

Marketing food and drink to children responsibly

Neil Samson, Kids and Youth, takes a look at the marketing of food and drink and children and suggests ways it may be done responsibly

THE WAY THAT food products are marketed to children has come under increasing scrutiny in the past few years from parents, the media, pressure groups and the government. Last November, in its white paper 'Choosing Health', the government warned of potential intervention in this area if the industry did not market foods to children more responsibly. In order to better understand the industry's response to this issue, Kids and Youth conducted a series of 11 interviews with prominent professionals from the food retailing, manufacturing and advertising industries. This article considers how children's food and drink is marketed and looks at ways of marketing them responsibly.

Marketing of children's food and drink in the 1990s

During the 1990s, we saw the face of the modern family change rapidly, with fewer children, growing numbers of dual income families and rising divorce rates. This, together with the effects of 'compression culture' resulted in many families being cash rich and time poor. Parents wanted to and could afford to indulge their children. This was partly to assuage the guilt of not spending much time with them, but also to help ensure they spent 'quality time' with them by giving their children what they asked for.

The 1990s could also be called the decade of 'kid power'. Children were becoming a very

powerful voice in the household, both in terms of demanding products aimed at them and influencing many other areas of household expenditure. The rise in 'kid power' is due in part to parents being more indulgent of their children both emotionally and materially, and part because parents were making a lifestyle choice in having children.

The combination of mums' desire for convenience, a wish for child-orientated products and 'kid power' coincided with a major influx in the number of food and drink products aimed specifically at children. Food and drink manufacturers were quick to realise that mums were looking for convenience foods that their children would enjoy, which also contained some goodness. Sunny D is an extreme example of a product that was positioned to appeal to kids on the basis that they would love the taste, while reassuring mums that it was a healthy alternative to orange juice. The advertising emphasised the vitamin C content of the drink, showed children helping themselves to it out of the fridge and having fun. The placement of the product alongside fresh orange juice in the chill cabinet and the similarity of the bottle to orange juice resulted in mothers unconsciously coding the drink as a healthy alternative to orange juice.

'It all suggested that it was freshly squeezed orange juice with sort of added goodness

rather than a totally artificial product' - Mother with three children (BBC *The Money Programme* 3 December 2003)

The effect of this strategy was remarkably effective in the short term and created a mega brand almost overnight, with sales of £160 million a year in the UK. The strap line, 'The great stuff that kids go for', sent two very powerful messages to mothers. It reassured them, firstly, that it was good for children and secondly, that their children would like it. Unfortunately for Sunny D, the honeymoon with consumers was short lived. Negative publicity began to surround the product, challenging the healthiness of the drink and resulting in the product being re-launched in a sugar-free format.

Food and drink manufacturers realised that if they produced products that appealed to children and persuaded them to ask for it, there was a strong likelihood that mums would buy it. This led to the development of numerous child-centric food products that were predominantly aimed at kids. An example of one such product in the UK is Cheestrings. This is a stringy cheese that can be transformed into a myriad of shapes and styles, and then eaten in an equally diverse number of ways. Kids loved it because it was fun, enabled independence, had engaging adverts and an appealing taste.

This period in time was possibly the golden age of 'pester power' in the UK, when it was believed that if you could get the child to ask for the product you were home and dry.

Current strategies used to market food and drink to children

The growing pressure on food and drink manufacturers emanating from the debate on childhood obesity has led to a diverse response. This has ranged from a radical overhaul of the entire children's food offering and communi-

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cations strategy, to complete withdrawals of food advertising to children. Some food and drink manufacturers use all of the multi-media platforms available to consolidate their brand in the hearts and minds of children.

In the research that we carried out in the food industry, professionals were asked their opinions on the current and future response of the industry to the issues of childhood obesity and children's diets. The discussion also covered marketing strategies used in the children's food and drink sector.

Reformulation

Many of the food retailers and manufacturers have improved the nutritional qualities of foods aimed at children. Kraft has increased the 'healthiness' of their products by reducing the levels of fat and salt. Kellogg's, which has been criticised for the levels of salt and sugar in some of its cereals, has responded by reducing the amount of salt in Cornflakes and has launched a reduced-sugar version of Frosties. Recently, some of the supermarkets in the UK have revisited their children's ranges and reformulated some of the products to make them healthier.

SOCIAL ISSUES



McDonald's Apple Dippers, now offered as an alternative to french fries in McDonald's children's Happy Meals.

