

## **Food Marketing to Children**

### **Society for Nutrition Education Annual Meeting**

#### **Opening Plenary Session**

**July 25, 2010**

There's no disputing the fact that the goal of food marketing is to influence children's food choices. A comprehensive review by the National Academies' Institute of Medicine, which was required by Congress at CSPI's urging, concluded that marketing affects children's food choices, food preferences and what they ask their parents to purchase and has negative effects on children's diets and health.

However, marketing, in and of itself, is not bad. The problem is that virtually all the foods marketed to kids are unhealthy – though that is finally beginning to change. If companies were marketing bananas and broccoli, I'd be cheering. But instead, companies have mostly marketed sugary cereals, fast food, snack foods, and candy. 90% of the ads on Saturday morning TV are for nutrition-poor foods.

There's a ton of marketing aimed at kids – about \$2 billion worth a year. Our kids live in a media saturated environment, where their desire for junk food is cultivated not only through television ads, but also through:

- characters,
- contests, and toys on and in food packages;
- children's magazines;
- snack brand books;
- cell phones;
- advertising built into games on the Internet; and
- ads masquerading as toys.

In the last couple of years, 16 major food companies have announced that they will scale back their marketing of unhealthy foods to kids through the Council of Better Business Bureaus' Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative.

However, as currently practiced, this self-regulation isn't working very well. On Nickelodeon, the most popular children's television station, ads for foods of poor nutritional quality decreased slightly, from about 90% to 80% of food ads from before self-regulation was in place to after the CBBB Initiative was implemented -- that is between 2005 and 2009.

So there is a little progress. But given the high rates of childhood obesity and the prevalence of poor nutrition in kids, the small magnitude of the change is not sufficient.

To get a better sense of what is happening with self-regulation, we analyzed the food marketing policies of companies that market food to children. We identified 128 food companies that market to kids, including food manufacturers, chain restaurants, and

entertainment companies, such as television, magazines, video gaming, and toy companies.

Of the companies analyzed, 3/4 got an F. The biggest problem is that two-thirds (68%) did not have a policy for food marketing to children. A much larger proportion of food and beverage manufacturers (64%) had marketing policies than did restaurants (24%) or entertainment companies (22%).

Some companies in our study claim they don't market to children. And it is true that most of those companies don't advertise during children's television programming. However, they market to kids in other ways, like through in-school programs or branded fundraisers, on the Internet, or through children's meals and menus in restaurants.

The CBBB companies have some of the clearest -- and strongest -- policies. Some food companies limit the marketing of all their products. More often companies set nutrition standards that limit the amount of calories, fats, salt, and sugars in the foods that they'll market.

Each company has its own set of nutrition standards, which make it hard for parents and advocates to know whether a food should or shouldn't be advertised. While there are many similarities in companies standards, there are often strategic loopholes. For example, the cereal companies have strong sodium standards, but weak sugar standards. McDonald's has a great sugar standard, but no sodium standard.

In a recent study, we found that products that companies identified as appropriate to market to children met each company's own standards. But, the majority (59%) of approved products did not meet a single, third - party nutrition standard -- the standards developed by CSPI.

Most food company marketing policies cover advertising on TV, radio, magazines, Internet, and in elementary schools. However, what's covered in schools is chock full of loop holes. The CBBB school policies don't cover displays of foods and beverages in school cafeterias or vending machines, sponsorship, fundraisers, and items provided through school administrators, like curricula.

Also most company policies don't cover middle and high schools. It is hard enough to feed teenagers healthfully -- parents don't need junk-food sales and marketing in schools undermining their efforts to feed their teenagers. General Mills, Kraft, and Kellogg some of the few companies that have agreed not to market in middle and high schools.

Few company marketing policies apply to on-package marketing, which is a major way that companies market to kids -- and one I have definitely experienced in the grocery store, as my daughter asked for Disney Princess cereal instead of Raisin Bran. There are also toy give aways, contests, games, and other appealing on-package marketing on too many unhealthy foods.

Also, few companies have agreed to limit marketing:

- through toys, like those given away with children's meals at fast-food restaurants and Pizza Hut Playsets,
- through use of company logos, product names or spoketunes on cereal bowls or tee-shirts, or
- through new media, like cell phones.

Several entertainment companies – including Nickelodeon, Disney, and the Cartoon Network -- have announced that they'll limit the use of their licensed characters to foods that meet nutrition standards. This is a start. But, other than ION Media, they haven't agreed to limit junk-food marketing through their other important media venues like TV, magazines, and the Internet.

Our analysis suggests a number of key shortcomings with the current self-regulatory approach. If companies hope to have self-regulation serve as an alternative to government regulation of food marketing to children, they need to:

- Adopt a common set of strong nutrition standards, as recommended by the FTC. Each company having its own set nutrition standards has lead to a very complex system, that is hard for advocates and parents to understand and monitor.
- Cover all their marketing
- Use a strong and consistent definition of what marketing is considered to be targeted to children.
- Entertainment companies should agree to limit junk-food marketing through all the media approaches they use to reach kids -- not just licensed characters.
- And, all companies that market to children should have a policy. Chuck E Cheese, Topps Candy (which makes baby bottle pops and ring pops), and Perfetti Van Melle (which makes Airheads) are some of the companies without policies.

CSPI worked with Senator Harkin to require the FTC pull together the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children, which you heard about from Mary. Together with representatives from the FDA, CDC and USDA, the FTC are developing model nutrition standards for food marketing to children. They also are required to address what media the nutrition standards should apply to, hopefully defining which should be considered directed at children. The standards will be voluntary, but we will work to urge many companies to adopt them.

We are willing to give self-regulation more time to work. But without more significant progress, I fear the country will need to rely on government regulation rather than self-regulation as the way to address food marketing to kids.

For more information about food marketing to kids, you can visit our website at [www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy](http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy). Thank you and I would be happy to answer questions when the other speakers are finished.