Encouraging big food to do the right thing for children’s health: a case study on using research to improve marketing of sugary cereals

Jennifer L. Harris\textsuperscript{a}, Megan E. LoDolce\textsuperscript{a} & Marlene B. Schwartz\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

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Encouraging big food to do the right thing for children’s health: a case study on using research to improve marketing of sugary cereals

Jennifer L. Harris, Megan E. LoDolce* and Marlene B. Schwartz

Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

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Addressing concerns about unhealthy food marketing to children, food companies pledge to advertise only ‘healthier dietary choices’ in ‘child-directed media’. However, public health advocates question whether the food industry will voluntarily improve their child-targeted marketing practices in a meaningful way. In this paper, we evaluate progress made by manufacturers of one food category – ready-to-eat breakfast cereals – in promoting nutritious choices to children, and the potential role of scientific research to influence corporate behavior. Beginning in 2008, researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity conducted a series of studies to evaluate child-targeted marketing by cereal companies using a variety of research methods. We aimed to understand the extent and impact of cereal marketing to children; disseminate these findings to parents, the media, the public health community, policy-makers, and industry representatives; and encourage cereal companies to shift child-targeted marketing toward the more nutritious products in their portfolios. A follow-up analysis in 2012 demonstrated some improvements in the nutritional quality and marketing of child-targeted cereals, although child-targeted cereals remain the least healthy products in company portfolios. This analysis provides a case study of the potential for success, as well as the limitations, of a public health strategy to incent food companies to voluntarily improve child-targeted marketing practices through strategic research and communications.

**Keywords:** public policy; food marketing; childhood obesity

**Introduction**

Numerous environmental factors have likely fueled the dramatic rise in childhood obesity and contributed to poor diets among young people in the United States. Public health experts point to the overwhelming amount of marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages targeted to children as a significant influence (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2006). Products most commonly marketed to children contain high levels of saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium that can lead to obesity and diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease (Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2012; Powell, Schermbeck, Szczypka, Chaloupka, & Braunschweig, 2011). Exposure to unhealthy food marketing also negatively impacts children’s food preferences, consumption of unhealthy categories of foods, and total calories consumed (White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, 2010).

*Corresponding author. Email: megan.lodolce@yale.edu

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Responding to growing concerns about unhealthy food marketing to children and the food and beverage industry’s role in the obesity crisis, in 2006, the Council of Better Business Bureaus launched an industry self-regulatory program, the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) (Kolish & Enright, 2013). Through this initiative, 17 major food and beverage companies pledge to only advertise ‘healthier dietary choices’ in ‘child-directed media’. The goal is to ‘shift the mix of advertising messages directed to children under 12 to encourage healthier dietary choices and lifestyles’.

Despite companies’ CFBAI pledges, independent reviews conducted in recent years have found limited improvements in food marketing to children. For example, youth-targeted food marketing expenditures declined from $2.1 billion in 2006 to $1.8 billion in 2009 (FTC, 2012). However, closer analysis reveals that two-thirds of this decline was due to reductions in fast-food kids’ meal premiums and advertising on children’s television; while less expensive forms of marketing, including digital media, sponsorships, product placements, and philanthropic promotions increased (Powell, Harris, & Fox, 2013). Furthermore, improvements in the nutritional quality of products advertised to children have been small and slow. For example, in 2009, 86% of food-related TV advertisements viewed by children promoted products high in saturated fat, sugar, or sodium, compared with 94% in 2003 (Powell et al., 2011). In 2013, First Lady Michelle Obama urged food companies, ‘to do even more and move even faster to market responsibly to our kids’. (The White House, 2013).

In this paper, we evaluate the progress by manufacturers of one food category – ready-to-eat breakfast cereals – to promote nutritious choices to children. We demonstrate the role that scientific research together with communication of findings to audiences whose actions could affect cereal-company profits (including parents, the media, and policy-makers) can play in influencing corporate behavior. This analysis provides a case study in the potential for success, as well as the limitations, of a public health strategy to incent food companies to voluntarily improve child-targeted marketing practices.

