

# How a National Integrated Marketing Campaign Boosted COVID-19 Vaccination Rates

NMHA leveraged integrated marketing tactics to spur COVID-19 vaccination rates in underserved communities across America

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## A SAGE GROWTH PARTNERS CASE STUDY

### CHALLENGE:

Increase awareness of the importance of COVID-19 immunization, reduce vaccine hesitancy, and inspire growth in vaccination rates among underserved populations.

### SOLUTION:

Create an original, branded campaign to drive vaccine awareness that leveraged education, incentives, and respected community voices to help amplify the message and spur action.

### RESULTS:

- Administered 69,000+ COVID-19 vaccinations
- Spurred a 135% increase in vaccinations between November and December 2021
- United nearly 2,000 home health agencies and pharmacies in the fight against COVID-19
- Registered 75,000+ community members within the “Flex for Checks” program
- Distributed 80% of vaccine rewards to minority populations
- Reached 1 million people through interactive online outreach, stories shared, and social education efforts
- Earned press recognition, mentions, and coverage across all 50 states



# Customer Overview

The National Minority Health Association (NMHA) has been a leading champion for health equity in America since its founding in 1988. Since then, the NMHA has achieved its initial mission of ensuring the establishment of Offices of Minority Health in all 50 states. Today, the NMHA has

expanded its mission to promote health equity initiatives that focus on closing the disparity gap. Across a variety of community outreach efforts and national initiatives, the organization is working to transform the healthcare system to be more equitable, inclusive, less costly, and more accessible for all.

*“The deep experience and tremendous talent of Sage Growth Partners was crucial to the deployment of our Flex for Checks program. Nothing like this had been done before in the manner where homecare agencies, workers, consumers, pharmacies and software companies came together and flexed their arms in the fight of our lives against COVID-19.”*

— Burgess Harrison, Executive Director of NMHA

## The Challenge

Since May 2021, safe and effective COVID-19 vaccinations have been free and widely available for the American adult population. Yet, as vaccination rates began to tick up across the nation, startling disparities in immunization were quickly noted. Among Black and Hispanic populations, rates of first and second vaccination doses were consistently much lower than

they were for White individuals. To help boost vaccination rates, in June 2021, the National Minority Health Association (NMHA) was awarded an \$11.1 million grant from HRSA to help raise awareness, earn trust, and increase vaccination confidence in historically underserved and minority communities.

*“It was very fluid, the way Sage was able to adapt and create materials for what our audiences needed throughout the project.”*

— Sara Moore, COO of the NMHA

Immunization is a critical tool in the fight against infectious disease. When the FDA granted emergency use authorization for the Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccines in Winter 2020, public health officials were overjoyed. The effort to fast track a successful vaccine was deemed one of the greatest public health success stories of the 20th century.

While vaccines help protect individuals, communities, and the global population from unchecked spread, future viral mutations, and help reduce the severity of symptoms, earning public trust in the vaccine’s safety and efficacy was paramount. Early vaccine roll-out data compared the demographic profiles of vaccines and unvaccinated adults. When compared to those who have received a vaccine dose, unvaccinated adults tend to be less educated, more likely to identify as Republican, people

of color, and uninsured. When sentiment was polled, a distinct difference emerged between a group known as hesitant, who wanted to “wait and see” – and those who were determined “definitely not” to receive a vaccine. The vaccine hesitant group tended to be more Black, Hispanic, and politically moderate, while those who identified as being anti-vaccine leaned more Republican, and were more often white.

Scientific reviews have confirmed the highest levels of vaccine hesitation among minority and underserved communities, with the highest rates of hesitancy among Black Americans. For members of Black and Hispanic communities, any initial distrust in the vaccine’s safety is a rational reaction to a system historically embroiled in unethical scientific practices and “results” that were levied to help justify racist policies through the mid-

#### A LIFE-SAVING SHOT

Since June 2021, an estimated 234,000 COVID-19 deaths could have been prevented with vaccinations (KFF).

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Resulting vaccine hesitancy – along with the social spread of conspiracy theories – helped dampen interest, and the vaccination conversation quickly became politically polarized.

