

The complex issue of food, advertising, and child health

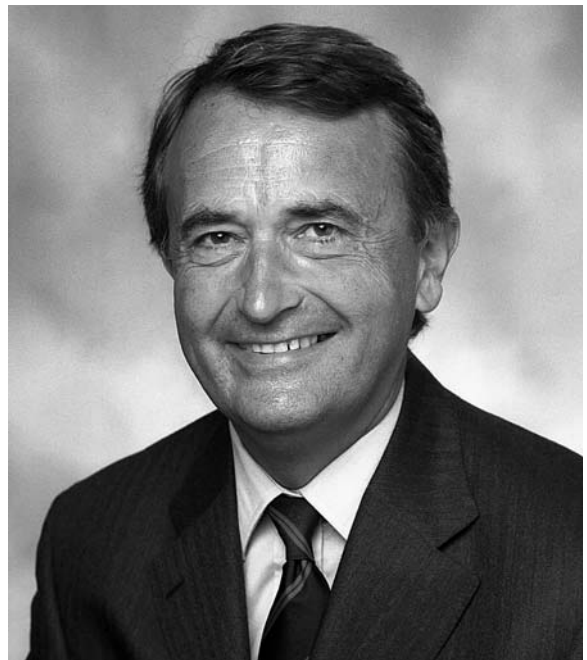
Barbie Clarke interviews Jeremy Preston, Director of the Food Advertising Unit

The debate on the future of advertising food to children, sparked off by widespread concern over escalating levels of childhood obesity, continues to rage in the UK, as it does in other parts of the world. Barbie Clarke interviews Jeremy Preston, Director of the Food Advertising Unit, to get the ad and food industries' views on this crucially important topic.

JEREMY PRESTON is a man with a mission, and it is one he hopes will change the thinking about food advertising to children. Appointed Director of the Food Advertising Unit (FAU) in July this year (2003), he has wide experience in the food industry, most recently 13 years as Managing Director of Cereal Partners UK, the breakfast cereal joint venture between Nestlé and General Mills, and before that with Unilever and RHM.

Based at the Advertising Association offices in London, Preston welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the emotive subject of children and food advertising. Having been a senior 'corporate' for many years, he had the benefit of significant back-up from a wide range of resources before, and now he is clearly relishing the challenge of being more of a free spirit and getting fully engaged in every aspect of working in a trade association, where he has to do a lot for himself. 'It's just great fun dealing with a subject on which everyone has an opinion!'

The Food Advertising Unit, UK, was set up in 1995, under the auspices of the Advertising Association, as a centre for information, communication and research in the area of food advertising, particularly with regard to children. 'At its core,' Preston says, 'it rejects calls to restrict advertising to children, by what it views as genuine, but misdirected, concern about children's dietary health. Our members include advertisers (food and drink manufacturers), advertising agencies and broadcast media.'



Agreeing that children should be protected from inappropriate commercial influence, Jeremy Preston wishes to raise the general awareness of the already substantial restriction imposed by the current control systems governing advertising to children. Many countries have strict rules and legislation about advertising to children, although the picture is somewhat confusing, with Sweden having banned TV advertising to children under 12 for the last 11 years. Meanwhile, Norway bans ads ten minutes before and after children's programming,

Flemish-speaking Belgium bans all ads to children five minutes before and after, Italy bans ads during audio-visual cartoons, and during kids' TV programmes lasting less than 30 minutes. Greece bans TV stations from advertising toys to children between 7 am–10 pm, and the Canadian province of Quebec restricts all TV ads directed at children under the age of 13. Denmark, Austria, Holland, Australia and New Zealand also all have strict rules on children's advertising, as do the UK and US.

In the US there is a similar trade body called the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU), part of the Council of Better Business Bureaux (CBBB). CARU, though, was founded in 1974, and has as its mission the promotion of truthful, accurate advertising to children under the age of 12. It has recently revised the CARU self-regulatory guidelines for children's advertising, which include as one of its six underlying principles that 'Advertisers should recognise that children may learn practices from advertising that may affect their health and well-being.'

Jeremy Preston is keen to point out that it is far too simplistic to blame advertising for childhood obesity: 'Advertising drives brands, not diet,' he claims. In the UK, advertising to children is regulated through the Broadcasting Act 1990; the Communications Act 2003; the ITC Advertising Standards Code 2002 and Broadcast Advertising Clearance Centre Guidelines 1999; the Radio Authority Sponsorship and Advertising Codes 2000; and the British Code of Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing 2003. The rules are broadly similar across all media, and include prohibitions on anything that might cause children physical, mental or moral harm, including 'encouraging children to eat or drink at or near bedtime, to eat frequently throughout the day or to replace main meals with confectionery or snack foods'.

Many would see Preston's new task as daunting. There are more than one billion overweight adults in the world, 300 million of them obese, according to the World Health Organisation. Obesity and being overweight pose a major risk for chronic diseases, including type two diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer. Among these, childhood obesity has already reached 'epidemic' proportions (World Health Organisation) in some areas. An estimated 17.6 million children under five are estimated to be overweight worldwide, and according to the US Surgeon General in the USA, the number of overweight children there has doubled, and the number of overweight adolescents trebled, since 1980.