Why children’s cereals?
Beginning in 2008, researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity conducted a series of studies in the United States to evaluate child-targeted marketing by cereal companies. We focused on children’s cereals because they represented the packaged-food category marketed most often to children on TV (Powell, Szczypka, & Chaloupka, 2007) and the internet (Alvy & Calvert, 2008). In 2006, cereal companies spent $229 million on all forms of marketing directly targeting children under 12, more than any other food category (FTC, 2008). Furthermore, child-targeted cereals (defined as brands with one or more of the following on the package: a licensed character, television, movie theme; any other cartoon drawing; a promotion that was directed at children) consisted of 32–43% sugar by weight and were less nutritious than other cereal products (Schwartz, Vartanian, Wharton, & Brownell, 2008). Thus, companies could switch child-targeted marketing toward existing more nutritious products without expensive and time-consuming reformulations (potential barriers to improving child-targeted marketing). Finally, only four companies advertised cereals to children (General Mills, Kellogg, Post, & Quaker) (Schwartz et al., 2010), and all belong to the CFBAI (Kolish & Enright, 2013). Therefore, cereal companies pledged to improve their marketing to
children, providing an opportunity to examine whether company actions complied with publicly stated intentions.

Importantly, we also identified an opportunity to address public misconceptions about benefits of serving high-sugar cereals to children. Research funded by cereal companies demonstrated health benefits of consuming cereals versus skipping breakfast altogether (Albertson et al., 2009) or versus consuming high-fat options, such as fried eggs and bacon (Cho, Dietrich, Brown, Clark, & Block, 2003), and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2010) recommends that children consume cereal, together with milk and fruit, as components of a healthy breakfast. However, research had not compared differences between consuming child-targeted (i.e. high sugar) and low-sugar cereals (Castetbon, Harris, & Schwartz, 2012). Furthermore, despite growing concerns about sugar consumption (Johnson et al., 2009), cereal companies claimed that children will not eat low-sugar cereals (Clark & Crockett, 2008), and these products provide valuable micronutrients (e.g. vitamin D, calcium) (Thompson, Franko, & Barton, 2008).

**Strategic science approach**

Thus, existing research demonstrated that cereal companies aggressively market high-sugar cereals directly to children; companies may misinform parents and the public about the benefits of serving high-sugar cereals to children; and the CFBAI industry self-regulatory program may not effectively limit unhealthy cereal marketing to children. To evaluate these potential public-health issues, we conducted strategic research studies to better understand cereal companies’ child-directed marketing practices and how they affect children. We aimed to identify opportunities for cereal companies to improve child-targeted marketing practices and communicate our findings to audiences whose actions could affect cereal companies’ sales and profits. These key change agents included parents who buy the cereals, policy-makers who could enact regulation or legislation to govern cereal-company actions, the media and advocates who could help inform parents and encourage policy-makers to act, and the cereal manufacturers themselves.

To identify the key research questions, we considered potential reasons why parents buy high-sugar cereals and why they were not more concerned about child-targeted food marketing. We conducted focus groups (Ustjanauskas et al., 2010), followed by a large survey of parents (Speers, Goren, Harris, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2009), to understand parents’ perceptions about food marketing to their children. We learned that parents were largely unaware of all the ways that food companies market unhealthy foods to children, especially marketing on the internet. However, they became outraged when informed about common online child-targeted marketing practices, such as advergames (i.e. branded food-company games). In addition, quantitative analyses revealed that understanding the extent of child-targeted marketing was not sufficient to increase support for food-marketing restrictions; parents also must understand how this marketing affects their children (Goren, Harris, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2010). Therefore, an important research goal was to document how cereal companies market to children, especially on the internet, and to demonstrate the impact of marketing on children’s diets and health.