### Gaining a Grant

In order to do this, the NMHA needed not only to make their voice heard, but they needed it to resonate. In a detailed proposal for a grant from the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA), NMHA proposed partnering with and activating trusted home health agencies, community health workers, and consumers who could directly engage and build trust with socially vulnerable populations. This later grew to a nationwide campaign.

Equipping these local, community-based “micro-influencers” with a unified message and an official branded public health communication campaign was essential to both earning trust – and the campaign’s overall success. Above all, emphasizing the vaccine’s safety was paramount. To help the NMHA meet the challenge, Sage Growth Partners recommended an integrated campaign that included social media, print and digital collateral, public relations outreach across all twelve states, and branded swag.

The comprehensive campaign would leverage a catchy slogan, program branding, financial incentives, and social stories to help change the conversation and persuade the vaccine hesitant to take action.

#### INITIAL CAMPAIGN TARGET

- **Key States:** CA, DE, FL, GA, MO, NC, NY, SC, TX, VA, VT & WV
- **Age:** 18 - 35
- **Community Type:** Urban
- **Political Views:** Liberal



Minorities populations were more often unvaccinated.

**14%** **19%**  
Black Hispanic

Less than **20%** of the vaccinated population reported were under the age of 30.

Younger generations were skeptical about the vaccine, but open to education.

**34%** **38%**  
Age: 18-29 Age: 30-49

*National polling revealed that younger cohorts, and Black and Hispanic individuals were most likely to be open to the idea of vaccination*

Less than **20%** of the population identifying as anti-vaccination came from urban communities.



The same minorities who report being unvaccinated did not rule the possibility out.

**22%** **20%**  
Black Hispanic

**43%**

Nearly half of the population categorized as "watch and wait" for the vaccine were in a lower income bracket (<\$40k annually).

We created the financial incentive portion of our campaign specifically to engage with this portion of the unvaccinated population.

 **12%**

Only a few individuals who self-reported as liberal and were unvaccinated reported feeling completely opposed to getting the vaccine.

# The Solution

The NMHA turned to healthcare consultancy Sage Growth Partners (SGP) to help craft a compelling campaign that would empower home healthcare workers and local agencies with a unified message that could reach the most vulnerable and historically underserved communities, earn trust, and inspire vaccination.

“To help the NMHA reach the vaccine hesitant, we knew we had to create interest and earn trust,” said Boh Hatter, SGP’s Chief Marketing Officer. “The campaign our team developed was both unexpected and remarkably effective in activating trusted community influencers and those we hoped to reach, educate, and vaccinate.”

## Strategic Beginnings

To start, SGP began with a comprehensive secondary research phase to learn more about the history of medical mistrust, healthcare inequities, and to understand the range of personas, from the vaccine hesitant to the anti-vaxxer.

Once the team understood their audience, they kicked off an all-

hands brainstorm to ideate catchy slogans, compelling taglines, and motivating rewards that would resonate across social platforms and audiences.

Universal themes emerged: financial rewards were powerful motivators for all three stakeholder groups, while education, reliable information, and easing safety concerns were essential barriers that must be addressed in order to effect change.

After reviewing a dozen concepts and creative directions, the team unanimously arrived at a winning slogan. “Flex for Checks” rose to the top, for its ability to convey both irreverence and inspiration in a broadly accessible way that could galvanize the public. Both SGP and NMHA agreed that this winning line neatly captured action and incentive in a memorable, bite-sized, social media-friendly statement. And for this project, timely action was of the essence. From ideation to iteration and project launch, the project had to quickly coalesce in order to effectively address the virus’ rapid spread and meet the urgent public health need to

**Understanding barriers and motivators to earn trust & persuade action**

SGP developed a matrix that identified the strongest barriers and the most powerful motivators to action for each target audience.

	Agencies	Workers	Consumers
Motivators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empower their employees and communities with a substantial program</li> <li>PR</li> <li>Financial rewards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial rewards</li> <li>Desire to help their patients</li> <li>Care for their communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End the pandemic</li> <li>Keep their communities healthy</li> <li>Social norms/missing out</li> <li>Financial rewards</li> </ul>
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resources</li> <li>Information</li> <li>Lack of incentive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reliable information</li> <li>Perhaps personal distrust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Politicization of the vaccine</li> <li>Economic constraints</li> <li>Worries about vaccine research/side effects</li> <li>Medical/Gov. distrust</li> </ul>

raise awareness and immunize as many individuals as possible. Over mere weeks of rapid project development, the SGP team partnered closely with stakeholders at NMHA to message, test, gather feedback, and iterate.

