

# Food Marketing to Youth: Current Threats and Opportunities

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Food marketing follows youth everywhere and nearly all of it promotes unhealthy foods. We expect children to be exposed to TV commercials, company websites, and radio ads; however, food marketing is also part of the childhood landscape on billboards, school scoreboards, vending machines, packaging and promotions on store shelves, and restaurant signage.<sup>1-5</sup> Today, food companies also visit youth on their cell phones, through “word of mouth” on social media like Facebook and Twitter, and hide out as product placements in video games, television shows, and movies.<sup>1,5,6</sup> In the past, if parents limited television time and kept the TV set out of their child’s bedroom, they might be able to prevent their child from seeing the average 13 ads per day viewed, but that is no longer enough.<sup>7</sup> Every year, parents are undermined by \$1.6 billion dollars of marketing designed to circumvent their influence and convince their children to consume products like fruit drinks, soda, fast food, and sugary breakfast cereals.<sup>8</sup> Exposure to food marketing not only increases children’s preferences and requests to parents for advertised foods in the short term, but it also leads to increased intake and poor diet over time.<sup>1,5,9,10</sup>

Parents may be most surprised by how much food marketing occurs in schools. In 2006, \$186 million of food industry expenditures aimed at youth occurred in schools.<sup>8</sup> Although there has been some national progress in removing sugary drinks from schools due to a combination of strong state legislation that removes unhealthy beverages and self-regulation by the American Beverage Association,<sup>11,12</sup> food companies have not abandoned the captive student audience and the opportunity to be viewed as supportive of education. Food and beverage brands still appear on corporate sponsored curricula, vending machines, scoreboards, school buses, in-school televisions and computers, fundraising materials, and academic incentive programs.<sup>5,13,14</sup>

A range of stakeholders and strategies are needed to reduce the harm caused by child-directed food marketing. The 2006 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report on food marketing to children provided clear advice for government, schools, researchers, and parents, as well as food and beverage companies, restaurants, media and entertainment companies, industry trade groups, and those who set marketing practice standards.<sup>5</sup> Two recent papers by Kraak and colleagues found that in the 5 years following the IOM report, only moderate-to-limited progress has been made in most domains, with virtually no progress in establishing government oversight of industry practices.<sup>15,16</sup> Interestingly, one group that has made moderate progress is the food industry itself.

## Action by the Food Industry

In 2006, the Better Business Bureau created the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) to lead the food industry in self-regulation. Since its creation, the CFBAI has made progress in both the number of companies who participate and the strength of the pledges to limit marketing of unhealthy foods to children under 12 years old. Notably, the original strategy of allowing each company to define its own “better for you” standards will be replaced by 2014 with a uniform set of nutrition criteria. Similarly, CFBAI members have strengthened the criteria used to define “child-directed marketing” so that it includes traditional, digital, and social media, as well as product placement in movies primarily directed to children under 12.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these positive developments, there are still serious and significant limitations to the CFBAI standards. Definitions of child-directed advertising do not include marketing outlets such as product packag-

ing and point-of-sale promotions<sup>18</sup> and do not cover general-audience advertising on family shows watched by large numbers of children.<sup>9</sup> Child-directed websites are included, but they are defined so narrowly that even Happymeal.com would not be covered.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the largest number of child visitors is found on general-audience websites (*e.g.*, Domino's and Pizza Hut's main websites; MyCokeRewards.com), which are not covered by CFBAI pledges.<sup>3,4</sup> Finally, while CFBAI covers marketing in elementary schools, major components of marketing are exempt, including food and beverage displays, charitable fundraising activities, and public service messaging sponsored by food companies.<sup>18</sup> In sum, the CFBAI has moved the needle, but it isn't enough. Analyses of TV advertisements viewed by children since the inception of the CFBAI reveal no meaningful improvement in the nutritional quality of foods.<sup>20,21</sup> Future research will reveal whether the stronger standards in 2014 make a difference, but in the meantime, more must be done.

## Action at the Federal Level

In 2011, a federal government Interagency Working Group (IWG) proposed voluntary nutrition and marketing standards to guide industry self-regulatory efforts.<sup>22</sup> These standards were met with significant industry opposition because they were stronger than those of the CFBAI in three significant ways. First, the original IWG recommendations encouraged the food industry to consider children aged 12–17. The CFBAI responded quite negatively to any suggestion that marketing to children 12 or older should be on the table for discussion.<sup>18</sup> It is important not to acquiesce completely to the industry on this point; although there are valid arguments that our society draws a line at age 16 or 17 for other activities requiring maturity, children between 12 and 15 should still be protected from food marketing.

