Community-Wide Campaign to Promote Physical Activity Among Midlife and Older Adults: Lessons Learned from AARP’s Active for Life™ Campaign and a Synopsis of Evidence-Based Interventions

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Acknowledgements

The Active for Life™ campaign was funded through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, New Jersey.

Several individuals deserve recognition for their contributions to this document:

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Executive Summary

Physical inactivity is recognized as a serious public health problem in the United States, largely because it contributes to the development of certain chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, some kinds of cancer, osteoporosis and falls in older adults. The threat of premature mortality from inactivity-related health problems is most salient for people older than 65 years of age, who constitute one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population and who experience chronic disease and disability at a higher rate than other Americans (Bureau of the Census 1996; U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging 1988; Hoffman, Rice, and Sung 1996).

By contrast, physical activity can add years of independence to an older person’s life, reduce that person’s level of disability and improve his or her quality of life, according to evidence summarized in the May 2001 report entitled The National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older. Despite these proven benefits, the percentage of physically active older adults is still low: in 2000, only 35.1 percent of men and 26.6 percent of women were meeting the recommended level of 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity five or more days per week (Merck Institute of Aging & Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2004) Research shows that midlife adults know what they should be doing to stay healthy and physically fit, but few are acting on that knowledge (AARP 2002).

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1 The National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older grew out of the need for a framework for planning, collaborative action and social change among organizations and agencies involved in physical activity/aging. Seven partner organizations led the effort to create the document: AARP, American College of Sports Medicine, American Geriatrics Society, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Council on the Aging, National Institute on Aging, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In addition, representatives of approximately 50 interested organizations provided input and recommendations during a conference that was held in October 2000.

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Active for Life™

Getting sedentary midlife and older adults to change their physical activity behaviors was the intent of Active for Life™ (AFL), a social marketing campaign supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and planned and implemented by AARP. The campaign encouraged adults older than age 50 to engage in moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week.

AFL tested the effectiveness of this physical activity directive by conducting targeted physical activity campaigns in two cities: Madison, Wisconsin and Richmond, Virginia. Overall planning, marketing and media relations were coordinated by staff at AARP headquarters in Washington, D.C., whereas local campaigns were run by AFL coordinators who worked closely with AARP’s Wisconsin and Virginia state offices. Local campaigns in each city employed a range of interventions to educate residents about physical activity, provide information about local physical activity programs and advocate for environmental changes that would make it easier for the 50+ population in each city to walk and bike.

Campaign Timeline and Locations

While AFL officially began in May 2002 with kickoff events in both Richmond and Madison, planning for the campaign began in October 2001 after AARP received the RWJF funding. The campaign continued on a formal basis until January 2004. Then, between January and July 2004, local campaigns in each city continued to operate without direct involvement from AARP headquarters in Washington. During this time, the local campaigns wrapped up their programmatic and environmental work and made plans to sustain AFL initiatives over the long term.

During the campaign’s early planning stages in 2001, AARP used a variety of criteria to select the cities in which it would launch AFL local campaigns. Potential sites were ranked according to a number of factors, including size; percentage of people aged 50 and older; number of AARP
members; state obesity and physical inactivity rates; current and potential community partners;
variety of local media outlets; and the community’s diversity, environmental assets, and rates of
crime and pedestrian deaths. Final sites were selected through a Kepner-Tregoe (KT) Decision
Analysis.

In keeping with AARP’s site-selection criteria, Madison and Richmond were chosen to host the
AFL campaign because they were similar in size and were both state capitals. In addition, both
cities contained a large population of AARP members, were located in states with active AARP
offices and appeared to have a large number of local organizations that could become AFL
partners. Conversely, these two cities differed significantly in the level of physical activity
among their residents.

AFL researchers learned more about the cities of Richmond and Madison during the course of
their studies. For example, support for physical activity appeared to be stronger in Madison than
in Richmond, according to AFL’s pre-campaign research. Madison residents who participated in
AFL surveys showed a stronger overall commitment to physical activity than did older
Richmond residents and were more knowledgeable about the benefits of physical activity for
midlife and older adults. The city of Madison also appeared to have a stronger infrastructure for
promoting physical activity than did Richmond. Older Madison residents interviewed before the
AFL launch were more likely than older Richmond residents to report that a “great deal” of
physical activity-related programs and services were available in the community for older
residents who were interested in becoming more physically active. In addition, Madison’s built
environment was slightly more conducive to outdoor activities, such as walking, than
Richmond’s environment was.

Having this information was important to AFL researchers because it offered them significant
insight into how the social and environmental differences between Richmond and Madison might
affect the success of the AFL campaign in each city. The researchers later concluded that these
differences might have contributed to the differing rates of success that Richmond and Madison
residents enjoyed when attempting to continue their physical activity routines after AFL ended.
While AFL helped more of Richmond’s older residents initiate physical activity, older Madison residents were more successful at sustaining their activity levels over time.

### Research Goals

AFL provided researchers with a unique opportunity to study whether it is possible to change the physical activity behaviors of midlife and older adults and to do so within the context of a broad-based social marketing approach. Research results suggest that the multi-faceted AFL campaign contributed to increases in self-reported physical activity among midlife and older adults in both Richmond and Madison. A multi-wave survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates at several stages of the campaign showed increases in both cities in the percentage of midlife and older adults who became familiar with the recommendation to be physically active at least 30 minutes at least five days a week. In addition, the percentage of AFL participants who reported getting “more physical activity than a year ago” increased in both cities during the course of the campaign. However, as with most behavioral change efforts, the initial increases in awareness and behavior decreased over time.

### Primary Components of the Campaign

The Active for Life™ campaign consisted of four separate components:

1. **Marketing and Communications.** AFL approached its marketing and communications efforts in a systematic way. Initially, the campaign relied heavily on surveys and focus groups to identify how adults aged 50–59 years old feel and talk about physical activity. Based on the focus group findings, AFL developed clear physical activity messages that it hoped would resonate with the 50+ population. It then created a marketing and communications strategy, which included both paid advertising and media relations, to spread those messages. The campaign also distributed guidebooks and resource guides that

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2 Reports of the focus groups are available, upon request, from AARP.
gave midlife and older adults advice and direction on how to increase their physical activity and maintain that increased activity over time.

2. **Partnership Building.** AFL coordinators in both Richmond and Madison developed partnerships with public health agencies, recreation and parks departments, health organizations, environmental groups, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, fitness facilities and clubs, major employers and other relevant groups. Some partners agreed to distribute AFL materials to their members and constituents, cosponsor AFL events, or form coalitions to improve local conditions for walking and biking. Other partners—including YMCAs, fitness centers and senior centers—offered free classes or walking clubs to local residents who participated in AFL. Notably, a significant number of former AFL partners continued to promote physical activity in Richmond and Madison up until the time that AARP and RWJF ended their involvement in the cities in 2004.