'Reducing salt, fat and sugar are the key enemies. We, like a lot of others in the industry, will be working with our suppliers to reduce the content of sugar, salt and fat where it is feasible because it will be deemed irresponsible not to do it' Food retailer (Kids and Youth research)

Some manufacturers have also recognised the difficulty in persuading some children to eat overtly healthy foods and have adopted a 'health by stealth' approach; for example, by adding the goodness of brown bread into a white bread (Hovis Best of Both). Chuppa Chups have recently launched a range of sugar free lollipops that do not harm teeth.

The Co-op supermarket chain announced in July 2005 that it has banned some additives from its own-brand food products. The decision to remove additives (including monosodium glutamate and some E numbers) is in response to concerns about the effects on children and others sensitive to their consequences.

There have, however, been some notable failures in this area. For example, in 1997 the Cancer Research Campaign charity in the UK teamed up with frozen-food retailer, Iceland, to develop a line of frozen vegetables called

'Wacky Veg'. The range included: pizza flavoured sweetcorn, cheese and onion flavoured cauliflower and chocolate flavoured carrots. Unfortunately for the charity and Iceland, Wacky Veg may have proved just too wacky for the kids and was quickly withdrawn.

Healthier food choices

The fast food industry has been in the line of fire in the war on obesity for several years. McDonald's has been singled out for particular criticism and media focus, and could be said to have become a scapegoat for the entire fast food industry. Ironically, McDonald's was singled out by many of the advertisers, retailers and manufacturers interviewed by Kids and Youth as being one of the most pro-active organisations in taking steps to combat obesity and poor diets. McDonald's has recently broadened out the Happy Meal kids offer to include healthier options such as milk, fruit juice, fruit and chicken grills; it has also reduced the salt content in McNuggets.

'McDonalds have probably been ahead of the game on it, they have been the most obvious in changing their menu, they have brought out fruit and water' Food advertiser (Kids and Youth research)

Other fast food restaurants and retailers frequented by families, such as pub chains, have followed McDonald's lead in introducing healthier food choices for children.

Promoting healthy lifestyles

The less active lifestyles of the current generation of children is a key contributor to childhood obesity. Children consume fewer calories now than in the past. However, the number of calories burned has declined even more rapidly. Several children's broadcasters (which rely heavily on food advertisers for their

revenues) and food manufacturers/retailers are currently running initiatives that aim to promote healthy eating and a balanced lifestyle.

Cartoon Network is launching an animated mini-series called 'Elfy food', which, if said in a 'Cockney' (London East End) accent, sounds like 'healthy food'. The series features a gang of five elves whose special powers come from fruit and vegetables. The series aims to re-brand fruit and vegetables as an important part of a hero's diet, to encourage children to eat them. Nickelodeon is currently running a campaign called 'Nicktrition' to raise the awareness of healthy eating and an active lifestyle. Kids can even get online advice from a nutritionist. Walkers crisps and McDonald's have given out free pedometers in order to encourage children to become more active.

McDonald's has also produced a series of health education messages that are aired during children's programmes and feature 'Yum Chums'. These are creatures who live in children's tummies and love water, fruit and vegetables.

Balanced messages

Several of the major food and drink advertisers are currently portraying more balanced messages about healthy eating and encouraging healthy lifestyles. Breakfast cereal manufacturers, like Kellogg's, advocate eating some of their breakfast cereals as part of a balanced breakfast and feature fruit juice and toast alongside the cereal. Fast food retailers such as Burger King and McDonald's show a range of food items on their menu in their advertising, including healthier options to encourage children to eat a balanced meal.

Many of the current food advertisements portray children taking part in physical activities and sports, often alongside sports related promotions. There are currently fewer advertisements for children's products where a free gift is the primary focus. It is now more com-

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mon for the free gift to be part of a message that includes information about the product benefits.

Family marketing

Some products, particularly those with healthy claims, that were previously targeted exclusively at children, have now switched to either only targeting mums or are including mums within the communications strategy. Marketers are realising that with the growing pressure on mums to provide healthy products for their children, the balance of power is shifting away from 'kid power' to 'parent power'.

Mums are beginning to question brands which solely target their children and are more likely to respond to brands that recognise and respond to their concerns. Several of the children's food and drink brands run advertorials in magazines read by mums, as well as having specific areas for mums (and kids) on the website with nutritional information and advice.