Second, the IWG defined “marketing” and “child-directed” more comprehensively than the CFBAI. Marketing included packaging and in-store marketing, and youth-targeted media was defined more broadly.<sup>22</sup> The CFBAI argued that the IWG marketing definitions were difficult to measure, not practical for application purposes, and so broad that they encroached upon philanthropic efforts and marketing activities directed at families and adults.<sup>18</sup> This last point raises the ethical question of how much our society is willing to give up in lost opportunity to market to adults in exchange for a safer environment for our children.

Third, the IWG nutrition recommendations were stronger than those of the CFBAI; they required the presence of “food groups to encourage” and allowed only small amounts of sodium, saturated fat, and sugar. The CFBAI argued that the IWG guidelines were too complex and difficult to apply, and would threaten the palatability of products. The palatability argument is a red herring

because the IWG guidelines do not compel companies to reformulate. Companies can keep the products as they are and simply stop marketing them to children.

In October, 2011, the FTC agreed that focus should be on children under 12, apparently abandoning efforts to protect children in middle school and early high school.<sup>23</sup> They also indicated greater agreement with the CFBAI definitions of marketing and better for your products. Given this apparent effort to compromise with industry at the federal level, advocates may want to focus in the short-term on state and local policies to reduce food marketing to children.

## Action at the State and Local Levels

There is a tremendous opportunity to regulate in-school marketing at the state, county, city, and school district levels.<sup>24</sup> For example, San Francisco's Commercial-Free Schools Act prohibits exclusive agreements with food companies, branded teaching materials, and requires Board of Education approval for all corporate sponsorships.<sup>25</sup> The Seattle Public Schools similarly have prohibited logos on all school-district property, including vending machines and playing fields, and have removed for-profit television.<sup>26</sup>

Every school district that participates in federal food programs (*e.g.*, National School Lunch Program) is required to have a written School Wellness Policy.<sup>27</sup> These policies are required to have parental input and are a powerful tool for removing and preventing marketing in schools. Policies can be enacted that prohibit: (1) the sale and advertisement of foods using brand names on school property (including curricula, vending machines, food containers, sports gear and venues); (2) fundraisers where families purchase branded items (*e.g.*, Sonic's Limeades for Learning, General Mills' Box Tops for Education); (3) incentive programs (*e.g.*, Pizza Hut BOOK IT!, which rewards reading with pizza); and (4) direct advertising on in-school TV, bus radio, and school websites.<sup>9,13,28,29</sup> School bus legislation requires immediate attention because many state legislatures have pending bills to permit the sale of advertising space on both the inside and outside of school buses.<sup>30</sup>

At the community level, there are strategies to limit children's exposure to marketing. Detroit, Palm Desert, and San Francisco established minimum distances between places that children frequent, such as schools or playgrounds, and certain food establishments or vendors.<sup>31–33</sup> Mississippi is currently considering a bill to prohibit outdoor advertising of foods and beverages sold at nearby fast food restaurants in areas such as underperforming schools.<sup>34</sup> The Berkeley Media Studies Group describes other community strategies, such as requiring restaurants and stores to place only healthy items at kids' eye level; keeping unhealthy products like candy behind the counter; and limiting in-store child-focused promotions for unhealthy foods.<sup>29</sup> Each year, government bod-

ies explore new policies, and the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity online legislation database can be used to search bills related to food marketing at any time.<sup>30</sup>

Food marketing directed at youth is pervasive, powerful, and pernicious. Parents and community leaders must become more educated on how food companies are reaching our children and the negative health consequences. Industry self-regulation has made modest changes in the foods marketed to children, and the potential for federal action at this time is unclear. Currently, the most promising strategy is to enact policies at the state and local level. Parents interested in improving the school environment can write district wellness policies that limit food marketing in schools and on school buses. Local governments can help parents keep some space between food marketing and their children in public places. Parents already have the challenging job of teaching healthy eating habits to their children; the food industry must not be permitted to undermine those efforts.

#### Author Disclosure Statement

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