3. **Environmental Change.** By reducing environmental barriers to physical activity, communities can work toward providing numerous safe and pleasant opportunities for people to be active in their daily routines. The rationale is simple: citizens will be more likely to follow public health messages about the benefits of physical activity and to integrate physical activity into their lives if they have easy access to adequate sidewalks for walking and safe roads for bicycling. Active for Life™ took this rationale seriously when it incorporated advocacy for environmental change into the physical activity promotion strategies that it employed in Richmond and Madison.

AFL sponsored several major initiatives aimed at increasing local awareness of environmental issues, assessing specific environmental barriers and advocating for change. The Pedestrian Flag Project in Madison helped local residents cross busy intersections and educated motorists about their responsibility to yield the right-of-way to pedestrians. Through the PhotoJourney Project in Richmond, school-age children took photographs to document the environmental barriers that they encountered in their school neighborhoods. The Tour de Traffic in Madison and the Active Living Tour in Richmond allowed citizens and policy makers to tour key city intersections and roadways, study existing environmental
barriers and formulate recommendations to overcome those barriers. And, finally, local residents in both cities conducted a Walking and Biking Suitability Assessment to measure the ease or difficulty of walking or biking in their neighborhoods.

4. **The Walking Campaign.** In 2003, AARP and RWJF decided to narrow AFL’s focus from broadly promoting *all* physical activity to promoting *one specific* activity—and that activity was walking. AFL sponsored 12-week walking campaigns in Madison and Richmond that encouraged participants to record the amount of walking they did each day and then to set goals to increase that amount. The campaign distributed free step counters to participants who kept a daily log of the number of steps they took. A media campaign attracted participants to the walking initiative and a Web site and toll-free number kept the participants engaged.

The change from a broad focus on physical activity to a narrow focus on walking was undertaken primarily to boost the number of AFL participants. Despite the campaign’s early success—AFL had reached about 12,000 midlife and older adults during its first year—AARP research was showing that target audiences in both cities found the AFL effort to be too general and somewhat ambiguous. AFL organizers hoped that a narrower focus would make the campaign more attractive to members of the target audience.

Walking was chosen as AFL’s prime activity—and was endorsed by AFL’s local partners—because it is popular, inexpensive, healthful and easy for most people to do. In addition, AFL partners were convinced that a good experience with walking would eventually lead older adults to participate in other types of physical activities. The choice proved to be a good one. The walking campaign produced measurable increases in participants’ awareness of both physical activity benefits and recommended activity levels. It also added freshness to the AFL campaign and renewed media interest in the campaign.
Active for Life™ Guide

As part of the Active for Life™ campaign, AARP and RWJF conducted a literature review to identify potentially effective strategies for changing the physical activity behaviors of midlife and older adults. Design of the AFL campaign was based on this literature review, which included the Guide to Community Preventive Services, also known as the Community Guide (Kahn et al. 2002). After the campaign’s conclusion, AARP teamed up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to share lessons that AARP and RWJF learned during AFL. These lessons are included in this guide. The guide’s first four chapters were written by AARP staff with support from CDC. These chapters focus on the four AFL components mentioned above:

- Chapter 4: A Guide to Community-Wide Walking Campaigns.

Readers should note that Chapters 1-4 include information from a number of internal AARP reports, which are not yet publicly available. Researchers and other practitioners who are interested in more detail should contact AARP's Knowledge Management unit at (202) 434-6274.

Chapter 5, written by CDC staff, summarizes community-based strategies that have proven to be effective in changing physical activity behaviors among midlife and older adults. This last chapter, entitled “Strategies Used in Evidence-Based Interventions to Increase Physical Activity among Midlife and Older Adults,” includes references that readers can review for more detailed information about specific, community-based interventions.

In sharing examples of community-based physical activity interventions, the CDC-authored chapter draws heavily on the Community Guide. This respected publication, developed by an independent nonfederal Task Force on Community Preventive Services with the support of the
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides recommendations for using a variety of evidence-based interventions to prevent disease and promote healthy behaviors, including physical activity behavior. The Task Force bases its recommendations on a rigorous and systematic scientific review of published studies.

Essentially, Active for Life™ was an attempt by AARP and RWJF to translate the general principles advocated in the *Community Guide* into the design of a community-wide campaign that would promote physical activity to adults who are aged 50 years and older. In doing so, AARP and RWJF sought to help community-based physical activity practitioners apply *Community Guide* recommendations to their own work so that campaigns similar to AFL might eventually be replicated throughout the country.

**Lessons Learned from Active for Life™**

The five chapters in this guide offer numerous lessons that AARP, RWJF and their local partners learned during the AFL campaign. Hopefully, practitioners working in local communities can use these lessons to develop and implement their own campaigns to promote physical activity among midlife and older adults. An overview of these lessons is provided below:

*Marketing and Communications Lessons:* When developing a marketing and media relations campaign to promote physical activity, involve communications professionals in your initial planning stage, and give them enough time—a year or more—to conduct market research and develop the campaign’s primary messages. When designing promotional materials, take into consideration the audience’s biases regarding physical activity, choose visuals to which the audience can relate, and focus on sending simple and specific messages that the audience will remember. You probably won’t have to spend much time convincing midlife and older people about the benefits of being active—they already know these facts. Instead, focus on helping them find ways to fit physical activity into their busy lives.
Develop your campaign’s messages before you reach out to the media. When you’re ready to reach out, get to know local reporters as individuals and develop ongoing and mutually beneficial relationships with them. In addition, spend time developing new twists and angles for the physical activity story. You’ll need a unique approach in order to capture the attention of news outlets that are already saturated with health-related stories. As you plan the campaign’s media events, spent some time anticipating what could go wrong in the course of these events. Then write a crisis plan that outlines what you will do and how you will respond if, for example, a campaign participant gets hurt or local residents have negative reactions to particular initiatives. Including local partners in the development of this crisis plan—as well as in your media campaign—will help solidify your relationship with those partners.

**Partnership Lessons:** It takes time—a year or more—to attract partners to a social marketing campaign like AFL. A savvy and outgoing local coordinator can help you attract these partners, and the process of finding partners should be ongoing. Look first for partners who are already working in the aging or recreation fields, and then seek nontraditional partners whose missions may be indirectly related to the campaign’s goals. Be sure to clearly explain to partners both the benefits and costs of participating in the campaign—and do your best to convince partners that the benefits far outweigh the costs. Strive for early buy-in from partners and ensure their long-term commitment by providing focused and finite activities in which they can participate. Once partners have signed on to your campaign, don’t leave them alone to fend for themselves. Make a concerted effort to communicate with your partners on an ongoing basis, and work with them to ensure that campaign-related activities will continue after your funding has expired.