We also considered cereal-company marketing practices that might raise the policy-maker concerns. We hypothesized that the promotion of high-sugar cereals as nutritious options for children could mislead consumers and justify policy action, including common industry practices of adding micronutrients to otherwise nutrient-poor products and...
identifying high-sugar cereals as ‘healthier dietary choices’ through the CFBAI. In addition, cereal companies had identified many nutritionally poor children’s cereals as ‘Smart Choices’, using criteria developed by the food industry to qualify for a front-of-pack label identifying healthier products (Smart Choices, 2009). Therefore, another research goal was to evaluate the overall nutritional quality of children’s cereals and determine whether messages promoting high-sugar cereals as healthier choices misled consumers into thinking these products were nutritious options for children.

Finally, we examined cereal-company statements defending their marketing practices to identify potential industry counterarguments. In response to previous studies documenting high-sugar content in children’s cereals, companies claimed that children would not eat low-sugar cereals. In a letter to the editor of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, nutritionists from Kellogg and General Mills stated, ‘Food does not become nutrition until it is eaten’, and ‘Children like the taste of ready-to-eat cereals and are therefore more likely to eat breakfast’ (Clark & Crockett, 2008). However, research had not confirmed this strategy for improving children’s diets, presenting an opportunity to empirically test this claim.

As an academic research center, we are committed to transparency and utilizing the best scientific practices. We value peer-reviewed academic research, but studies published in academic journals often are outdated by the time of publication, making them less useful for current policy work. Furthermore, strict word requirements can limit the amount of specific and detailed information we could present about cereal-company marketing practices. Therefore, we designed all research to meet the standards for scientific journals to maintain the credibility of the findings, but supplemented academic papers with timely self-published reports that detailed specific company and brand-level information for use by advocates and policy-makers.

The research
From 2008 to 2012, researchers at the Rudd Center conducted several studies to document cereal nutrition, marketing targeted to children, and effects on children and their parents. Our 2009 report, Cereal FACTS: Evaluating the Nutrition Quality and Marketing of Children’s Cereals (Harris et al., 2009) served as the cornerstone of this research program. It provided a comprehensive and science-based evaluation of cereal marketing to children, including on TV, the internet, and in stores, following implementation of companies’ CFBAI pledges. It also compared the nutritional quality of cereals marketed to children with adult-targeted cereals. The report utilized syndicated market research data, supplemented by in-house and commissioned studies when the data were not publicly available. Additional studies examined the extent and impact of specific practices identified in Cereal FACTS.

Documenting cereal nutrition and child-targeted marketing
Results of Cereal FACTS demonstrated that the CFBAI had not led to noticeable improvements in child-targeted cereal marketing (Harris et al., 2009). In 2009, sugar content of child-targeted cereals averaged three teaspoons per serving (approximately one-third of cereal content by weight), down from 3.5 teaspoons in 2006. In addition, child-targeted cereals contained 85% more sugar, 60% more sodium, and 65% less fiber than cereals targeted to adults. Products with the worst nutrition ratings (e.g. Reeses’ Puffs, Corn Pops, Lucky Charms) were deemed ‘better-for-you’ in companies’ CFBAI
pledges and the industry’s Smart Choices front-of-pack labeling program. Not one CFBAI-approved cereal qualified for the USDA Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, and none would be allowed in advertising to children in the United Kingdom. We identified a category of ‘family cereals’ (e.g. plain Cheerios, Frosted Mini-Wheats, Life) that were more nutritious than child-targeted cereals, but companies chose to market these products exclusively to parents, not children. We also highlighted the common practice of placing nutrition-related claims on unhealthy cereals: 95% of child-targeted cereal boxes displayed at least one nutrition-related claim (e.g. contains whole grains, vitamin D, and calcium), while many featured three to four such claims.

