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Sandra C. Jones

University of Wollongong, sandraj@uow.edu.au

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It's time for Ronald McDonald to hang up the red wig

Abstract

More than 550 international health professionals and organisations have signed a letter to McDonald's calling for the Ronald McDonald icon to be shelved.

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It's time for Ronald McDonald to hang up the red wig

AUTHOR



Sandra Jones

Professor and Director of the Centre for Health Initiatives at University of Wollongong



Children form lifetime brand associations from age two.

[flickr/AlternativeMedia](#)

More than 550 international health professionals and organisations have signed a letter to McDonald's calling for the Ronald McDonald icon to be shelved.

What's made Ronald McDonald such a successful marketing tool?

One of the biggest factors is he doesn't just represent the brand – he *is* the brand.

He's the personification of McDonald's, and that's been really effective in terms of building a really broad awareness of the organisation and really giving it a personality and a character.

Brands try really hard to create a brand personality that people can relate to – not only with children but with adults as well. Having a character like Ronald McDonald has a positive impact on people's attitudes towards that brand, and builds a long-term relationship.

A US study found that 96% of children recognised Ronald McDonald and I would say that would be even higher among adults.

At what age do children begin developing their attitudes to fast food?

There's been some research, again in the US, that looked at children's and young people's awareness of brands. What they found was that if you use a cartoon character or an animal,

or some other significant character that appeals to young people, children's brand recognition begins as early as two years of age.

This is very, very early and well before they're forming taste preferences or in a position to make any food choices on their own. They are developing recognition of the brand and developing positive attitudes towards the brand. It is incredibly influential.

A study of 63 children compared the attitudes of identical food – one set in McDonald's packaging, the other unbranded. The children, who ranged in age from three to five, were asked to compare the taste of the identical foods. What the researchers found was children strongly preferred the taste of the food and drink they thought was from McDonalds, even though it was identical.

So it didn't just influence their attitudes towards the brand, it influenced their taste perceptions. So it really shows you how powerful that branding is: even though it doesn't taste any different, they believe it does because it says it's from McDonalds.

What about adult's perception of brands and the efforts of companies to promote health, for example, KFC and breast cancer research?

This is where corporate social responsibility comes into play. Companies use their brand to promote important, positive messages – social change and health change messages. And that serves two purposes. There is an increased awareness of the health issue but it also creates a really strong, warm feeling towards the brand.

You can see this in play when you talk to many adults – they like McDonalds, they like Ronald McDonald, they like KFC. They're considered good companies because they're doing good things.

This positive support is particularly useful when these companies are up against increasing moves to regulate fast food marketing. If they are seen as being good corporate citizens, consumers won't want to cut them off at the knees and stop the good work they're doing.

But the public health people say, "If you really want to be socially responsible, you'd stop producing unhealthy food and you'd stop marketing it to children."

Even if, at two or three years old, you're not eating at McDonald's, you're still forming really positive attitudes towards the brand, and that stays with you throughout your life.

When children do start eating McDonald's it's associated with birthday parties, games, playgrounds, Happy Meal toys, and fun. Children don't go to McDonald's for the food; they go there for the experience.

If you get someone to develop a positive brand association when they're a child, there's lots of evidence to suggest that it continues as they grow into adults. So you're getting lifetime loyalty.

If it's all about the brand, does it matter what's being advertised?

If you see a brand often enough, or a product often enough, you develop a positive attitude towards it. So one of the issues around Ronald McDonald and other characters is that you don't have to promote the food. You promote the toys; you promote the character.

Children have a really positive attitude towards Ronald McDonald because he's a clown and he's fun. He's in their magazines and he's on their television channels.

Adults have a positive attitude because they still have those warm and fuzzy memories from when they were children, and there's also corporate social responsibility.

Even though there's solid evidence that this food is harmful, you get a lot of public backlash when you criticise McDonald's because they have Ronald McDonald House, they have Ronald McDonald charities: they're doing a lot of good things. And Ronald McDonald, while he may not be a person, is doing good things.

It's a tricky issue but we know that the more advertising children see, the more positive their attitudes are, and these things do have an impact on their attitudes towards food.

One of the big issues we face is kids' perception that healthy food is good for them, but unhealthy food is fun – they think it's exciting, it makes them popular, it makes them have fun.

These associations are really deeply ingrained in the way junk food is promoted and causes problems when we want them to grow up and eat healthily as adults.

How do we reduce these associations?

The industry is incredibly strong and pervasive and we have a long history in Australia of governments being reluctant to regulate, even though we have strong evidence that there are serious problems with the way products are marketed.

We still have a system in Australia of voluntary self-regulation of advertising by industry groups, and I think that is a problem. There's increasing evidence that shows self-regulation is not effective, and there really is a role for governments to regulate.

So far, the industry has stayed one step ahead. Each time the government has received a lot of pressure from the public to do something, the industry brings in a half measure. They're little steps and often they're countered by other things in the environment.

They might say things like, "We're not going to advertise during these particular children's shows but we'll still advertise on television while children are watching" or, "We're going to do less advertising on children's television but we'll still advertise in their magazines and on the internet where children will see these messages".

So other forms of marketing should also be restricted?

This is really crucial if we're going to see a change in eating patterns, and attitudes towards foods and brands.

Marketing is a lot broader than just television. It includes billboards; point-of-sale promotions; packaging; giveaways and competitions; links to popular cartoon characters and movie characters; association with community events; and fundraisers in schools.

These are all things that form positive associations and make children feel good about those foods.

These companies have done such a phenomenal job of creating a positive image and creating that whole corporate social responsibility that it makes it hard to say "Ronald McDonald is a problem".