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Concern about Marketing Food and Drink to Children

Marketing to children is a relatively new business, with working parents prepared to compensate for the time they spend away from their families by spending money on them. This has led not only to the growth of a profitable marketing sector, but also to widespread criticism about the exploitation of children. The industry is responding in a variety of ways, with different degrees of success, but the food and drink industry will never be the same again. Responsible marketing to children is an essential component to any campaign targeted at children.

A recent picture on the front page of the UK newspaper, *The Times*, seems to sum up the disturbing media coverage across Europe and North America about the marketing of food and drink products to children. It depicts a young boy of 4 or 5, staring down at his weight on a set of domestic scales, with the headline "Should every child be put on the scales in school?" Over the last few years, marketers have faced widespread criticism in media, from consumer groups, and from politicians, about the way in which children are targeted as consumers.

The Growth of Marketing to Children

Historically, as television advertising began to develop and with it the increase in marketing, it was the elders in the family that were targeted not their children. With the introduction of television in the post World War II era of the 1950s, families were encouraged by governments to grow and develop in a way that would bring stability to the western world. The baby boom years began with mothers, most of whom had taken an active role in the war, being encouraged to stay at home and concentrate on bringing up the next generation. The generation they raised

subsequently rebelled against the constraints of their post-war upbringing, which led to the rise of feminism, post-feminism, student protest, hippies, rock music, etc. These parents were different, with today's baby boomers refusing to grow up and often dressing in the same clothes as their sons and daughters.

Marketing to children is now a big business. The Chartered Institute of Marketing estimates that the pre-school market in the UK alone is now worth around £4.3 bn a year (2002). In a total market estimated at £30 bn it has been shown that children have an influence on their parents' choice of clothes, food, furniture, cars, computers, holiday, even houses. The combined annual pocket money income of children in the UK is £2.3 bn. Children aged between 4 and 12 see as many as 20,000 ads a year, and can recognize up to 400 brands.

The 1980s saw a growth in the money spent on children's advertising in the western world. This was partly due to social change, and partly out of a recognition of this untapped market by the marketing industry. As more and more mothers in the West worked, greater income was generated, but children saw less of their parents. The wish to compensate and partly justify the guilt felt by two working parents who had less time to spend with their children forced them to spend money on their children. Marketers spotted the opportunity, not just to sell traditional children's products such as fast food, toys, and confectionery, but to encourage families to make the most of 'quality time' in the form of holidays, cars, in-house media entertainment, etc. Many major advertising agencies now have a children's division, and there has been a growth in the number of companies that specializes entirely in the kids and youth markets.

In her influential book, *No Logo*, Naomi Klein (2000) has claimed that the rise in youth marketing came about in the 1990s. She identifies the early 90s as seeing an increase in the population of teenagers (the first since 1975). Whilst the recession of the early 90s had a devastating effect on the economy in the US and Europe, the brands that remained successful and pioneered the recession were the youth brands: Soft drinks, trainers, fast food, chewing gum, etc. Both teenagers and children became a viable market, and marketers enjoyed working in this area. But in Europe and the US, such overt commercialism is being increasingly challenged by organizations such as 'Commercial Alert' (US) and the 'Center for a New American Dream' (US), all of which are campaigning against the increased commercialization of children's lives.

In the UK too there has been widespread criticism about marketing to children. In the 1990s, the long drawn out 'McLibel' trial was finally brought to a conclusion with Mr Justice Rodger Bell dubbing McDonald's as an 'exploiter' of children. Members of Parliament, especially from the Labor Party, have been campaigning for tighter control on marketing to children, with some wanting to see an outright ban on television advertising to the under-5s.

The History of Marketing Food and Drink to Children

Along with the growth in the marketing to children, there was also a rise in the number of hard-pressed working mothers having a desire to use convenience food rather than freshly prepared food. Tiredness experienced by mothers, the need to feed their children, and fun food and drink products for children ensured that mothers felt good about giving them convenience food. There came a huge increase in the number of food and drink products aimed specifically at children, with supposed 'added goodness'. Food and drink manufacturers fast recognized that children's convenience foods were an ideal marketing opportunity, and emphasized the natural wish for children to have fun by

targeting food and drink products directly on them. Some products such as Kraft Cheese Dairy Lea Dunkers, Lunchables, and Rippers, make food fun for children, and at the same time giving them healthy ingredients.

There has never been such a selection of food products, especially those targeted at children. Families leading busy lives have a tendency to eat meals and snacks out of the home, with more food now being prepared out of the home than at home in many western countries. Companies, such as McDonald's, appeal to the need for inexpensive, fast, and convenient food that will satisfy children's hunger, and be a fun experience at the same time.

