

Study details US junk food industry's targeting of youth through TV ads

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A recent report details the food industry's policy of targeting children in television advertising to promote snack foods and sugar-laden cereals. The study, released on March 28, was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, a privately operated foundation focusing on health issues. The report was spurred by growing concern over the number of obese children in the US: about one in three, or 25 million.

Titled *Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States*, the 59-page report is drawn from the largest study of its kind ever conducted. According to the report's Executive Summary, "Where previous studies have typically used samples of 40-50 hours of programming, this study uses more than 1,600 hours." Its research covered six commercial broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, WB and UPN) and a half-dozen commercial cable networks (ABC Family, BET, The Cartoon Network, Disney, MTV, and Nickelodeon). The "non-commercial" network PBS was also included, making a total of 13 networks studied.

The study divided the children into three groups: ages 2-7, 8-12 ("tweens") and 13-17. A week's worth of programming from 6:00 a.m. through midnight was studied during 2005 and 2006. According to the Executive Summary, "A total of 40,152 ads and 996 public service announcements (PSAs) were identified and coded by type of product, service, or issue. Of these ads, a total of 8,854 were for food or beverages. The food ads were coded across 35 variables, including type of food, primary persuasive appeal, target audience, use of premiums, depiction of physical activity, health claims, and promotion of a website. The network, day of week, time of day, and genre of programming were also recorded for each food ad and PSA."

The findings were disquieting, to say the least. For example, the breakdown by age revealed that children 2-7 were subjected to an average of 12 food ads a day, or more than 4,400 per year. The figures for 8-to-12-year-olds were 21 food ads a day (7,600 per year), while the 13-17 group saw 17 food ads a day (6,000 per year). This translated to about 30, 50 and 40 hours of food ads per year, respectively. Food ads constituted 50% of all ad time on children's shows, and are the largest category for all ads children see.

The breakdown according to food type is revealing: 34% for candy and snacks, 28% for cereals (usually of a sugary variety) and 10% for fast food. Dairy products (mostly yogurt), fruit juices, and fruits and vegetables found paltry representation: 4%, 1% and 0% respectively.

Advertisers used a variety of appeals in their ads: taste (34%), fun (18%), premiums or contests (16%), uniqueness or novelty of the product (10%) and promotion of a web site (20%). In contrast, according to the report, "Two percent of all food ads targeting children or teens use claims about health or nutrition as a primary or secondary appeal in the ad, while 5% use pep or energy as a primary or secondary appeal." Other tactics included the use of celebrities and sweepstakes.

Thirty percent of ads targeting children featured a "disclaimer." For example, an ad may push a product as "part of a balanced diet" or claim that it "provides essential nutrients." According to the report, "the industry's self-regulatory policies encourage such disclaimers in ads targeting children, especially for cereals and snacks. (For example, they state that ads should depict the food product within the framework of a nutritionally balanced meal and that snacks should be clearly depicted as such rather than as substitutes for meals...)" This begs the question: Is the product a

necessary part of the “balanced” meal, or could the balanced meal do quite well without it? That information is not provided.

The report has a disclaimer of its own. Its concluding paragraph states, “This study does not address the issue of whether food advertising to children on TV is going up or down, nor does it address the issue of whether such advertising influences what kids eat, or should be in any way restricted, either through voluntary industry efforts or through regulatory policy.”

Be that as it may, the report appears in the midst of recent calls for reining in the food industry’s saturation of kids’ TV. The Institute of Medicine (IOM), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have convened panels, and/or issued recommendations, and, in the case of the AAP, even called for a ban on “junk food” ads in shows aimed at young children. “In Great Britain,” notes *Food for Thought*, “policymakers have banned ads for foods high in fats, salt or sugar in programming aimed at children under 16, and have prohibited the use of premiums or children’s characters in food ads to young people.”

Reactions in the US food industry have been twofold. On the one hand, journalist Nanci Hellmich in the March 29 edition of *USA Today* reports Daniel Jaffe of the Association of National Advertisers as claiming that “several studies show the advertising of food to children on television has decreased substantially since the late 1970s.” Mr. Jaffe is quoted as saying that “food advertising was going down at the same time that childhood obesity was jumping dramatically, so placing the primary blame on advertising is overly simplistic.”

On the other hand, according to *Food for Thought*, “in December 2006, ten of the top food companies in the U.S. announced a Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, which includes a commitment to devote at least 50% of all advertising to healthier foods or to messages that encourage fitness or nutrition.” This belated show of concern for children’s health is reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s past “campaign” to “discourage” teen smoking, and displays about as much sincerity.

One unwitting moment of irony in the report notes that since “children 8-12 watch so much television, and

therefore see so many food ads, they may be the group *most* affected by food marketing. This is also likely to be an especially important age for the development of children’s food habits, since they are likely to have more time away from their parents, have their own money, and have more opportunity to make their own food choices. Therefore, policymakers and industry leaders may want to pay special attention to advertising seen by tweens” (emphasis in original). Isn’t that what “industry leaders” have been doing all along?

The logic behind this saturation of children’s TV is revealed in the introduction to the report. Citing the 2006 study by the IOM, the report states, “most children under 5 years old are not able to consistently differentiate advertising from programming, and children under age eight do not reliably understand the persuasive intent of advertising. Others have concluded that after the age of eight, while children generally have the cognitive ability to evaluate advertisements, they do not necessarily do so.” What better target exists for bottom-line-driven corporations than children with undeveloped critical faculties?

Food for Thought is a valuable source of information on the pervasive influence of the food industry’s ad assault on children, despite its reluctance to make any claims to that effect or propose any measures to change the situation. This is perhaps all that can be expected, since philanthropic organizations would be unnecessary in a society that responded to the needs of working people and had other priorities than the enrichment of shareholders and CEOs.

Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States is available at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7618.cfm>



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