Furthermore, in 2008–2009, companies continued to aggressively advertise their least nutritious cereals to children on television and the internet (Harris et al., 2009). On average, children viewed 1.6 advertisements per day on television promoting high-sugar children’s cereals. Eight child-targeted advergame sites featured high-sugar cereals on most pages and typically incorporated the cereal as part of the game (e.g. creating bumper boats out of Fruity Cheerios or brand characters in an Apple Jacks racing game). The two most popular sites, Millsberry.com and Postopia.com, averaged 767,000 and 265,000 young visitors per month, respectively. Millsberry was especially engaging, featuring a virtual world where children could create their own avatar and explore a branded ‘city’. Visitors averaged 66 min per month on the site. In addition, cereal companies placed banner advertising on popular children’s websites (e.g. Nick.com, Disney Channel) to drive traffic to their advergames. In the supermarket, 21% of the cereal aisle was devoted to child-targeted cereals, and special displays were more likely to feature child-targeted cereals compared with adult cereals. Furthermore, product packaging featured numerous messages to attract children’s attention, such as promotions and brand characters on the front and games and advergame URLs on the back.

Two additional studies further documented the extent of cereal-company marketing targeted to children. Using syndicated market research data from comScore, we analyzed child visitors to all food company websites and found that websites containing advergames attracted twice as many children compared with other sites (Harris, Speers, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2012). Advergame sites also were more engaging, and cereal companies maintained the most popular advergame sites (Harris, Weinberg, Javadizadeh, & Sarda, 2013). In the supermarket, cereal companies also were more likely to use child-targeted promotions than other food companies, which featured on 19% of cereal boxes (Harris, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2010). Two cereal companies (Kellogg and General Mills) had more child-targeted cross-promotions than any other food manufacturer. Furthermore, from 2006 to 2008 (pre- and post-CFBAI implementation), promotions in the supermarket increased, especially those targeting preschoolers and older youth, but the nutritional quality of promoted products did not improve.

**Effects of child-targeted cereal marketing**

We also assessed the impact of advergames, nutrition-related claims on high-sugar cereals, and messages used to promote high-sugar cereals to children. In an experiment examining the effects of playing advergames on children’s snacking behavior, children ages 7–12 were randomly assigned to play advergames promoting unhealthy foods, advergames promoting healthy foods, or control games without food mentions (Harris, Speers et al., 2012). After playing, researchers offered children a variety of healthy and
unhealthy snacks. Playing unhealthy advergames increased children’s consumption of unhealthy snack foods by 56% and reduced fruits and vegetables consumption by one-third. Furthermore, effects were greater for children who regularly played advergames, suggesting that repeated exposure increases advertising effectiveness.

We also examined how parents interpreted nutrition-related claims on high-sugar cereal packages in an online survey of parents (Harris, Thompson, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2011). Parents misinterpreted claims that highlighted specific nutrients, such as whole grain or fiber, and other more general claims (e.g. ‘supports your child’s immunity’), believing that nutritionally poor cereals with these claims were more nutritious than other cereals. Claims also increased parents’ willingness to buy. Parents also inferred incorrect information about claim meaning, including that they provided health benefits that the FDA does not allow companies to state directly. For example, 80% of parents assumed that cereals with ‘calcium and Vitamin D’ would help their child grow strong bones, and 74% believed that cereals with ‘antioxidants and vitamins’ would keep their child from getting sick. Thus, nutrition-related claims potentially misled consumers about the true nutritional quality and potential health benefits of child-targeted cereals.

We also content analyzed the messages in television advertisements for high-sugar cereals and measured children’s exposure to those advertisements using Nielsen data (LoDolce, Harris, & Schwartz, 2013). Nearly all (87%) cereal advertisements seen by children promoted high-sugar products, whereas adults were equally likely to see advertisements for high- and low-sugar cereals. In addition, messages in high-sugar cereal advertisements that children viewed were significantly more likely to convey unrealistic messages and misleading information about healthy eating. For example, 91% portrayed cereals as having extraordinary powers (e.g. cereal pieces transforming into cartoon characters, roller coasters, and playthings), and 67% portrayed both healthy and unhealthy behaviors in the same ad (e.g. eating at non-meal times, indicating the cereal is part of a balanced breakfast). These unrealistic, highly entertaining, and mixed messages raise concerns given children’s greater vulnerability to advertising influence and limited ability to evaluate advertising truthfulness (IOM, 2006).