Recognizing that mothers might want 'added goodness' has sometimes misfired for manufacturers. An example is the drink Sunny D. The product was launched with an emphasis that it was full of Vitamin C, and the product was placed alongside fresh orange juice in the chill cabinet in supermarkets, giving the impression that it was a healthy drink. Advertisement with the tagline, 'The great stuff that kids go for', depicted children helping themselves from the fridge. Almost overnight the brand became successful, with sales of £160 mn a year in the UK. However, this was to be short-lived. Critics pointed to the high sugar content, and the fact that the drink did not need to be chilled at all. Mothers felt let down by the brand, and began to reject it until it was forced to relaunch a sugar-free format.

Concerns in the West about Rising Levels of Obesity

Concerns about childhood obesity began to emerge in the late 1990s with the World Health Organization signaling a global obesity epidemic ahead, with 300 million people worldwide being dangerously overweight. It gave the startling news that the rate of obesity was on the rise with an increase in childhood diabetes linked to overweight. Although it was recognized by many health professionals, it was probably the publishing of *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser 2001) that informed the general population that this was an issue of immediate concern. The book puts forth a compelling argument that at the current rate of increase of overweight and obesity, and with the existing Western diets children are likely to die much before their parents.

This stark fact was embraced by government and lobbying groups. Blame was put on food and drink manufacturers and retailers, advertisers, and marketers. Lobbying groups moved into full gear, both those backing the adversaries, and the food and drink manufacturers themselves defending their business.

Focus was put on unhealthy Western diets which had high levels of fat, sugar and salt. These were seen to exist in the so called 'convenience' foods which were to be put in the oven or microwave, rather than being prepared from scratch or food from fast food restaurants. For the first time, many mothers who had previously been unconcerned, began to examine food labeling to find out for themselves the contents of the food they were happily giving their children. The way in which food and drink was being marketed to children, the use of toys and licensing, the advertising of food products on children's TV, all came under the spotlight. Food and drink manufacturers became enemies and were, in some cases, being held directly responsible by some for the increase in early child diabetes, premature death, and high levels of obesity.

More reasoned and concerned observers also pointed out that children were less active than their parents. Parents were less willing to allow their children to freely play outside the home. A rise in car accidents, alongside a concern about 'stranger danger', with wide publicity given to recent (and rare) child abduction cases made many parents feel better if their child were at home, safe and sound.

Concern about Marketing Food and Drink to Children

Children have more access to technology available at their homes, and their bedrooms have become entertainment centers, with TV, DVD, CD, Games Consoles common (See Table 1). This higher level of less activity in home has been coupled in many countries with children taking less activity in school. In many UK schools, for example, sport and activity has taken second place to the achievement of higher academic excellence.

In recent months, there have been many moves by governments to curtail advertising and marketing of food and drink products to children. In the UK, the government has announced a ban on 'junk food' in schools. Foods high in fat, salt or sugar are to be banned from vending machines and meals in English schools within a year. The School Meals Review panel, set up after a campaign on BBC by TV chef Jamie Oliver to improve school meals, is shortly to announce nutritional standards that will be compulsory in schools. His television series revealed the low standards in schools which prompted widespread concern. So successful was the television series that Jamie Oliver has been approached by the government in France, and is currently in the US to advise schools on nutritional meals. The UK Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, announced at the Labor Party Conference (Brighton, UK, September 28) "I am absolutely clear that the scandal of junk food served every day in school canteens must end."

Table 1: Which of the following do you have in your bedroom for your own use?

	All (%)	UK (%)	France (%)	Germany (%)	Spain (%)
Radio	52	47	58	61	42
Music system	47	57	37	49	46
TV	44	68	28	40	42
Nintendo/ Playstation/X-Box	36	46	27	31	41
PC/Laptop	29	23	28	29	37
VCR	23	44	12	18	19
Mobile Phone (no camera)	20	25	12	24	18
DVD Player	18	31	8	18	15
Internet connection	12	7	9	10	21
<i>Base: Eurokids aged 5-12, n=805</i>					

The Wider Implications of Marketing to Children

The reaction of the UK government is typical of many of the concerns that have been voiced globally about marketing food and drink to children, and has led to a wider concern and questioning about the notion of advertising and marketing to children. This, of course is not completely new. In Sweden, TV advertising to children under 12 has been banned since 1991. In Quebec (Canada), a similar ban has been in place since 1978. Interestingly, in Sweden, obesity levels among children have tripled in this period, and in Canada a 2003 study indicates that obesity levels have doubled over a 15-year span, no different from other obesity levels found in other parts of Scandinavia and Canada as a whole.