**Environmental Change Lessons:** To be successful, environmental change projects should be carried out in collaboration with local partners. Attract supporters to your project by planning well-organized, professionally led, visually appealing and balanced public events aimed at raising local awareness about environmental barriers and teaching local residents how they can get involved in removing those barriers. When possible, involve children in campaign events to show that environmental barriers affect people of all ages.
Local organizations and residents can help you collect information and perform assessments that will support an environmental change advocacy effort. Interested parties can participate in high-profile tours that allow them to observe and offer recommendations for improving a neighborhood’s built environment. Local residents can be trained to complete a systematic, multi-step assessment of a neighborhood’s suitability for biking and walking. Involvement in such an assessment can educate volunteers and cement their commitment to improving the local built environment, while creating the hard data, maps and community-generated recommendations you need to advocate for change with public officials, committees and task forces.

**Walking Campaign Lessons:** Participants in a walking campaign will need information and ongoing support to help them sustain their commitment to walking. You can help walking campaign participants stay on track by providing step counters, which they can use to measure their progress. Providing opportunities for peer support will also help keep participants walking. High-priced rewards that are delayed until large amounts of physical activity are completed may not be a good way to motivate participants to stick with a walking campaign. A better approach might be to offer low-key and modest incentives that are timely and frequent. Promoting a walking campaign will be more successful if you enlist the support of local celebrities who can add credibility and visibility to the campaign. In addition, it’s important to enlist the support of local partners, who will appreciate having tangible and visible ways to become involved in a walking campaign.

**Conclusion**

As the chapters in this guide illustrate, encouraging physical activity is not a simple task. However, the Active for Life™ campaign has proven that such endeavors can be successful as long as they involve good planning, energetic outreach, collaboration with local partners, and education and support for the people who are trying to increase their activity levels. These adults know that they should be more active, and most of them want to be more active. Helping them accomplish this goal can be rewarding for local organizations and agencies, whether their
campaigns are large or small, well financed or shoestring operations, or located in large metropolitan regions or small villages and towns.

AFL’s coordinated, multi-faceted approach to physical activity promotion proved to be its greatest strength. In both Richmond and Madison, all AFL activities—marketing, media outreach, community organizing and partnership building—were closely coordinated in order to saturate local markets with physical activity messages. This “saturation” approach guaranteed that residents older than 50 years of age would hear AFL messages at least once during the campaign and, hopefully, from a variety of sources.

If enough practitioners sponsor campaigns that include physical activity messages, the end result could prove to be quite dramatic: a better quality of life for the older population, both now and in the future. AARP and CDC offer this guide in hopes that the information and advice it contains will help practitioners create physical activity programs that will help midlife and older adults enjoy a healthy and independent old age.

**References**


Table 1: Lessons Learned from AFL

**Marketing and Communications**

1. Marketing and media relations experts should be part of the initial planning for any physical activity promotion campaign.

2. It takes a year or more to plan an effective communications campaign.

3. Midlife and older adults know they should be more active; however, they need help fitting physical activity into their busy lives.

4. The audience’s biases and attitudes must be taken into consideration when marketing physical activity.

5. The visual images you choose for ads speak louder than the words you write.

6. Advertising won’t be successful unless viewers remember the message.

7. Consumers will become confused if you ask them to do too much.

8. The more specific advertising is, the more likely it is to resonate with the audience.

9. Before you call the first reporter, it’s important to develop the specific messages that you want to communicate.

10. Having a crisis plan may help you avoid a crisis.

11. Media outreach is based on relationships, so it’s a good idea to get to know local reporters as individuals.

12. Local news outlets are saturated with stories about health-related issues. This means that a media outreach campaign needs to find—and keep finding—new twists and angles to capture—and recapture—the media’s attention.

13. Cooperation on a media outreach campaign can solidify relationships with local partners.

**Partnership Building**

1. It takes a year or more to recruit, educate and gain a commitment from local partners in a social marketing campaign like Active for Life™.

2. Savvy and outgoing coordinators can make all the difference in attracting partners.

3. Successful campaigns will constantly be on the lookout for new partners.
4. Traditional partners will bring early credibility to a campaign, but nontraditional partners will add to its richness down the road.

5. Prospective partners will be most likely to sign on to a campaign if the benefits of participating outweigh the costs.

6. It is important to build partner commitment early.

7. Prospective partners feel more comfortable with a campaign that features concrete activities that have a specific focus and defined goals.

8. An organized strategy for communicating with partners on an ongoing basis can cement their commitment to the program.

9. A successful campaign will make plans to leave something behind after its funding has expired.

**Environmental Change**

1. Successful environmental change projects will be conducted in collaboration with partners who can provide information about local environmental barriers and actively participate in removing those barriers.

2. Well-planned public events will attract prospective partners and volunteers to an environmental change project.

3. Children can play an important role in educating the public and government officials about environmental barriers to physical activity.

4. An organized tour of a neighborhood—attended by citizens, advocacy groups and government officials—can raise awareness of environmental issues, generate recommendations for improvement and help build a coalition to work on change.

5. The best neighborhood tours are professionally led, visually appealing and balanced in their presentation.

6. A Walking and Bicycling Suitability Assessment (WABSA) can provide block-by-block details about how conducive the built environment is to physical activity in a community.

7. The WABSA auditing process can be useful to advocates but it is also a valuable and empowering educational tool for volunteers.

8. Some WABSA auditing tasks can be conducted simultaneously.
9. WABSA audit maps can be used successfully for both policy change and for individual change.

10. Public committees and task forces are powerful vehicles for influencing policy decisions.

**The Walking Campaign**

1. Local celebrities will add credibility and visibility to any walking campaign.

2. Community partners need tangible and visible ways to get involved in a walking campaign.

3. Consider carefully how you structure participant incentives.

4. Walking campaign participants need initial education as well as ongoing support and information.

5. Keeping track of participants’ progress helps to measure a walking campaign’s success and to keep participants on track.

6. It is essential for walking campaigns to offer participants the options of step counters and peer support.
Chapter 1:
A Guide to Marketing and Communications

Marketing and communications were primary components of Active for Life™ (AFL). Through the AFL social marketing campaign, AARP and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) sought primarily to disseminate messages about physical activity on the national level and in two local markets: Madison, Wisconsin and Richmond, Virginia. The campaign’s communications strategy had four major objectives:

1. To increase the public’s awareness of AFL.

2. To educate the public about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommendation, which was endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General, that adults engage in moderate-intensity physical activity at least 30 minutes a day on most days.

