

Going soft drink free in YMCA Victoria aquatic and recreation centres

Evaluation summary

This evaluation summary is part of a broader project which aims to assess the health costs and benefits of implementing healthy eating policies in two key public settings – healthcare, and sport and recreation facilities.

Introduction

YMCA Victoria, a large not-for-profit community organisation, is Victoria's biggest provider of community recreation, managing local aquatic and recreation centres on behalf of approximately 24 local governments across the state. Collectively these centres attract 17 million visits every year.

In 2014, YMCA Victoria announced a Healthy Food and Beverage Policy to be implemented over 2015–2017, across the organisation in kiosks, cafes and catering services attached to 70 aquatic and recreation centres. As part of this policy, YMCA initiated a 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign, which aimed to phase out regular soft drinks from all centres by December 2015. This evaluation summary discusses the impact of this campaign, including the extent of implementation, change in customer drink purchases, and potential financial impact at nine YMCA Victoria centres.

The evaluation of YMCA Victoria's changes fills a gap in knowledge about the impact of healthy choice strategies from the perspective of the retailer. It concludes with a number of useful recommendations for organisations planning to undertake similar policy changes to improve population health, based on the Victorian Government's *Healthy Choices: policy guidelines for sport and recreation centres* (DHHS 2014). The *Healthy Choices: food and drink classification guide* (DHHS 2015) uses a traffic light system to classify food and beverages as 'green' (best choice), 'amber' (choose carefully) or 'red' (limit intake).

The evaluation of YMCA Victoria's campaign was carried out by Deakin University, with funding from VicHealth. For more information and additional resources, visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/easychoice

Objectives and methodology

Objectives

This research project had three aims:

1. To assess the extent of implementation of the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign within nine YMCA Victoria aquatic and recreation centres, with a focus on the changes made to ready-to-drink beverages rather than drinks made on site, such as coffee.
2. To assess the potential population health impact of the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign at nine YMCA Victoria aquatic and recreation centres through changes in customer drinks purchases.
3. To assess the potential financial impact of the Healthy Food and Beverage Policy, specifically on total dollar sales of ready-to-drink beverages and beverages overall, at nine YMCA Victoria aquatic and recreation centres.

*Removal of other 'red' drinks, such as sports drinks, were not part of this campaign and will be a focus in 2017.

Methodology: data collection

Photo data: Photographs of food and beverages on display, as well as menus, were taken at all nine centres in June 2014 before the policy was implemented, and following the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign in February 2016. Using the display photographs, an analysis of the number of slots occupied by 'green', 'amber' and 'red' drinks was carried out, to determine the proportion of 'green', 'amber' and 'red' drinks on display, before and after the policy implementation.

Sales and attendance data: Monthly itemised sales data and monthly attendance data were obtained between January 2013 and May 2016 for all nine centres. Analysis of the sales trends across the nine centres was used to estimate the difference in the number of items sold and dollar sales before and after the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign. The final analysis of the sales trends takes into account seasonal changes (for example, higher drink sales over the summer months) and average monthly attendance data across the nine centres.



Exit survey data: Brief exit surveys were conducted on YMCA customers at three of the centres included in the evaluation study. Every third exiting customer was approached and asked multiple choice questions regarding the activities undertaken at the centre and demographic information (age, gender etc). In addition, researchers asked open-ended questions regarding food and beverages consumed within the centre, both purchased at the centre and brought in from outside. Initial baseline surveys were conducted during the winter before the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign, and the follow-up survey was conducted in winter, after the campaign. A total of 1300 surveys were conducted at baseline, and 1183 at follow-up.

Key findings

Extent of implementation of soft drink removal at nine YMCA Victoria centres

The proportion of available 'red' food and drink items decreased from 71% to 45% across nine centres, while the proportion of 'green' items increased from 13% to 28%, from June 2014 to June 2016.

As part of the overall Healthy Food and Beverage Policy, YMCA Victoria promoted a 'Soft Drink Free Summer' in the summer of 2015/16 with the aim of removing all regular soft drinks by February 2016. All nine centres achieved this campaign goal.

In addition to centres being soft drink free, more healthy choices were placed in the drink fridges. There was a large decrease in the availability of 'red' drinks, as well as a moderate increase in 'green' drinks, and a small increase in 'amber' drink availability. Across all nine centres the proportion of available 'red' drinks decreased from 62% to 25%, while the proportion of 'green' drinks increased from 32% to 66%. In addition, three centres had met the end of 2016 policy target of 10% or less of fridge space allocated to 'red' drinks.

Impact of the 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign at nine YMCA Victoria centres

Analysis of change in the volume of ready-to-drink beverages purchased showed a clear decrease in the volume of 'red' ready-to-drink beverages purchased, with the volume sales of 'green' drinks clearly outstripping those of 'red'.