**Potential cereal-company responses**

We also conducted an experiment to test cereal companies’ claim that children will only eat high-sugar cereals (Harris, Schwartz, Ustjanauskas, Ohri-Vachaspati, & Brownell, 2011). Children were randomly assigned to choose one of three high-sugar or comparable low-sugar cereals (e.g. Frosted Flakes vs. Corn Flakes) for breakfast served in summer day camps. Participants in both groups also served themselves low-fat milk, orange juice, bananas, and strawberries. Sugar packets were provided in both conditions. All children reported either ‘liking’ or ‘loving’ the cereal they chose, with no difference between those who received high- vs. low-sugar cereals. Children ate significantly more high-sugar cereals (two servings vs. approximately one in the low-sugar group). Notably, although children added more table sugar to low-sugar cereals, children in the high-sugar condition consumed almost twice as much refined sugar overall due to the sugar in the presweetened cereals. Milk and total calories consumed did not differ significantly between groups, but children in the low-sugar condition ate more fruit. Therefore, children who were offered low-sugar cereals had a more nutritious breakfast overall.
Finally, we examined cereal-purchasing patterns using Nielsen Homescan data to assess the relationship between purchasing behavior, nutritional quality, marketing strategy, and household socio-demographic characteristics (Castetbon et al., 2012). Households with at least one child purchased the most cereals. Households with children, as well as African–American and Hispanic households, purchased more unhealthy cereals compared with other households. In addition, households purchased child-targeted cereals with advertising 13 times more often than non-advertised brands, while advertised adult cereals were purchased four times as often. These results suggest that advertising to children is more effective than advertising to adults and leads to greater consumption of nutritionally poor products, especially in households with children.

Communicating the research findings

Communications represented an integral component of our public health strategy to encourage companies to improve their marketing to children. The release of Cereal FACTS in late 2009 was accompanied by extensive communications targeting three key change agents: parents (i.e. cereal-company customers), advocates, policy-makers, and other researchers. We created a website (CerealFACTS.org) featuring consumer-friendly information for parents and advocates, including interactive tools to evaluate the nutritional quality of different brands and identify healthier choices, and rankings of brands by the type of marketing. We also created a four-page summary of the report for distribution to press and policy-makers. In the accompanying public relations campaign, we focused on one primary message: ‘Cereal companies aggressively market their least nutritious products directly to children’, requesting that companies, ‘Market the more nutritious products that are already in their portfolios instead of high-sugar cereals to children’. Further, we conducted outreach to state and national policy-makers.

The results were news. Cereal FACTS received over 400 mentions in national and local TV, radio, and print, and the coverage was overwhelmingly positive (Yale Rudd Center, 2014). The media also addressed the common misperception that high-sugar cereals are healthy options for children’s breakfast. In subsequent years, we published the follow-up studies in academic journals, which also received widespread national media attention. In addition, CerealFACTS.org received over 136,000 visits. The industry responded quickly. Shortly after the report’s publication, General Mills launched its own website and public relations campaign defending its products and marketing practices (General Mills, 2014). General Mills and Post both announced further added-sugar reductions in their children’s cereals (NBC News, 2010; Skidmore, 2009). PepsiCo took down its child-targeted Cap’n Crunch website (Crunch Island). Finally, three of the four major cereal companies agreed to meet with us to discuss opportunities to improve marketing to children.