3. To change the attitudes of midlife and older adults toward physical activity.

4. To promote specific AFL-sponsored activities and physical activity outlets in the community that would help members of the target population change their physical activity behaviors.

AFL approached its marketing and communications efforts in a systematic way. Once its objectives were identified, the next steps were clear: AFL needed to (1) identify its audience; (2) develop the specific messages it wanted to communicate; and (3) choose the communication vehicles it would use to disseminate those messages.

Audience: AFL decided to target its communications activities to three distinct audiences: Richmond and Madison consumers who were aged 50 years and older and who were already

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trying to engage in physical activity or were currently planning to be more active; *community organizations* that might become AFL partners; and *government agencies* and *civic organizations* that could be enlisted to make local communities more “activity friendly.”

**Messages:** Initially, the campaign relied heavily on surveys and focus groups to identify how adults aged 50–59 feel and talk about physical activity. The focus groups included two types of participants: those who said they were “planning” to become more physically active and those who said they were “trying” to become more physically active. Based on the focus group findings, AFL developed preliminary messages for its marketing campaign and subsequently tested those messages during two more rounds of focus groups.

Even during their early stages, the focus groups had a significant influence on the design of the AFL marketing campaign and on its core message about physical activity. That core message was based on a CDC-ACSM recommendation, endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General and disseminated in 1996, that Americans participate in 30 minutes of moderate exercise “on most days” of the week. Members of the AFL focus groups found the phrase “on most days” open to interpretation and, therefore, somewhat vague. Some focus group members believed that engaging in physical activity on four days a week would be acceptable, whereas others believed that being physically active on six days each week would meet the recommendation. To clarify the directive, AFL tested the phrasing “at least 30 minutes a day, five or more days a week” and found that most focus group members thought this directive was clear and consistent with the spirit of the CDC-ACSM recommendation. This phrase would be associated with the AFL campaign for the next two years.

**Dissemination vehicles.** To disseminate the AFL message on both the national and local levels, campaign staff and consultants purchased newsletter, television and radio advertising; convinced reporters to write and air stories about the benefits of physical activity; and distributed written materials explaining how midlife and older adults could change their physical activity behaviors and how they could sustain those behaviors over time.
Paid Advertising

The directive of “at least 30 minutes a day, five or more days a week” was featured prominently when Active for Life™ released its first package of advertisements between May 2002 and May 2003. These ads showed “real” older people (as opposed to professional models) engaging in simple activities like walking. AFL developed two sets of ads: one set that was targeted specifically to viewers who were aged 50-64 and another set that was aimed at people older than 65.

In one print advertisement, targeted to the older age group, a 67-year-old African American woman was pictured walking with three friends who were talking and laughing. An inset showed the same woman with family members who had just presented her with a pair of walking shoes. “I stay active because I choose to age on my own terms,” read the ad copy, which also encouraged readers to (1) “get your heart rate up—at least 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week” and (2) send away for a free handbook called Be Active for Life.

Similarly, AFL television ads released during this same period emphasized simple ways to stay active and showed heart-warming pictures of midlife and older people with their families. Each commercial featured a voice-over in which the ad’s main character explained his or her reasons for staying active:

- “Every bride deserves a dance with grandpa,” announced one gentleman, shown dancing with his granddaughter at her wedding.

- “I stay active because strong arms give better hugs,” said a grandmother, shown embracing her two grandsons.

- “I stay active because with this bunch, I need all the energy I can get,” remarked a grandfather, shown filling his barbeque grill with charcoal as young children played in the background.
Each television ad concluded by encouraging viewers to participate in a specific, local activity program and to “get your heart rate up, at least 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week.”

Although the ads were well received and their placements were highly concentrated, post-airing surveys conducted in both Richmond and Madison were not encouraging. On the positive side, viewers who recalled seeing the ads stated that the commercials were visually appealing and likeable. These viewers remembered such messages as “We need to exercise more,” “We should raise our heart rates for at least 30 minutes,” and “It’s never too late to start.” However, only a small segment of viewers—about 13 percent—recalled ever hearing about the campaign. This low level of awareness prompted AFL to consider making a mid-course correction in its strategy.

During its second year, AFL established a walking campaign that ran for 12 weeks in Madison and Richmond and used step counters as a motivational tool that allowed participants to keep track of each step they took each day. The campaign urged participants to determine their current steps-per-day and then to set goals to increase incrementally the number of steps they took each day during the 12-week program. To publicize the campaign, AFL aired a television commercial that was very different from the family-oriented ads of its first advertising round. While the first set of ads attempted to “tug at the heart strings,” the second ad was intended to “tickle the funny bone.”

The new ad was a tongue-in-cheek spoof on infomercials and featured two comical characters: a pony-tailed body builder named Chad, and his not-too-bright sidekick, Suzie. The commercial began as a sales pitch, with Chad energetically shouting at the audience, “What would you do to feel better, feel stronger and have more energy for the rest of your life?” During the remainder of the 60-second spot, Suzie builds the suspense by peppering Chad with specific questions about the exact nature of the mysterious product he’s selling. She asks, “What are you talking about? Some kind of magic pill or something?” … “A fad diet or something?” … “An ancient secret salve?” Finally, Chad announces, “It’s called … walking!” When the stage curtains behind Chad and Suzie open to reveal people walking in place, the audience applauds enthusiastically. Then,
the screen fades to black and a commentator summarizes the theme of AFL’s new ad campaign: “Walking. Who Knew?”

In addition to the television ad, AFL placed print ads in local newspapers to tout the benefits of walking. One ad introduced the concept of walking with the words, “It’s the least you can do. Literally.” The other ad exclaimed, “Finally! A workout that’s as easy as walking!”

AFL communications research showed that both the Chad and Suzie commercial and the two print ads were believable and meaningful to people who saw them, and were appealing in tone and content. The research also determined that the ads successfully conveyed AFL’s key messages about walking and the importance of being active, and were persuasive in suggesting that walking is an activity for anyone, at any age. Most important, more than half of the viewers recalled something about the ad, roughly four in 10 recalled something about walking, and one in 10 viewers remembered something about AARP. The tongue-in-cheek tone of the ad clearly had made it memorable.

Media Relations

In 2002 and 2003, the public relations firm of Fleishman-Hillard in Washington, D.C. worked in partnership with AARP in Washington and the association’s state offices in Wisconsin and Virginia to develop and implement an AFL media outreach program for Active for Life™. The media relations campaign took place at both the national and local levels.