Much of the blame for the current epidemic has been put squarely on food manufacturers and fast-food restaurants. With obesity accounting for as much as 7% of total healthcare costs in some developed countries, it is not surprising that there is alarm and concern among food manufacturers and advertisers about the growing stream of criticism levelled at them. A lawsuit was filed in the US earlier this year trying to ban Kraft's Oreo biscuits on the grounds that they contain an artery-clogging ingredient that 'reduces human life'. Kraft Foods recently announced it will reduce sugar, fat and calories in many of its product and shrink single-serve portions beginning next year. And we know that McDonald's, Cadbury-Schweppes and Nestlé, among others, are taking steps to review their products in terms of ingredients that could be deemed to be 'unhealthy'.

In June this year (2003), the National Federation of Women's Institutes in the UK passed a resolution on children's diets, exercise and health:

‘The meeting views with concern the increase in obesity and diet-related health problems in children, and the associated risk of chronic disease in later life, and urges HM Government to regulate the promotion to children of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet and to ensure increased opportunities for exercise and practical food education in schools.’

In the USA, the debate has been taken on by psychology academics, with Professor Kelly Brownell, Director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, calling for food companies in the US to stop ‘bombarding’ children with TV, radio, and magazine advertising for junk food, fast foods and soft drinks. He also appeals to schools in the US to stop selling these foods and drinks in the cafeteria, vending machines and school store, and he wants celebrities, such as Beyoncé Knowles promoting Pepsi and Shaquille O’Neal endorsing Burger King, to stop promoting such foods. In his new book, *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry, America’s Obesity Crisis and What We Can Do About It* (McGraw-Hill 2003), written with Katherine Battle Horgen, they argue that ‘kids are targeted in relentless ways by food companies, and they aren’t mature enough to make choices that affect their health’.

Jeremy Preston, however, sees obesity among children as having far more complex causes than merely children’s exposure to advertising from food and drink companies. He says, ‘Children are exposed to advertising everywhere, not only advertising but promotions, packaging, in-store displays, magazines. Indeed, research carried out by the FAU shows that children are more sophisticated than adults give them credit for, and understand the purpose of advertising from an early age.’ The research report, published in

August 2003, is a review of the international research literature assessing the role of advertising in children’s food choices, carried out by Dr Brian Young (Academic Editor of this journal, and Professor of Psychology, The University of Exeter). Dr Young had previously written a similar work for the UK Government (MAFF Report) in 1996, and the current report brings this work up to date.

The latest FAU research has shown that children do understand the difference between advertising and editorial or programme content from the age of three. From around the age of five, children begin also to understand the commercial intent of advertising; in other words, that it is trying to sell them something. By the age of seven or eight, most children are fully aware of the persuasive nature of advertising, and have an understanding of it. Full understanding increases with age, but before children act independently as purchasers, they can comprehend that advertising is there to sell to them. The report concludes:

‘Food advertising does not dictate children’s dietary patterns, but it does have a role to play in food choice at the level of the brand. In addition, television programming offers a generous range of images about food and can shape food choices. Healthy and unhealthy eating with different kinds of foods is represented in all media in a host of different ways.’

Preston adds that around 90% of food for the family is bought by the parents, and therefore they largely control the diet. ‘Pester power’, as it is known in Europe, or ‘the nag factor’, as it is called in the USA, is often cited as an unfair pressure stimulated by advertising, but, as Preston points out, ‘In a recent survey we commissioned among 1500 parents, the latter accepted [pester power] went with the territory

of being a parent, and 86% said they did not concede to demands from their children.'

Jeremy Preston is keen to say that, although the problem is complex, the food industry will work hard at it, remarking, 'And, of course, not all kids are obese, or even overweight. The food industry wants to be part of the solution, and it is certainly not in the industry's interest to have obese people around.' He is also aware that the advertising and food industries, on a global basis, are easy targets. 'There are many other factors that influence weight, not just the advertising of food products.' Clearly, advertising of snack foods directed at children is much greater than that of fruit and vegetables. Children have always asked their parents for things, but codes of practice do not permit advertisements to encourage this. Well-known slogans, such as 'Don't forget the Fruit Gums, Mum', or 'Buy some for Lulu', would not be permitted now.

Preston says, 'Obviously overweight is a product of the imbalance between energy in and energy out. Whereas calorific intakes have fallen in the last decade, levels of physical activity among children have declined further. For example, since 1986 the number of walking trips made by kids has fallen by 17% for children aged five to ten years, and by 29% for children aged 11 to 15. Parents simply do not allow their children to walk to school any more.'

