

Sugar And Fat Under Fire Children To Get Healthier Food

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A barrage of criticism of children's food and the way it is advertised is forcing the Industry and parents to change the way children eat. Euromonitor International explores what could be the end of the fast food and sugar fuelled party.

Child centred marketing equals big business with children spending hundreds of millions and influencing billions of dollars worth of sales each year. However there has been a shift in attitudes, as global child-centric advertising is being blamed for causing the world's children to become overweight and habituated to bad eating regimes at an early age.

Statistics on child obesity have mobilised Government offices, non Governmental organisations and the EU to call for regulation of the food industry in terms of the ingredients used in children's food products, the labelling on the packaging, and the advertising methods used to promote the products.

In the US, Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children (SCEC) - a coalition of many child advocacy organizations - believes that marketing to children is exploitive and harmful to the nation's youth evidenced by US children consuming record amounts of sugar, soft drinks, fast foods, and snack foods. As a result of a growing complaints against food industry advertisers, major initiatives are in place to sell healthier, more explicitly labelled food to children and to clean up the advertising being held responsible for child obesity and bad eating habits.

Influencing children, according to some experts, can begin very early: research is quoted which asserts that children often recognize brand logos before they can recognize their own names, and there have been explicit accusations that child-centred marketing causes children to carry unhealthy eating habits into adulthood.

Building loyalty

To respond to companies' demands for strategies targeted specifically at children, most major advertising agencies have children's divisions and some marketing firms, such as Kid2Kid, Kid Connection, Just Kids, Small Talk etc, focus only on children.

Some experts believe that brand loyalty begins as early as age 2. It is also asserted that successful child-directed marketing cultivates not only children's brand loyalty, but influences their entire outlook on life. The argument is that a nine-year-old child who can recognize the Budweiser frogs and recite the slogan is more likely to start drinking beer. According to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) in 1991, almost all 6-year-olds living in the United States could identify Joe Camel, making him as recognizable to them as Mickey Mouse. The effect of this knowledge was confirmed by another study which discovered that Camels make up one-third of all cigarettes illegally sold to minors.

Soft drinks and health

Industry bodies and health organisations are now constantly highlighting statistics. Most adults are now aware that a 12-ounce can of cola has as much caffeine as an average cup of coffee and that a 14-year-old boy may be consuming more caffeine each day than his father, who drinks a cup of coffee each morning. (According to the 1999 Centre for Science in the Public Interest study entitled 'Liquid Candy', the average teenage boy drinks approximately 20 ounces of soft drinks per day, and the average teenage girl drinks about 12 ounces.)

Overweight and obesity

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of overweight children between ages 6 and 11 years more than doubled to 18.8% between 1984 and 2004, while among 12 to 19 year old, the rate more than tripled, to 17.1%. As a consequence of these and similar findings, many US suburban schools have already banned soda and candy from vending machines and replaced greasy foods with fresh fruits and vegetables on cafeteria menus. The same has happened at many schools in the UK following a major initiative to serve healthier school meals.

Industry pressure

The EU Health Commission recently asked the food industry not to advertise foods high in fat, sugar and salt to children and stressed the importance of trustworthy food labels. Self regulation as opposed to legislation is a key issue in the EU with the industry favouring self regulation. However, it is possible that the EU nutrition labelling directive, which has been under consideration since 2003, might finally be in place in 2007. The UK consumers association advocates the simple traffic lights system of food labelling. The industry appears generally opposed to it as too simplistic, but the industry is very conscious of the need for action to regain the credibility lost through the succession of attacks on its practices in

terms of marketing food products condemned as unhealthy and fattening. This seems to be a view now generally accepted by the food industry: the Unilever CEO recently presented his 'manifesto for the food industry' to the CIAA Congress. The speech stated that while most food businesses were quick to spot the demand for taste, convenience and value, they had been blind to the fact that consumers were getting fat, unfit and progressively healthier.

Action points

Specific actions advocated for the food industry were: to drive down the levels of sugar, salt, trans-fats and saturated fats in its products, and wherever possible to eliminate trans-fats completely and to provide, by better labelling, clear, simple information that will allow consumers to make informed choices.

Anti-pesticide code

The trend towards healthier food for children and better advertising practices is global. In Australia, the advertising industry has a new code on marketing junk food to children in the wake of studies showing that about one in four Australian children are overweight. Recent figures put the cost of obesity (in children and adults) in 2005 at \$21 billion in Australia.

The new code stops advertisers implying that the food will give children physical, social or psychological advantages over other children. It bans encouraging children to urge their parents to buy the food in a bid to prevent advertising undermining parents' role in guiding diets. In addition, the new code aims to prevent misleading health and nutritional claims and the creation of a false sense of urgency.

Proactive health for children

The trend towards encouraging healthier food for children has been taken up by major child oriented media. Nickelodeon recently announced that its popular cartoon characters will feature on kid-friendly packs of fruit, following the 2005 licensing initiative to encourage a healthier diet for kids. The new deal brings Nickelodeon's most popular characters, SpongeBob SquarePants and Dora The Explorer, to packs of farm fresh peaches, plums and nectarines.

Other high profile examples of the trend gathering pace include KFC's recently announced plans to eliminate most trans fats from its food by April 2007. Meanwhile Kraft has removed trans fats from Oreos after being sued in 2003 and has since reduced or eliminated it elsewhere. Trans fats are also to be removed from foods served at Walt Disney theme parks.

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