At the national level, the campaign’s objective was to announce AFL as a partnership between AARP and RWJF, to establish the two organizations as players in the physical activity arena, and to generate visibility for AFL among national policy leaders. The campaign’s national kickoff, which took place in May 2002, received 3.4 million “earned” media impressions, meaning that television and newspaper outlets covered the kickoff event because they viewed it as newsworthy, not because AFL had purchased advertising time or space. The kickoff received national television coverage on CNN and local television and newspaper coverage in such major
media markets as New York, Los Angeles, the District of Columbia, Detroit and San Diego. In addition, the campaign’s kickoff event in Washington, D.C. was attended by representatives from such organizations as the CDC, the American Cancer Society, the American Association for Active Lifestyles, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, and the National Center for Walking and Bicycling.

After AFL’s national launch, the campaign’s media relations work continued on the local level. Each local campaign began with a special kickoff event aimed at generating in-market visibility for AFL and introducing AARP and RWJF to the Madison and Richmond communities. The events featured fun walking and aerobics activities, which provided an opportunity for the visual media to take “light-hearted” pictures that told the AFL story in an entertaining way.

Before and after the local launch events took place, Fleishman-Hillard worked hard to place articles and feature stories about AFL in Madison and Richmond newspapers and on the cities’ television and radio stations. In addition to garnering publicity for the campaign’s major local events, the firm also focused on helping AFL’s local partners promote their own activities and programming. While media coverage of these partner events tended to be less extensive and often did not mention AFL, RWJF or AARP, they succeeded in communicating the importance of physical activity for people older than age 50 and helped to build goodwill with local partners. These partners reported to AFL that they viewed free advertising as one of the most lucrative benefits they received from their participation in the campaign.

Other Marketing Materials

Once AFL captured the attention of community residents through direct marketing and media relations, it needed to offer those residents some practical guidance about how they could increase their levels of physical activity. AFL provided residents in Richmond and Madison with three products aimed at motivating them to become “active for life.” All three products figured prominently in AFL’s promotional ads and articles, which continually urged readers and viewers to request one of the following:
• **A Handbook**: The *Be Active for Life Handbook*[^3] was a guide that residents could use to carry out their own physical activity programs. AFL project staff distributed 5,000 handbooks in Richmond and 3,000 in Madison during the course of the campaign. The 40-page handbook introduced readers to the CDC-ACSM recommendation, endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General, that midlife and older adults should engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity at least five days per week. The handbook also provided a number of self-administered small surveys that participants could use to determine how much physical activity they were currently getting and to gauge their readiness to increase those activity levels. The book contained three sections of questions, worksheets and goal-setting exercises to help participants move from being “not yet ready” for physical activity to “staying active for life.” The final section provided tips for success and a listing of organizations that could offer information about exercise, fitness and health.

• **A Community Resource Guide.** A *Be Active for Life Guide* was published in each city. At 92 pages in Madison and 72 pages in Richmond, the guides provided a comprehensive listing of local programs, services, activities, health clubs and other physical activity resources for adults aged 50 years and older. No similar publication existed in either city. The 8½-by-11-inch booklets were organized according to activities in which older people might be interested—including aerobics and jazzercise, biking, bowling, court sports, dance, fencing, general exercise classes, golf, hiking, roller blading and in-line skating, skiing, soccer, running, walking, softball, strength training, swimming and aqua aerobics, t’ai chi and martial arts, tennis, table tennis, triathlon, volleyball, water sports, winter outdoor activities and yoga. Within each physical activity category, the handbooks listed contact information for local organizations that sponsored relevant events and programs. The books also provided tips on how to use a health club and how to establish a walking club. AFL distributed more than 17,000 copies of the guides in Madison and 20,000 copies in Richmond. Several energetic partners took an active role in collecting information for the guides by distributing questionnaires to appropriate organizations and then organizing the data for AFL.

[^3]: An updated version of this handbook, now entitled, *Physical Activities Workbook*, is available through the AARP Web site at http://www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/health_publications_order_form.html#physical
• **Step Counters.** Step counters were distributed, free of charge, to participants in the walking campaigns that took place in Richmond and Madison during AFL’s second year. The counters, which carried the AFL logo, were simple devices that clipped onto the walker’s waistband and counted each step that the walker took. AFL participants used the step counters to measure their current activity level, and to track their progress as they increased that activity level over time.

**Lessons Learned About Conducting a Communications Campaign**

Throughout the marketing and communications campaign, staff working for AARP, RWJF and AFL learned many valuable lessons that shaped the campaign’s strategies and resulted in several mid-course corrections. These lessons are shared in the following pages in an effort to help guide similar initiatives aimed at communicating physical activity messages to the 50+ population.

**Lesson #1:**

*M Midnight and media relations experts should be part of the initial planning for any physical activity promotion campaign.*

Many organizations plan a particular initiative and then recruit media and marketing specialists after the fact to promote the specific activities included in those plans. AFL learned that developing an effective marketing and media strategy is easier if communications experts are involved from the beginning in planning the activities that they will later be promoting. It may be necessary to involve two types of communications experts in the planning process: (1) marketing experts to design and place paid advertising in local or national media outlets and (2) media relations experts to develop and pitch stories to national and local reporters. These experts will need to work together in a coordinated fashion to ensure that the campaign presents a unified message to the general public.
Lesson #2:
It takes a year or more to plan an effective communications campaign.

Promoting physical activity is a lot more complicated than thinking up a catchy motto, buying advertising or calling local reporters. An effective communications campaign can take a year or more to plan. The first nine months could easily be devoted to formative research—conducting surveys and focus groups that provide planners with the information they need to understand who the members of the target market are, what they think, what they know, what their challenges are, and what messages will resonate with them. The second nine months could be devoted to formulating messages for the campaign, designing advertising, and building relationships with local media. Organizers of a marketing and communications initiative may find that funders, partners and colleagues do not automatically appreciate how long it takes to develop an effective media campaign. It may be necessary to educate these individuals and organizations about a campaign’s planning requirements so that pressures to launch the campaign prematurely can be mitigated.

Lesson #3:
Midlife and older adults know they should be more active; however, they need help fitting physical activity into their busy lives.

AARP hired Roper ASW, a marketing research and consulting firm headquartered in New York, to conduct two national surveys among midlife and older adults that would shed light on respondents’ perceptions and attitudes toward health and physical activity. Generally, respondents were fairly knowledgeable about the CDC-ACSM physical activity recommendations, even if they were somewhat hazy about the specifics. More than half of those interviewed said that they thought it was appropriate to exercise about three times a week, whereas another 30 percent thought that they should exercise five or more times a week. Slightly more than one-third of the respondents said that a person of their age should exercise for about 30 minutes at a time, while similar percentages of respondents suggested that 20-minute or 45-
minute workouts were more appropriate. More than seven in 10 respondents (71%) said that it was very important for people their age to do some type of moderate exercise.