Policy-makers also paid attention. The release of Cereal FACTS coincided with industry’s announcement of its new Smart Choices labeling program (Smart Choices, 2009). The combination of our report and a NY Times article questioning whether Froot Loops should be a Smart Choice (Neuman, 2009) caught the attention of Connecticut’s Attorney General Richard Blumenthal. Mr Blumenthal announced that the Smart Choices program was ‘potentially misleading’ and initiated an investigation. One week later, the FDA announced that it also would analyze ‘misleading’ food labels and nutrition standards (without naming Smart Choices directly). On 23rd October, Smart Choices was officially put on hold pending the FDA’s findings (Ruiz, 2009).
Evaluating industry promises

The CFBAI’s annual report for 2012 cited substantial progress in food and beverage marketing to children since the Initiative’s inception in 2006, ‘The work that the CFBAI’s participants have done to change the children’s food advertising landscape shows that strong, thoughtful and transparent self-regulation can make an important difference’ (Kolish & Enright, 2013). The report highlights companies’ excellent compliance with their pledges; the enhanced nutritional content of foods advertised to children and the introduction of new category-specific uniform nutrition standards to be implemented by 2014; and the Initiative’s expansion to additional food manufacturers and one media company. The report notes that the positive trend in nutrition ‘was particularly notable in the cereal category’.

However, continued independent evaluation of food-marketing practices is necessary to determine whether meaningful change has occurred. Thus in 2012, we issued an update on the original Cereal FACTS report using the same methods and data sources as the 2009 report (Harris, Schwartz et al., 2012). This report measured changes in cereal nutrition and marketing targeted to children during the intervening three years.

In Cereal FACTS 2012, we identified several positive developments. Overall nutritional quality improved for 13 of the 16 child-targeted brands, by 10% on average. General Mills and Post discontinued their popular advergame sites (Millsberry.com and Postopia.com), resulting in an estimated 31% fewer internet advertisements viewed by children. On television, children viewed 5% fewer cereal advertisements in 2011 than in 2008 and 23% fewer vs. 2006. By comparison, children’s exposure to TV advertisements for most other packaged-food categories increased from 2008 to 2011. For example, candy advertising to children was more than doubled and advertisements for all other packaged foods and beverages increased by 6%.

On the other hand, some findings were less encouraging. Total media spending for child-targeted cereals increased by 34%; children’s exposure to TV advertising increased by 25% or more for some high-sugar cereals (Froot Loops, Reese’s Puffs, Trix, and Pebbles); Post and General Mills launched new smaller advergame websites for some child-targeted brands; and banner advertising and child visitors increased for most child-targeted websites that existed in 2008 and 2011. Kellogg also introduced the first cereal-company child-targeted advergame mobile app and a new high-sugar cereal (Krave) targeted to 12–14-year-olds.

Thus, there was some progress from 2008 to 2011, as well as evidence of new concerns. However, cereal companies’ overall strategy for marketing to children did not change substantially. In 2011, as in 2008, they continued to market their worst products directly to children. Despite improvements, cereals advertised to children contained 57% more sugar, 50% more sodium, and 52% less fiber than adult-targeted cereals; while parents remained the primary target for more nutritious ‘family’ cereals (e.g. Frosted Mini-Wheats, Multigrain Cheerios). Children continued to see more advertisements on television for cereals than any other packaged-food category (almost two advertisements per day). Finally, the majority of cereal advertisements seen by children on television promoted products consisting of one-third or more sugar. We found no evidence that companies had begun to market healthier products directly to children. Only Quaker had stopped advertising to children directly, repositioning its Cap’n Crunch cereal to adults with a nostalgia positioning.
Discussion

Rudd Center research on ready-to-eat breakfast cereals marketed in the United States was part of a national effort by researchers and advocacy groups to highlight the poor nutritional quality of children’s cereals and aggressive marketing practices targeting children (e.g. Kunkel, McKinley, & Wright, 2009; Powell et al., 2011). Government initiatives also have raised public awareness of unhealthy food marketing to children, including First Lady Michelle Obama’s White House Task Force (2010) report on food marketing to children, two FTC (2008, 2012) reports on marketing expenditures targeted to children and adolescents, and an Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (2011) recommendation for voluntary improvements in industry self-regulation of food marketing to children. As some of the most frequent advertisers to children, the cereal industry received considerable scrutiny in these reports. To their credit, cereal companies have implemented more improvements than most other food and beverage categories.