**Crafting the Campaign**

With an expedited timeline and all hands on deck, the SGP team developed an entirely new brand and logo, in addition to the project website, its home base and the center of its education operations – all in record time. Prior to project launch and to help ensure the message was resonating with the array of personas and stakeholders, SGP launched a quick US Consumer Panel Survey of over 200

individuals. With user feedback and buy-in, the final logo was selected and branding finalized – the project was now ready for the public.

The “Flex for Checks” theme was leveraged across a variety of motivating phrases, including a powerful tagline: “Get vaccinated. Get paid.” Other elements drew on emotional motivators, such as graphics that featured a fill in the blank statements: “I flex because \_\_\_\_\_,” “I flex for \_\_\_\_\_,” and “My checks are \_\_\_\_\_.” These additional executions helped highlight reasons for vaccination that could call on higher order motivations, such as loved ones or shared experiences.



User Generated Content



Website Design



Custom branded decals





“I flex for my grandma.”  
 “I flex for graduation.”  
 “My checks are protecting my family.”  
 “My checks are understanding the broader community impact.”

Now centered on a theme, SGP’s campaign build-out process began. Tactics were targeted by stakeholder group, and tagged as either “emotional messaging” or “fact-based messaging.” Website development was the campaign’s core, as it would be home to the catchy branding, education, customizable collateral, white papers, payment methods, PR materials, and more.

### National Support Grows

In addition to support from countless community home care agencies, home healthcare

workers, and individual consumers, the “Flex for Checks” program also received national support and endorsement from celebrities and minority health advocates, including noted medical commentator Dr. Ian Smith and music industry powerhouse Dr. Mathew Knowles.

“The NMHA was already a trusted name with market access and authentic social purpose,” said Hatter. “With the grant funding, they were empowered to apply their mission and push through widespread misinformation. They are talented and collaborative partners. Together with them, our team delivered a theme and messages that earned attention, changed minds, and helped people in communities that were hit hard by COVID-19.”



#### LIVE ON RACHEL

Dr. Ian Smith stopped by the Rachel Ray show to talk about the Flex for Checks program

# Agency Partner Activation

A critical aspect of the initiative was understanding that agency partners would be key to motivating and activating home healthcare workers to receive vaccinations. Since each healthcare worker comes into contact with about five different patients each week, their vaccinations could potentially protect a significant pool of community members.

As a result, Sage worked with NMHA to create a variety of materials for agency partners, such as FAQs, training materials, employee swag, and other collateral.

Throughout the program, Sage worked with many major and national home care agencies including Elara Caring, AccentCare, Right at Home, Addus HomeCare, and Home Helpers.

Sage coordinated with and developed marketing and PR materials for each of these agencies, and worked with their individual marketing and PR teams to amplify the Flex for Checks story. The program was responsible for bringing together nearly 2,000 home health agencies and pharmacies to promote vaccinations in their local communities.

*“We are proud to have been a partner with NMHA on this worthy program.”*

— Jamie Wright, PCS Regional Vice President, Elara Caring



**Anatomy of a successful grassroots population health campaign**

On an expedited timeline, SGP crafted and implemented a multi-phased, multi-tactic campaign to earn trust, change minds, and boost vaccination rates.



# The Results

*“With Sage’s partnership, we truly made an impact,” said Harrison. “With our ‘Flex for Checks’ program, we reached thousands of individuals who were hesitant to get the vaccine – who may otherwise never have gotten it – and we convinced them to take the shot.”*

After the NMHA and SGP launched “Flex for Checks” in August 2021, home care agencies, home healthcare workers, and others began flooding the site.