Between June 2013 and May 2014, just under half of all ready-to-drink beverages sold were 'red' and just under half were 'green'. Between June 2015 and May 2016 the proportion that were 'red' had decreased to around 30% of all ready-to-drink volume sold, with an increase in the proportion of 'green' sold to around 63%. The small volume sales of 'amber' appeared to be stable during this period.

The reduction in 'red' ready-to-drink volume sales equates to 757 litres less of 'red' drinks sold over the nine centres per month. This is the equivalent of around 2000 fewer cans of soft drink consumed on a monthly basis.

Exit survey data analysis also showed that while there has been little change in the proportion of people bringing 'red', 'amber' or 'green' items from home, there has been a moderate decrease in 'red' food and drink purchased at the centre, and an increase in 'green' item purchases. While limited to three centres, these results support the notion that customers have not responded to the healthier food provision by bringing their own 'red' food and drinks from home.

Change in ready-to-drink beverage display for nine YMCA centres 2014–2016



Financial impact of removal of soft drinks at nine YMCA Victoria centres

Sales analysis showed that while there was a clear decrease in the total beverage dollar sales for 'red' drinks, there was no change in overall beverage dollar sales. **This data suggests that it is possible to remove sugary drinks from venues such as these without an overall decline in drinks dollar sales.** It is important to note that these analysis do not capture other potential costs or true profit margins from beverages.

Enablers

The experiences of YMCA Victoria suggest that the following factors have been important in the successful implementation and outcomes of the soft drink free summer:

- Commitment within the YMCA Victoria executive and management teams to improving community health.
- Gradual implementation with initial removal of soft drinks and the aim of removal of 'red' foods in future years.
- Provision of resources by YMCA Victoria Health Promotion and Advocacy Team, including case by case advice, a toolkit, approved product list, planograms for recommended fridge layouts, and promotional material highlighting the sugar content of drinks and rationale for the campaign.
- Support provided by health promotion staff with implementation advice and information.
- Engagement of suppliers to ensure their support of the policy and supply of potential substitutes for the 'red' drinks being removed.

Conclusion

All YMCA Victoria centres analysed in this report were successful in their aims of removing all soft drinks from display and increasing the availability of more 'green' and 'amber' drink options. To meet their end of 2016 goal of 10% or less of fridge space filled with 'red' drinks, YMCA Victoria will work closely with its centres to reduce the availability of sports drinks.

A large reduction in 'red' drink choices was seen – around 2000 fewer cans of soft drink purchased per month across the nine centres.

Furthermore, the analysis of dollar sales suggests that within the context of the variety of drinks sold across the nine YMCA Victoria centres, customers are willing to switch to healthier drink options with no decrease in overall dollar sales.

As a result of the YMCA Victoria's Healthy Food and Beverage Policy and its recent 'Soft Drink Free Summer' campaign, YMCA Victoria centres have made substantial reductions in the availability of 'red' food and beverages, and should be commended for their initiative and leadership in creating healthy food environments for adults and children. Not only will this campaign have direct benefit to the clients of YMCA Victoria, particularly the children attending the centres, but it is also likely to support the spread of healthier food environments more broadly.

Recommendations

Ongoing support of YMCA Victoria recreation centres is recommended to assist with meeting their end of 2016 goal and future reduction in availability and sales of other 'red' drinks such as sports drinks. When targets for reducing 'red' foods are introduced, healthier packaged food items will need to be sourced.

Organisations planning to implement a similar policy may be interested in analyses showing that 'green' and 'amber' drinks with the greatest dollar sales were identified as:

1. Bottled water – 'green'
2. Small reduced-fat milk varieties – 'green'
3. Bottled lightly sparkling water – 'green'
4. Diet soft drink – 'amber'
5. Bottled lightly sparkling water flavoured with natural fruit essences – 'green'

YMCA Victoria has been proactive in communicating the resources, successes and challenges associated with implementing their policy through media, invited talks, meetings and conferences. This has encouraged numerous councils, health services, and recreation centres to follow suit. Further dissemination of their policy, processes and findings is recommended to support others implementing similar changes.

YMCA wish to acknowledge the Healthy Eating Advisory Service with their support in implementing the Healthy Choices guidelines at YMCA.

References

Department of Health and Human Services 2014, *Healthy Choices: policy guidelines for sport and recreation centres*, viewed 14 October 2016, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/getfile/?sc_itemid=%7bf42b7919-1210-4dcf-9232-51dabf55683e%7d&title=Healthy%20choices%20policy%20guidelines%20for%20sport%20and%20recreation%20centres>.

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