Encouragingly, parents’ attitudes about cereals appear to be changing. A Rudd Center survey conducted annually since 2009 shows an increase in parents’ perceptions that food marketing negatively affects their children’s eating habits, including common cereal-company practices such as cartoon characters on packages, in-store promotions, advergames, and internet advertising (Harris, Fleming-Milici, Sarda, & Schwartz, 2012). The percent of parents who reported feeding their children sugared cereals daily declined significantly, from 27% in 2009 to 22% in 2013 (Harris, Fleming-Milici, & Liu, 2014). Notably, in 2013 and early 2014, Kellogg, General Mills, and Post reported declines in cereal sales that have affected their earnings (Cavale, 2014; Stock, 2013). News reports cite the cost of breakfast cereals and evolving consumer tastes in favor of healthier choices and on-the-go options, as well as parents’ concerns about the high sugar content of cereals.

This case study in using scientific research to encourage industry actions to promote healthy food choices to children also demonstrates limitations of this approach. Notably, cereal companies have made only limited attempts to market low-sugar cereals to children, our primary request to them. Our meetings with the cereal companies revealed significant barriers to implementing such a major change in marketing strategy. Some appeared to remain convinced that high-sugar cereals are nutritious options for children. Others explained that dramatically altering their business model for children’s cereals, which has been enormously successful for more than 30 years, would present an untenable business risk. This potential risk is exacerbated by legitimate concerns that a company choosing to ‘do the right thing’ would lose market share if all competitors did not make similar changes.

Findings also demonstrate the limits of industry self-regulation in producing meaningful change, even in the face of considerable public scrutiny of company practices. Only one company (Quaker, owned by PepsiCo) discontinued child-targeted marketing of high-sugar cereals. Perhaps this decision was easier because PepsiCo sold just one child-targeted cereal (Cap’n Crunch). Instead, the other cereal companies agreed to somewhat reduce the sugar content of their established children’s cereal brands. General Mills and Kellogg appear to be exploring new market segments for some high-sugar cereals beyond young children.

Conversely, there is evidence that government regulation can lead to faster and more meaningful change. The threat of an investigation of Smart Choices by one state attorney general and the FDA prompted companies to quickly suspend its launch. In
addition, although cereal companies may believe that marketing low-sugar cereals to children is impossible, it is notable that both Kellogg and General Mills have developed low-sugar versions of children’s cereals (including Froot Loops, Apple Jacks, and Cinnamon Toast Crunch) to meet USDA’s new nutrition guidelines for school meals (USDA, 2012). Apparently they believe that children will eat these cereals when served in schools, yet the reformulated versions are not generally available in supermarkets. However, the preferred approach to address unhealthy food marketing to children in most countries, as in the United States, has been to defer to industry self-regulation over government regulation or legislation (Hawkes, 2007).

Conclusion

In announcing the first Cereal FACTS report, Dr. Kelly Brownell, former Director of the Rudd Center stated, ‘If there is to be any hope of protecting children from predatory marketing, either public outcry or government action will be necessary to force the companies to change’. As illustrated in this case study, further improvements in food marketing to children will require continued pressure from all directions. Big Food will likely continue promising to be part of the solution to childhood obesity and support parents’ efforts to raise healthy children. Researchers must continue to independently evaluate the accuracy of companies’ statements by examining the nutritional quality of products marketed to children and the extent and impact of child-directed marketing. Advocates must harness the research to mobilize parents and pressure companies to change. However, government policies that protect children from exposure to marketing of unhealthy products also may be necessary to ensure that food companies reform their food marketing practices to meaningfully contribute to improvements in children’s diets.

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