This research made it clear that AFL’s target audience was not inactive due to ignorance. Instead, midlife and older people knew that they should be more active, but were unable to integrate physical activity into their daily lives. In response to this information, AFL shifted the objectives of its communications plan. The campaign would have to do more than simply inform midlife and older people about the benefits of walking and other activities. It would also have to address—and hopefully break down—some of the barriers to physical activity that the target audience encountered.

Lessons Learned About Paid Advertising

**Lesson #4:**

The audience’s biases and attitudes must be taken into consideration when marketing physical activity.

When designing advertising for physical activity, it’s important to consider the biases that audience members have about exercise. For example, Active for Life™ learned early that what motivates a younger audience to exercise doesn’t have the same appeal for people in the 50+ age group. An older audience won’t view the prospects of having a “hard body” as an appealing motivator nor will it buy into the logic of “no pain, no gain.” Touting these notions in advertising could turn the audience away from physical activity.

Emotional appeals can also be tricky. Suggesting that physical activity will allow viewers to “dance at your granddaughter’s wedding” may work, but only as long as the marketing approach is not viewed as manipulative. Readers and viewers don’t respond well if they believe that an advertiser is trying to induce them to do something out of guilt or shame.

Finally, message developers must understand the reasons why members of the target audience
are not active. AFL gained this understanding from focus group participants who cited a number of barriers to increasing their own physical activity:

- **Lack of time.** Most people said that they didn’t have enough time to become physically active or couldn’t make time in their already busy schedules. AFL ads responded to this concern by emphasizing that physical activity doesn’t have to take a huge chunk out of every day—only 30 minutes a day is required.

- **Lack of a buddy.** Many respondents said that they weren’t physically active because they couldn’t find someone to share their activity. Finding an “activity buddy” was an important issue for focus group participants, who said they depended on companions to help them stay committed to physical activity and to distract them from tedious workouts. To acknowledge this desire for companionship, AFL ads featured groups of people engaged together in physical activity. Ads also promoted the availability of group classes and walking clubs in Richmond and Madison.

- **An aversion to sweat.** Some people viewed the whole idea of exercise—the sweating, flushing and heavy breathing—as distasteful. Focus group participants stressed that the physical activity portrayed in ads should not look like hard work—and should not be called “exercise” or “fitness.” AFL ads responded by featuring people who appeared to be enjoying themselves rather than “suffering” through an exercise regimen.

**Lesson #5:**

*The visual images you choose for ads speak louder than the words you write.*

No matter what the text of a print advertisement or television commercial is, the visual images—what the audience actually sees—leave the most lasting impression. If the visuals don’t match the viewers’ expectations, the entire message could be lost.

For example, one advertisement that AFL tested with focus groups encouraged readers to walk
or bike but showed a woman who was swimming. Focus group participants found it difficult to understand the mixed message and suggested that a reference to walking or biking should be accompanied by a photo of someone walking or biking.

Viewers also preferred to see advertisements and television commercials featuring people who looked like them, who were engaging in activities that they could envision themselves doing, and who were physically active at a realistic level of intensity. Mixed groups of men and women were preferred over groups of all men or all women. These mixed groups reinforced the idea that physical activity has important social aspects. Finally, the focus groups responded more positively to advertisements featuring “real people” than to ads featuring people who looked like professional models.

**Lesson #6:**

*Advertising won’t be successful unless viewers remember the message.*

Initially, AFL planners weren’t totally comfortable with the ad featuring Chad and Suzie and the fake infomercial. But while planners initially feared that the audience would be turned off by the commercial’s satirical tone, the ad received positive feedback from focus group members who rated it as both memorable and believable.

In fact, the most successful feature of the Chad and Suzie ad was the fact that it took a unique approach that distinguished its message from other messages being delivered in the crowded media market. Having a memorable ad—one that sticks in viewers’ minds, has a simple message, and stands out from other messages—is more important than striving for an ad that is pleasant to watch, as the first round of ads were. Even the best-conceived or best-produced ad will fail if people don’t remember it.

Results from telephone surveys conducted for AARP by International Communications Research of Media, Pennsylvania showed significant increases in knowledge and awareness measures after the Chad and Suzie ad hit the airways. The audience’s knowledge of the recommendation to
walk five or more times per week, its recall of the messages on physical activity and walking, and its awareness of AARP as the message sponsor all increased during the walking campaigns in both cities. A third survey showed that the new ad remained memorable even six months after the conclusion of the walking campaign.

**Lesson #7:**

*Consumers will become confused if you ask them to do too much.*

AFL’s initial advertisements in Richmond and Madison encouraged viewers and readers to take two distinct actions: (1) to become more physically active and (2) to call a toll-free number or visit a community site to request the *Active for Life Handbook*. The interconnected messages seemed clear to AFL: using the free handbook would help audience members become more active. However, most audience members appeared to miss these dual messages.

After viewing the early ads, audience members appeared to become confused about which action AFL wanted them to take. Were they supposed to become more physically active? Or were they supposed to get their hands on the AFL handbook? Faced with two separate instructions, most audience members took no action at all.

While the audiences’ confused response was surprising to ad designers, the breakdown in communication pointed out an important lesson: all advertising to promote physical activity must be as simple as possible. Ad writers must work particularly hard to develop a common language that all readers or viewers will understand, while taking pains not to appear as if the ads are talking down to the audience. Most important, each ad should focus on communicating only one message. If a campaign has two messages that it wants to communicate, then it’s best to communicate those messages through two separate ads—one message per ad.
Lesson #8:

The more specific advertising is, the more likely it is to resonate with the audience.

Advertising to promote the walking campaigns in Madison and Richmond was developed for a general audience rather than for a particular subset of the midlife and older population. AFL organizers now suggest that the campaigns might have been even more successful if the audience had been segmented to a greater degree. Specific ads could then have been designed to appeal to specific segments of the market.

For example, AFL had great success when it tested a narrowly focused direct mail campaign in May 2003. The mailing, which promoted the importance of walking 10,000 (or more) steps per day, went to more than 22,000 women in Madison and nearly 6,000 women in Richmond. All addressees were AARP members who had previously expressed an interest in physical activity. Each woman received an AARP-branded brochure along with a letter from her AARP state director. Women who returned the order form and a nominal fee received a walking guide and a step counter. Those who completed the walking program and mailed back an evaluation form received a motivational book as a reward. An initial response rate of 4.5 percent (a high response for direct mail) illustrated how much easier it is to attract the attention of an audience when messages are tailored to that audience’s specific interests.

Ads for the walking campaign could have been segmented in a similar way. For example, separate ads could have been designed for men and women, because the barriers to physical activity vary widely between men and women. Different ads also could have been developed for groups with different levels of readiness for physical activity. For example, ads might have been targeted specifically to people who were already “somewhat active” and could have been placed in locations where those individuals were most likely to see them.