**1,932**

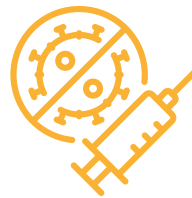
TOTAL AGENCIES SIGNED UP

**8,913**

TOTAL WORKERS SIGNED UP

**75,530**

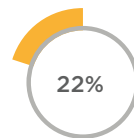
TOTAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS SIGNED UP



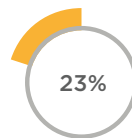
TOTAL COVID-19 VACCINATIONS

**69,021**

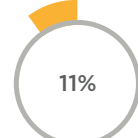
Of the individuals who self identified:



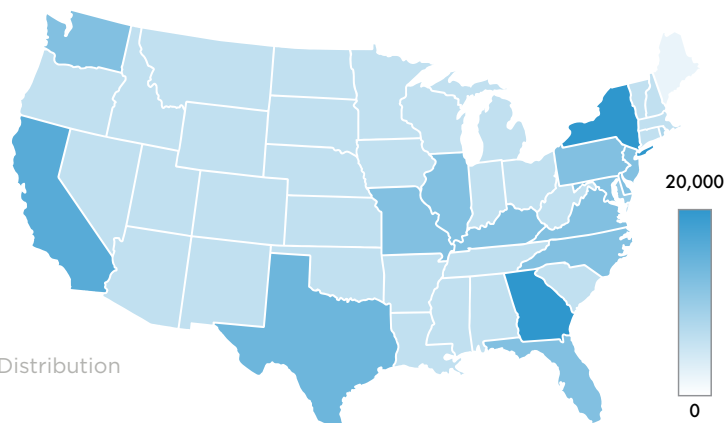
BLACK



CHINESE-AMERICAN



OTHER NON-WHITE



Vaccine Distribution by State

*“By the end, we surpassed 69,000 vaccinations in just five months. We met our goal months earlier than we had even dared to hope – by January, the campaign was so successful that we had to stop taking registrations.”* — Burgess Harrison

“We were overjoyed by the volume of sign-ups and engagement we saw daily across social platforms,” said Sara Moore, COO of the NMHA. “With Sage’s guidance, we were able to package up our mission in a way that truly resonated. It was able to impress an incredibly hard-to-reach audience, and galvanize them to change their minds and take action. We couldn’t be more pleased with the campaign results.”

With an operating budget of \$35,000, SGP was able to develop robust targeting parameters to help amplify the message and reach a broader population of qualified individuals. Over the campaign lifetime, the “Flex for Checks” program reached more than 718,000 individuals on Facebook and nearly 100,000 on Instagram.

The NMHA and Sage also partnered with Gather Voices and captured well over 100 videos of individuals touting the reason they were vaccinated. These videos, deployed across social media, were

instrumental to activating hard to reach audiences. “I don’t know if we would have been able to get as many gather voices videos without the Sage team amplifying those messages,” said Moore.

### **Reach and Impact**

The reach, scope and success of the Flex for Checks program was amplified through national media and PR efforts that stretched across the continental United States. Through celebrity partnerships with Dr. Smith and Dr. Knowles, the campaign earned media mentions that reached beyond healthcare trade journals and were covered in several high-profile mainstream, cultural, and national outlets, including appearances on the Rachael Ray show.

The community response was inspiring. Home healthcare agencies wrote in, delighted by the program and its success. Interested community members wrote in, requesting additional information, or looking for referral

#### **DRIVING CHANGE**

The SGP campaign’s paid social efforts directly resulted in 23,489 vaccinations.

links to sign up friends, partners, and loved ones. As the campaign's momentum picked up, it took on a life of its own. In many instances, member testimonials helped fuel additional sign-ups, including someone who wrote in: "*...I did find Flex for checks, where they give you \$50 each time you get a shot... definitely added to the perks of getting a shot!...*" The social share element was an additional powerful motivator for those individuals who needed to hear more communal buy-in, and could now see true examples of others like them taking their shot.

"We learned how to identify – and leverage – powerful motivators to inspire action," said Harrison. "I'm proud of the positive impact we were able to have in our communities and our ability to help reduce health inequities, disparities, and biases. In partnership with Sage, we were effective and efficient stewards of the HRSA grant. We believe our efforts helped save the lives of thousands from the potentially devastating effects of COVID-19."



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