

Editorial

Food and drink marketing to children: a continuing scandal

Should public health nutritionists join consumer groups in fighting against the methods used by food and drink manufacturers to market their products to children? I think so.

Food fables in the UK

In November 2006, the UK consumer charity Which? published a challenging report called *Food Fables – Exploding industry myths of responsible food marketing to kids*¹. The report shows the various ways that industry is marketing foods to children.

Which? is this year celebrating its 50th anniversary as a consumer organisation². It is now the largest consumer organisation in the UK, with more than 650 000 members. It deals mainly with giving advice to consumers on which products to buy, but has also taken a leading role in monitoring marketing measures.

In its current report *Food Fables*, Which? reveals how major food companies in the UK market unhealthy food to children despite national concerns regarding childhood overweight and obesity. The report starts by challenging the UK government to introduce restrictions on TV advertising of foods high in fat sugar or salt before 9 pm and to restrict other types of advertising and promotion of the same foods to children under 16.

The report shows several ways of catching these young consumers' interest, such as using illustrations targeted to children on packaging material, introducing gifts in packages, challenges which include saving several packages, and becoming a member of a club. Websites where children become members and get regular newsletters or mailings are common and sports is often depicted in combination with advertisements for soft drinks or chocolate bars.

Inter-netting kids

I went to the Swedish Coca-Cola website (www.coke.se) to see what is happening there: Coke is offering a number of free gifts, for example screen savers, background images, games and mp3 files, to those who enter the website. Free mobile phone downloads are provided, along with a direct log-on to the Coca-Cola website where different items can be purchased after having become a member – and in the process having submitted name, address and mobile phone number.

At M&M's website³, screen savers, games and e-cards are provided. Kellogg's offers several 'family-friendly' websites

(read = for children), among others one for Cocoa Krispies⁴. Again, free games are offered, and the entering of an email address is needed to access the games. Kellogg's also promises great offers from Nickelodeon on specially marked Kellogg's products (Frosted Flakes, Cocoa Krispies, Corn Pops, Rice Krispies and Go-Tarts) in their campaign 'Going back to school is tops'⁵.

The European Food Information Council (EUFIC)⁶, a food industry front organisation, has a special site for children – coolfood – where it is emphasised that all foods are healthy. On the pages regarding soft drinks and sugar containing foods they claim that 'Especially for those that are very active, sugar is a useful source of energy'. Soft drinks and sugar-containing foods are here called a food group. Furthermore, the '10 Tips for Kidz' provided here includes 'Quench your thirst', and when clicking further to find out which drinks can be used of course soft drinks are mentioned.

On the same website, a list of 'nutritious' snacks is provided, including chocolate, a slice of cake, cookies and flavoured milk. Since the information about EUFIC and its origins, funding and governance is not easy to find on this website, it is hard for the consumer and especially for children to understand the skewed messages.

Movement in the USA and Europe

A press release⁷ in July 2007 from Margo G Wootan, Nutrition Policy Director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), states that a number of food companies are setting standards for food they advertise to children in the future. The CSPI singles out Kraft as being the first food company announcing a comprehensive policy in the area. Companies listed as not taking action are Burger King, ConAgra, Nestlé, and Chuck E Cheese.

According to the latest commitments posted on the European Platform for Diet, Physical Activity and Health⁸, nine members of UNESDA (European producers of non-alcoholic drinks) have committed themselves to restricting the marketing of soft drinks to children under 12 years of age. PepsiCo Europe has promised to speed up their development of healthier snacks and drinks and to further develop their drinks towards non-sugar soft drinks and natural juices. Kraft has in Europe and worldwide committed to further developing their policy on food marketing aimed at children.

The consumer organisation in Stockholm⁹ has for several years awarded the best and the worst food products marketed towards children. The best product award this year went to a healthy muesli-type cereal. This year, three worst products were pointed out: first,

a drinking straw which adds strawberry flavour to the drink; second, the Danonino yoghurt drink (too high in sugar); and finally a cracker labelled Winnie the Pooh which has labelling not up to standard.

Furthermore, 65% of the 973 members of the parent council of this organisation recently voted for banning of unhealthy products clearly aimed at children⁷ and a majority of these parents did not want gifts to be included in food packages. The report was cited in most Swedish media.

Consumer organisations are crucial in the never-ending work of monitoring both products and marketing of products aimed at children and youth. They deserve our support, as professionals as well as parents. Pledges and commitments by those who have all to gain from marketing of products towards children are not worth much until we see the results in supermarkets, schools, TV commercials, websites and print media.

Agneta Yngve

Editor-in-Chief

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