Using another form of segmentation, AFL’s advertising campaign increased its effectiveness when it began focusing on one specific physical activity rather than promoting physical activity in general. The first AFL ad campaign, which used family-related themes, may not have been memorable or effective because its messages were too general and, therefore, were somewhat
vague. The second campaign, which focused specifically on the benefits of walking, was far more memorable because it zeroed in on one activity, communicated a more direct message and included a more specific call to action. ALF organizers believe that this specificity caused more people to remember and like the second campaign.

Lessons Learned About Planning a Media Relations Campaign

Lesson #9:
Before you call the first reporter, it's important to develop the specific messages that you want to communicate.

The AFL campaign’s overarching message was that regular physical activity is beneficial, feasible and enjoyable for people aged 50 years and older. Within this larger framework, however, the AFL media campaign needed to identify several sub-messages that it would communicate to the general public.

By reaching general agreement on these sub-messages, and putting those messages in writing, AFL stakeholders ensured that the media campaign had defined goals and that partners stayed focused on the campaign’s primary messages. The large number of media campaign partners—including AFL staff, staff of AARP and RWJF, employees of Fleishman-Hillard, local organizations, and local residents who were interviewed by the media—made it critical to put the messages in writing and to make sure everyone understood them.

Five AFL messages emerged from group brainstorming sessions held for AARP and RWJF staff and facilitated by media specialists from Fleishman-Hillard. While the complexity of the AFL campaign dictated that a fairly large group be involved in the discussion about messages, smaller media campaigns may want to involve only a handful of participants in the brainstorming meetings. Once the campaign messages are identified and agreed upon, the brainstorming group can then expect to spend considerable time editing the messages so that they are succinct and can be easily grasped by the public.
The five messages that emerged from the AFL brainstorming sessions:

1. **Announced Active for Life™:** “The RWJF and AARP have formed an important national partnership aimed at emphasizing the importance of physical activity for Americans age 50 and older. This existing joint venture, ‘Active for Life™,’ involves a campaign that includes advertising, promotion, community partnerships, public relations and community advocacy initiatives to promote physical activity.”

2. **Outlined the problem that AFL would address:** “Despite a growing body of scientific evidence that indicates that physical activity can contribute to increased years of active independent life, reduced disability, and improved quality of life for people 50 and older, recent studies have shown a tendency for inactivity among this population.”

3. **Offered a compelling reason to engage in physical activity:** “Scientific evidence shows that physical activity can contribute to improved health and functional ability, and reduce chronic illness and disability.”

4. **Pointed to the need for information and support:** “A recent AARP survey of adults 50 and older found that while 63 percent say that exercise is the best thing they can do for their health, a large majority of respondents want information and support to help them get moving.”

5. **Explained the RWJF/AARP social marketing campaign:** “In response to escalating health issues associated with a sedentary 50 and older population, RWJF and AARP are launching a pilot social marketing campaign—Active for Life™—in Richmond and Madison to test the impact that using paid media, communications strategies with local constituents, policy and environmental changes will have on increasing physical activity among people 50 years and older.”
In addition to keeping the campaign focused and consistent, AFL used its identified messages to measure the effectiveness of its media outreach effort. After each event or major media outreach effort, staff at Fleishman-Hillard evaluated how many of AFL’s five messages were contained in each piece of media coverage that the campaign received.

Lesson #10:

Having a crisis plan may help you avoid a crisis.

In October 2003, a 29-year-old woman carrying a red pedestrian flag was struck by a car while crossing Madison’s Monroe Street during the evening rush hour. The woman, who was not seriously injured, was participating in the Pedestrian Flag Project, an initiative that AFL was cosponsoring with the Safe Community Coalition (SCC) of Madison and Dane County to improve pedestrian safety in Madison. The project supplied bright red flags to pedestrians so they would be more visible to motorists when crossing the street; it also educated motorists about their responsibility to yield the right-of-way to flag-waving pedestrians in designated crosswalks.

The flag project participant was struck only four months after AFL had signed onto the flag project. The incident, which sparked a very public debate between people who favored use of the flags and people who did not, presented AFL media specialists with a huge challenge: they needed to keep negative press from damaging the flag project and the entire AFL campaign. Fortunately, the campaign was able to respond quickly to the incident because it had developed a Crisis Communications Plan when the Pedestrian Flag Project was still in the planning stages. As a result, the incident actually helped to shine a spotlight on the dangers that pedestrians face each day in Madison and the importance of the flag project in helping to make walking safer.

AFL’s Crisis Communications Plan anticipated two scenarios that everyone hoped would not happen. The first scenario was that a pedestrian would be hit and injured or killed at one of the designated flag crossings during the flag project’s launch or within the months immediately following the launch. The second scenario was that motorists would become infuriated by flag-
waving pedestrians and that the media would begin interviewing angry motorists and running negative stories about the flag project.

The crisis plan called for a step-by-step response to each scenario. If the first scenario occurred, and a pedestrian was injured, media relations specialists were prepared to contact medical and police personnel, gather information about what happened, and deliver crisis messages to local reporters. Those messages would address the campaign’s sorrow for the person involved, reiterate AFL’s primary concern for safety, and inform the public that AFL had coached participants on how to use the system and had urged them not to cross the street if they did not feel safe. If the project attracted negative publicity, the media specialists were prepared to monitor the local press and contact reporters who were writing and airing negative pieces. Media specialists also created crisis messages that explained pedestrian laws, described the project’s role in educating motorists about pedestrian safety, and emphasized that AFL and SCC were helping pedestrians and motorists work together.

As it turns out, AFL did not have to put its crisis plan into full action when the Madison pedestrian was struck by the car. The incident did not take place at the project’s launch, so no one from AFL was actually on site when the incident took place. In addition, SCC decided to handle the crisis because it had been the lead agency on the project for 17 months prior to AFL’s involvement. AFL supported SCC’s efforts by providing materials that the coalition could use in its dealings with the media. As a result, SCC was able to have letters to the editor and an opinion piece published in the Wisconsin State Journal, a local newspaper.

AFL only developed crisis plans for events that carried the risk of danger either because participants might get hurt or because a controversial event might attract negative publicity. In addition to the flag project, AFL created crisis plans for the Tour de Traffic in Madison and the Active Living Tour in Richmond, because tour participants—who included older people, pregnant women and people with disabilities—would be getting on and off buses and crossing dangerous intersections.
Lessons Learned About Pitching Stories to the Media

Lesson #11:

*Media outreach is based on relationships, so it’s a good idea to get to know local reporters as individuals.*

While Americans are fond of referring to reporters, editors, photographers and videographers as “the media,” it’s important for media relations specialists to recognize and relate to these professionals as individuals. The best news coverage will come from members of the media who understand a campaign’s messages and have a personal relationship with the campaign’s media specialists.