Appealing to the divergent needs of mums and kids within a single advertisement poses a real challenge to marketers. However, some have been very successful at generating fun, excitement and involvement by kids at the

same time as reassuring mums about the nutritional content. A recent advertisement for Cheestrings achieved just the right balance. The ad begins with mum and child on a train, mum hands the child the Cheestring, (showing that mum endorses it). He then proceeds to make a moustache like the passenger in front of him by stringing the cheese and placing it on his lip. The passenger in front then looks around to see the child mimicking his moustache. The action then cuts to show the packaging and emphasises that it is real cheese and contains milk. This is quite a departure for the brand that was previously almost exclusively child-centric in the way it communicated about the brand through advertising, packaging and promotional activity.

Withdrawal of advertising to children

Some food and drink manufacturers are withdrawing from advertising less healthy products to children. Kraft has announced that it is stopping advertising products to children under 11 that do not conform to their 'sensible solution' criteria. To qualify for 'sensible solution' status, products must provide beneficial nutrients, such as protein, calcium, fibre or wholegrain, at nutritionally meaningful levels, while staying within specific limits on calories, fat, salt and sugar.

Multi-media campaigns

Some food and drink manufacturers have continued to use the traditional techniques to appeal to children while also using multi-media platforms, such as the internet, to enter into children's worlds. Many of the most successful kids' food brands have websites, competitions and games on popular kids' sites such as Nickelodeon, Jetix and Cartoon Network.

The virtual reality world of the internet enables children to associate with brands in a

far more interactive way than watching an advertisement, helping to build brand loyalty.

'I have been looking at breakfast cereals and how they are marketed to children. It just feels like they are using every trick in the book and that hasn't changed. They all use cartoon characters and songs, they sell a free widget rather than the product, so the kid wants the toy not the cereal' Food advertiser (Kids and Youth research)

Marketing food and drink responsibly

It is difficult to find a 'one size fits all' strategy for responsible marketing of children's food and drink products since parents' attitudes vary considerably depending on the product being advertised. For example, many parents are very happy for persuasive advertising techniques to be used to encourage children to ask for products they consider to be healthy, such as fruit, vegetables and yoghurts. However, some feel that this approach would be inappropriate if it was applied to products containing high levels of fat, sugar and salt.

A big issue in food advertising is products which have high levels of fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). This then presents another question: 'is it possible to market HFSS foods responsibly?' The answer to that question depends on whether you believe children should be allowed to eat foods which contain high levels of these ingredients and how often, and is a personal choice.

There are dangers at both ends of the spectrum. Some argue that if we prevent our children from eating HFSS foods, we, as a society, could be setting off an eating disorder time bomb, where anorexia and bulimia become mainstream childhood diseases, rather than largely the preserve of teenage girls. On the other hand, it is argued that by allowing marketers carte blanche permission to fuel the

demand for HFSS foods, children's food brands could be in danger of pressing the self-destruct button, as parents' fears about childhood obesity levels make them re-evaluate their food brand choices in favour of healthier options.

There are advertising codes in place but in order to market HFSS food and drink products responsibly to children, marketers might consider the following questions:

- Does the communication send a balanced message about the product to kids, for example, containing reference to the product benefits as well as the free gift?
- Does it encourage healthy lifestyles, either via the communication message or through competitions, sponsoring events, and so on?
- Is the product positioned as a treat rather than an everyday food?
- Does it make reference to the importance of eating a balanced diet in a way that children will understand? (Some ads show a written message about this on the ad that many children under seven either will not or cannot read.)
- Is there an opportunity for parents to check out the nutritional information of the product? (For example, more information online.)
- Does the product have the lowest levels of fat, sugar salt and artificial additives possible without compromising on the taste?
- Is there an opportunity to choose an alternative product from the range with lower HFSS?
- Are the nutritional claims balanced and do they give a true picture of the 'healthiness' of the product, for example, avoiding promoting the benefits of low fat or high fruit content in products that contain a large amount of sugar.
- Is the nutritional labelling transparent, allowing parents to make an informed decision about whether to buy the product for their children?

It is clear that there is a slow lane and a fast lane in the efforts to market children's food and drink products responsibly. Parents are now becoming far more careful about the types of food they give their children and how frequently they give them those they perceive as unhealthy. Children are also becoming very knowledgeable about healthy eating and are increasingly aware of the link between obesity and eating unhealthy foods. The successful children's food brands of the future will be those that exercise responsible marketing practices, respond to the needs of parents to be reassured and informed, while fulfilling children's desire for foods that are fun, interactive, cool and healthy at the same time.

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