, college Democrats) that show social norms are changing.
 5. Create a YouTube channel with recipes, interviews of students, and other topics of interest to college students.
 6. Work with off-campus restaurants to help promote their plant-based options.
 7. Create a mentoring program/support system to guide students and answer questions for those interested.
 8. Work with mainstream organizations and departments to promote meat-free meals:
 - The College of Environmental Science
 - Student environmental groups
 - Dining Services
 - Student Government

Evaluate Outcomes

By conducting an annual survey, we can determine if students are eating more meat-free meals. We will also request data from Food Service and local restaurants regarding sales figures of meat-free options. We will work with Gregg Sparkman, Ph.D. Stanford, Postdoctoral Scholar, to create additional evaluation methods that will help us determine the effectiveness of the campaign and its long-term results.

This proposal includes data from the research and input of Gregg Sparkman (Ph.D. Stanford, Postdoctoral Scholar, Princeton University), Michigan State Food Literacy and Engagement, VegFund, The Center for Public Interest Communications at the University of Florida, The University Network, and The College Market Group.