Establishing those relationships will require some preparation work. For example, before AFL began working in Madison and Richmond, media specialists from Fleishman-Hillard spent a good deal of time familiarizing themselves with the media outlets in both cities. This task involved reading newspapers, watching television news programs and listening to radio programs in order to understand the types of stories a particular media outlet carried. Before Fleishman-Hillard media specialists sought a health reporter to whom they might pitch stories, they read the health section of the local newspaper to identify who was writing about health and what topics were being covered. The media specialists then called the newspaper’s health reporter to suggest story ideas that fit the reporter’s area of interest and expertise.

Local media markets, like Madison and Richmond, are relatively small and have a limited pool of reporters to which a media campaign can reach out. Therefore, AFL found itself going back to the same reporters multiple times to pitch different types of articles. Repeated contacts were less problematic for reporters with whom AFL had developed personal relationships.

Developing a relationship with a reporter meant staying in touch, even when the media specialist wasn’t trying to sell a story. Typically, AFL sent periodic emails (far less intrusive than phone calls) to reporters to update them on how the campaign was going. Sometimes, media specialists would provide reporters with information that might interest the reporter, even if that information
was not directly related to AFL. This was a good way of showing that reporters could benefit from a relationship with AFL.

To avoid being viewed as a nuisance, AFL tried to choose carefully the stories that it pitched to individual reporters. AFL recognized that most reporters can only write a limited number of articles about a single topic. Therefore, AFL pitched the most important stories first, sometimes foregoing coverage of minor events so that it could garner a reporter’s interest in a major one. The campaign also tried to build relationships with a variety of reporters and writers within one media outlet, including the obvious “health” and “senior” reporters as well as reporters who covered city affairs and the environment. As a result, media outreach specialists were not always calling the same reporters. AFL media specialists pursued this strategy in the hope that the campaign could obtain more media coverage because different reporters at the same media outlet were writing about AFL.

**Lesson # 12:**

*Local news outlets are saturated with stories about health-related issues. This means that a media outreach campaign needs to find—and keep finding—new twists and angles to capture—and recapture—the media’s attention.*

It’s hard to open any newspaper or magazine these days without seeing an article about health-related issues, whether that article is about the efficacy of taking vitamin supplements, the high cost of prescription drugs, or the latest cancer treatment breakthrough. This interest in health-related topics can be both good news and bad news for a media relations campaign that promotes physical activity. On the positive side, consumers are clearly more interested than ever in reading about how to improve their health, and media outlets are more interested than ever in writing about this topic. However, this increased interest also makes it more difficult to get the attention of health writers who are deluged with story pitches from media specialists in other health-related fields. To meet this challenge, AFL had to continually come up with interesting angles that would make its campaign seem “new” to the reporters who were covering it.
Special events were a good way to make the campaign seem “new” to reporters. The initial kickoff events in Madison and Richmond easily attracted media attention because they featured local celebrities—including the lieutenant governor of Wisconsin and the first lady of Virginia—about whom reporters wanted to write. Introducing new campaign elements was also a great way to attract renewed media coverage. The special features of AFL’s walking campaign—free step counters, the impressive group of local dignitaries who were on hand to launch the campaign, and the new Chad and Suzie ad campaign—helped to renew reporters’ interest in AFL and resulted in a great deal of media coverage more than a year after AFL was launched. The media campaign received an additional boost when AFL sponsored the Tour de Traffic in Madison and the Active Living Tour in Richmond. These events offered great visuals that attracted renewed media attention, especially from television stations.

Having a group of local AFL participants who were willing to talk to reporters also helped the campaign garner media attention. Reporters generally like to have a human-interest angle on almost any article they write, so AFL’s ability to connect reporters with “real” people who could tell their personal stories was often the key to obtaining local coverage. AFL’s local partners recommended articulate residents who would be good spokespersons for the campaign. AFL trained these people so that they knew what to expect from a media interview and understood the messages that AFL wanted to communicate.

Lesson #13:

Cooperation on a media outreach campaign can solidify relationships with local partners.

AFL enjoyed productive partnerships with local organizations in the Richmond and Madison communities. (See Chapter 2 of this guide for more details about partnerships.) In the area of media relations, local partnerships yielded clear and concrete benefits for both AFL and local organizations. The partners and their activities provided AFL with the local angle it needed to attract media attention to the campaign. In addition, AFL’s success in promoting local programs was one of the benefits cited most often by partners as the reason they participated in AFL.
A particularly successful partnership took place between AFL and the Wisconsin Senior Games, a statewide event that Madison hosted in 2003. The games, which offered non-competitive physical activities for older adults, were promoted in conjunction with an AFL-supported media campaign, the first ever conducted for the Senior Games. The event enjoyed a 10-percent increase in registration in 2003 compared to 2002. Other partners reported similar success stories when AFL media relations staff supported their outreach activities.

Due to limited resources, AFL wasn’t able to provide media relations support for every one of its partners. Often, local coordinators in Richmond and Madison were called upon to choose which partner activities the campaign would support in this way. Those decisions, which were not always well accepted at the local level, were made after local coordinators determined which local programs had missions that most closely dovetailed with the AFL message and which ones were likely to attract the most media attention. To mitigate the bad feelings that such decisions might cause, AFL developed a tool kit to help community organizations conduct their own media outreach. The kits offered tips on all aspects of media outreach, such as compiling a media database, monitoring local media, drafting media materials, hosting an event and reaching out to local reporters.

**Conclusion**

The marketing and media relations efforts conducted in Richmond and Madison served as the voice of AFL by spreading messages about physical activity to the widest possible audience and inviting local residents to take advantage of the many opportunities for physical activity that AFL and its partners offered.

Smaller organizations with limited budgets might be overwhelmed by the amount of time, effort and money that AFL spent promoting its physical activity campaign. They shouldn’t be. Small-scale campaigns may not find it necessary or effective to spend thousands of dollars developing and placing paid advertising in local media outlets. Instead, they may discover that media
relations efforts aimed at garnering free news coverage of campaign events can provide all the promotion they need.

In the end, the amount of money spent on a community-wide campaign is not the most important reason for that campaign’s success or failure. More importantly, every campaign should do the following:

- Involve communications experts in campaign planning work.
- Get to know the target audience.
- Develop clear messages that the campaign would like to communicate to the public.
- Create personal relationships with local reporters so that messages can be disseminated widely and accurately.

Finally—and most important—campaigns need to be willing to honestly assess the effectiveness of their efforts and to make mid-course corrections if necessary. Only then can a community-wide campaign truly give voice to the important messages about physical activity that midlife and older adults need to hear.