Over the last few months alone, i.e., between June and August, there has been a widespread global trend to take similar steps by the UK government. In August 2005, the following steps were announced. A survey in Australia conducted by CFAC found that 91% of respondents wanted food advertising to children to be restricted, and the parents' group has called for tighter regulation of food advertising to children. In the US, the Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI), Boston, is to host a conference tackling food marketing to children. Two other US studies published in the August issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* show TV food ads and fast food restaurants are heavily targeting children. In July 2005, Brazil Parliament discussed a proposal for a ban on advertising to children. In Denmark, the Ministry for Family and Consumer Affairs announced that it is reviewing

its marketing act with stricter rules on children. The Netherlands plans to ban advertising of children's programs on public television. Sweden's Minister for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Affairs has published '*Food Manifesto*' calling for a ban on 'junk' food ads to children across all media. In Chile, two Members of Parliament are planning to sue food manufacturers for misleading advertising of children's breakfast cereals. The largest consumer group in Germany (VZBV) has called for a ban on advertising in schools. In Italy, health ministers have made tackling childhood obesity a priority. And finally in India, in June, the Consumer Education and Research Center (CERC) called on two state governments to restrict promotional activities in schools.

While many critics have called for restrictions on advertising to children, it is interesting to note that in Quebec (Canada), where a ban on TV advertising to children has been in place since 1978, a 2003 study (Willms, Mark, Tremblay and Katzmarzyk) indicates that obesity levels have doubled over a 15-year span, no different in fact from other obesity levels in Canada. And in Sweden, where there has been a similar ban since 1991, obesity levels have tripled among school children.

Finland had tackled this problem in a slightly different way, but very successfully. In the 1970s, Finland had the highest rate of deaths from heart problems in the world, due to a flourishing dairy industry that played a big part in the Finnish diet, and in the 1980s Finland's obesity rate was twice as high as that of the UK, but now, 20 years later, 19% of women in Finland are classed as obese, compared to 26% in the UK, and this has been due to an assertive public education campaign to promote exercise and a healthy diet. School children in Finland are weighed annually, and the results are recorded in their year end reports. Each child receives a free school lunch which must comprise one-third of their calorie intake. Finnish food firms have been forced to adapt also, so that 30% of cheese now sold in Finland is low fat, compared to just 10% in the UK.

Food and Drink Manufacturers' Response


The food and drink industry has responded to growing criticism in a variety of ways. McDonald's has introduced an extensive children's menu with healthy options, and is encouraging children to 'be active'. Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other drink producers in the US have recently agreed to voluntary restrictions on sales in the US schools. Kraft, the biggest packaged food company in the US has launched a 'healthier' cookie, a whole grain version of the popular brand 'Chips Ahoy' and also pledged to promote only 'healthy' foods to children under 12, both through its website as well as television, radio and in print.

Self-regulation on the part of industry does seem to be the way forward, and there are several initiatives that educate children about advertising and marketing. In Canada, the impressive organization 'Concerned Children's Advertisers' (CCA) was launched in 1990 and its mission is to help and inform children about challenges in life and social issues as well as teaching them about the media and the world of advertising. Around 24 companies that back it, including Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Warner Brothers, and Mattel. It has tackled several issues like bullying, and conducted its latest campaign centers on childhood obesity. The 'Long Live Kids' program was launched towards the end of 2004 and has three important messages for children "Eat smart, move more, and be media-wise." It was backed by a high profile advertising campaign, 'Health Rocks', that was shown in Canada since October 2004.

CCA was the model for the launch of 'Media Smart' in the UK in November 2002. This is a non-profit media literacy program for school children aged 6 - 11. Funded by the advertising business in the

UK, it develops and provides free educational materials to schools. Its supporters included several food and drinks companies, including Cadbury Trebor Bassett, Hasbro, HJ Heinz Co, Kellogg's, Masterfoods, McDonald's and Unilever. The material is highly enjoyable to view, and to use, and is known and recognized by over 50% of the UK children. Media Smart is now broadening out to other European countries, with the Netherlands and Belgium already established, Germany and other countries in Europe about to launch similar schemes.

Conclusion

As one of the most vulnerable sectors, the well-being of children and young people is a responsibility we all hold, and we must market to them responsibly. But, though the growth of the sector has been so large and successful, we have become complacent about how we are targeting children. The deep concern about childhood obesity, and the long-term effects on health, has made us all reassess the way in which we consider children as 'consumers'. Whether we write about children as consumers, carry out research with them, and target them as consumers, we would all be wise enough to regard the current concern about marketing of food and drink to children, expressed globally, as a wake up call. We hope that children and their parents will be supported by a responsible industry, keen to provide healthy and nourishing food and drink products. 

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