

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN EQUAL FOOD ACCESS AND STUDENT HUNGER

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2018-2019 academic year, UC Merced experienced low acceptance rates for CalFresh benefits. Although popular marketing materials such as flyers and handouts work to an extent, these methods are not effective in reducing the stigma surrounding food stamp use. Creating new marketing strategies that reduce the shame associated with government aid is essential in successfully connecting our students to programs like CalFresh, that provide food and financial relief.

GOALS

Video modules and clips were created with the intention to increase knowledge about the CalFresh food stamps program as a whole and teach students how to access and use their benefits on campus and in the community. Topics included student FAQs, tips to maximize monthly benefits, student relevant statistics about food insecurity, and general updates relevant to our department and the program.

In terms of social media, our goals were to improve student engagement for our Instagram and Facebook pages, and receive more campus exposure to solidify the reputation of the CalFresh program as reliable, trustworthy, and dependent.

MATERIALS/METHODS

The following free, public access materials were used to create videos:

- Canva graphic design account
- Camera app on iPhone
- Final Cut Pro editing software
- iMovie editing software

Video concepts, script, editing, and the social media copy for said videos were done by the GFI fellow, while shooting, participation, and feedback were provided by CalFresh team members.

RESULTS

Through collective efforts from our social media coordinator and videos series, our numbers show that:

- in fall 2019 the EBT revenue from our campus marketplace doubled.
- in fall 2019 our acceptance rate grew to a 52.7%, compared to an approx. 49% from the previous year.
- our Instagram (@ucmcalfresh) gained over 200 followers since last summer, most of which are personal student accounts, as well as campus departments, clubs, and orgs, and other CalFresh pages from UC and state campuses.
- our most popular video received over 590 views and over 20 shares.
- last academic year, our most liked video on Instagram had 25 likes, while this year our most liked video received over 80.

DISCUSSION

Policy Changes

Our department works very closely with the Human Services Agency in Merced. When working with the county, things are constantly changing in terms of policy, and the requirement for TANF funded CalGrant potentially prevented students from qualifying for the program. The campus also passed a new policy regarding work study and student employment, which also disqualified a significant amount of students from meeting student exemptions.

COVID-19

Due to the COVID outbreak, certain video ideas that would have been posted in April and May had to be cancelled. This potentially skewed our acceptance rates and revenue report numbers for spring 2020.

CONCLUSION

College campuses do not necessarily need large amounts of funding and materials to create a campus atmosphere that educates the student population about the misconceptions of government relief and encourages students to use their available resources without shame. When the needs of students are taken into consideration and easily digestible material is created, social media can become the fastest way to rebrand CalFresh as an opportunity to eat better food for better living.

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