This view is supported, not just by Preston and the FAU, but by several leading international nutritionists. *USA Today* (22 September 2003) reported that Keith Ayoob, Associate Professor of Paediatrics at Albert Einstein School of Medicine in New York, who works with obese and overweight children, has said that parents have to be more vigilant about what their children are eating, commenting 'I never see kids who have better diets than their parents.' And in the UK, Professor David Hall, past

president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health told *The Observer* (17 August 2003):

'There is no doubt that the rate of obesity is exploding. It's a massive problem for the whole of the Western world. But we are more likely to be successful if we bring in measures that affect the health of the whole population. It's about making it easier to walk to school, getting kids to stop watching hours of TV, offering better school food, and providing more sports facilities.'

What, then, are the answers, and how can Jeremy Preston, in his new role at the helm of the FAU, counteract some of the criticism levelled at the food industry, and the advertising industry? 'There are no easy answers, or quick fixes,' he says, but he does have clear ideas for a three-stage approach that will help to promote a healthy lifestyle among children. These, he believes, include three important areas: education, exercise, and improved labelling.

1. Education

Preston sees an important role for education, with the food and advertising industries working with educationalists to introduce children at an early age to the concept of preparing for healthy adulthood, 'which would include lifestyle, healthy eating, how to cook healthily, exercise, time management, as well as citizenship.' He goes on to say, 'There's a lot of creativity out there, especially in the advertising industry, and it must be possible to put together an imaginative and stimulating programme to help young children understand how to look after themselves and eat in a way that will prepare them for health and fitness later in life.'

2. Exercise

'It is surprising how little the word "exercise" is mentioned in relation to obesity among children,' says Preston. 'There need to be facilities available, and exercise needs to be fun so children want to take part in exercise and sport, and not be told to do it. We as an industry should help to promote such activity.'

3. Improved labelling

'There is clearly much confusion around in the mind of the consumer about what are and are not healthy ingredients, as well as things like "kilojoules": what on earth does that mean to the everyday consumer? With Brussels dictating to a large extent what should and should not appear on labels, this is probably causing even more confusion.' Preston would like the food industry to work together to promote clear and easy-to-understand labelling so that both children and parents understand what it is they are consuming.

In his role at the FAU, Preston is also keen to work with other agencies. The industry has been awaiting with great interest the outcome of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) report looking at the way foods are promoted to children. The FSA was set up in 2000 in the UK by an Act of Parliament as an independent food safety watchdog to protect the public's health and consumer interests in relation to food. The report, entitled 'Does food promotion influence children? A systemic review of the evidence' (published 25 September 2003 and produced by Professor Gerard Hastings and his team at the University of Strathclyde Centre for Social Marketing), was commissioned by the Agency to examine existing evidence and provide a

more in-depth understanding of the extent and nature of food promotion to children. An impressive 29,946 pieces of relevant research were initially assessed for the report, and ultimately 101 studies were reviewed. The report, just published at the time of writing, is lengthy, and will take some time to absorb. Some key findings include:

- Promotion is just one part of the complex process of marketing and that measuring the effect of promotions on consumer behaviour, and disentangling this from other influences, is notoriously difficult.
- The advertised diet contrasts sharply with that recommended by public health advisors, and themes of fun and fantasy or taste, rather than health and nutrition, are used to promote it to children.
- There is evidence that food promotion influences children's food preferences and their purchase behaviour.
- A number of studies have shown that food advertising can influence what children eat. (One, for example, showed that advertising influenced a primary class's choice of daily snack at playtime.)

The report concludes:

- There is a lot of food advertising to children.
- The advertised diet is less healthy than the recommended one.
- Children enjoy and engage with food promotion.
- Food promotion is having an effect, particularly on children's preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption.
- This effect is independent of other factors and operates at both a brand and category level.

Finally the report states: 'This does not amount to proof of an effect, but in our view does provide sufficient evidence to conclude that an effect exists.' Following the publication of Professor Hastings's research review, the FSA says it intends to draw on the conclusions of this report, to inform and promote open public debate, and will be hosting a series of meetings involving a wide range of stakeholders with an interest in, or concern about, the promotion of food to children. This will include a meeting of leading academics to discuss the review findings, and a public meeting to debate the issue.

With the report running to over 400 pages, it will clearly take Jeremy Preston and his colleagues at the FAU some time to digest and respond to it. At this stage, though, Preston is keen to point out 'We all agree with Professor Hastings that the issue is very complex, and this report needs professional consideration and measured response. This is necessary because the food, drink and advertising industries we represent wish to continue a constructive dialogue with the FSA and contribute to finding

workable solutions.' He remarks, 'The FSA report appears to focus only on the promotion and advertising of food products on television, and makes no comparative reference to other important factors, such as the influence of parents on eating habits, the importance of sibling and peer group pressure, or the effect of reduced exercise.'

Clearly, the issue of obesity in children is a complex one, and there are many contributing influences. Preston believes that a balance must be struck, and that the food, drink and advertising industry is not seen as the main culprit. 'Increasing levels of overweight and obesity among the population are as a result of an imbalance in energy intake and expenditure and are affected by a range of important lifestyle factors,' he says, 'advertising being at best a minor influence. The problem needs a solution that is practical, relevant and sustainable and not just a quick fix. The advertising industry wants to be part of that solution and will be making informed recommendations when the FSA report has been fully reviewed.'