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Abstract

Given the role that food marketing plays in influencing dietary patterns in children, the aim of this research was to explore the internet-based marketing tactics employed by eight leading Australian food companies that produce and distribute foods that are predominantly consumed by children. We examined the marketing policies and child-targeted internet marketing practices of eight major Australian food companies. Seven of the eight food companies have websites or sections of sites that are devoted to children and/or teenagers; with downloadable materials and extensive direct marketing. Of most concern was the collection of detailed personal information from children and/or teenagers, which was evident on the websites of five of the seven food companies that have such sites.

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Marketing to Children and Teens on Australian Food Company Websites

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Abstract

Given the role that food marketing plays in influencing dietary patterns in children, the aim of this research was to explore the internet-based marketing tactics employed by eight leading Australian food companies that produce and distribute foods that are predominantly consumed by children. We examined the marketing policies and child-targeted internet marketing practices of eight major Australian food companies. Seven of the eight food companies have websites or sections of sites that are devoted to children and/or teenagers; with downloadable materials and extensive direct marketing. Of most concern was the collection of detailed personal information from children and/or teenagers, which was evident on the websites of five of the seven food companies that have such sites.

Introduction

The prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in Australia is high by international standards, and the rate of increase appears to be accelerating sharply (Magarey, Daniels & Boulton, 2001; Booth, Chey, Wake et al., 2003; Norton, Dollman, Martin et al., 2006). Experts estimate that at least 17% and Australian children and adolescents are now overweight and 6% are obese (O’Dea, 2003; Norton, Dollman, Martin et al., 2006).

The intensity and frequency of children’s current exposure to commercial messages is unprecedented (Linn, 2004). Food advertising is a concern with regard to obesity because it disproportionately promotes the consumption of foods high in total calories, fat, sugar and salt, and low in nutrients (Hastings, McDermott, Angus et al., 2006; McGinnis, Gootman and Kraak, 2006). A range of promotional techniques are used to make these foods appealing to children, including bright packaging, intensely coloured and flavoured ingredients, free gifts, puzzles, competitions, collectables, and tie-ins with cartoon characters, pop stars, sporting heroes and popular children’s films (Dalmeny, 2003).

The food advertising industry claims that an industry-sponsored system of self-regulation can adequately and effectively control child-directed marketing (Kelly, 2005). Hawkes (2005) argues that statutory powers will be needed to regulate food marketing to children if the industry cannot create a media environment that is more conducive to healthier choices – including a focus on how much collective marketing children are exposed to, and if marketing convinces children to eat a product, rather than merely how they are convinced. The Australian lobby group Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC) is calling on the government for a marked reduction in the commercial promotion of foods and beverages to children under 14 years old, particularly via prohibition of television food and beverage advertising during programs with a significant child audience (CFAC, 2007).

The World Health Organisation reported on Internet regulations in 73 countries around the world and noted that, of the surveyed countries with existing e-commerce laws and self-regulatory codes covering the Internet, only 13 contain clauses on marketing to children (Hawkes, 2004). These ‘guidelines’ include things such as not soliciting children to purchase
products by mail or internet, not encouraging children to enter sites that are suitable only for adults, not exploiting children’s credulity, and encouraging children to obtain parents’ permission before entering personal data (Cowburn and Boxer, 2007). Of these 13 countries, including Australia, which have child-specific Internet marketing regulations or codes, none have clauses specific to food. Further, in Australia – as in the United States – these general guidelines on Internet marketing to children, as well as specific guidelines on data collection and links to other sites, are currently self-regulated (Hawkes, 2004).

The issue of internet advertising to children is timely given both increasing rates of Internet usage and moves to web-based markets by many food companies. Recent population data shows that 47% of Australian children between the ages of 5 and 14 accessed the internet during the 12 months to April 2000, increasing from 22% of 5-8 year olds to 72% of 12-14 year olds, with no significant differences between genders or between rural and metropolitan households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). In the US, more than two thirds of Internet sites designed for children and adolescents use advertising as their primary revenue stream (Story & French, 2004); and Internet sites in Australia targeting young children are increasingly supported by food advertising (Thompson, 2005). Arnott’s recently announced that it will cease advertising to children via ‘children’s television programs (i.e., those classified ‘C’ or ‘P’) and children’s magazines, receiving accolades from lobby groups, but said that it ‘may develop promotional websites aimed at children under 12 years of age’ (Nguyen, 2005).

Food marketers are well aware of the potential of the Internet for communicating with children; and a recent US study reported that 85% of the food products advertised during children’s television programming had a website either wholly or in part targeted at children (Moore & Rideout, 2007). From an industry perspective, one of the key benefits of the Internet as a marketing medium is the capacity, via having children register on the site, to track web usage and ‘segment visitor groups and create targeted campaigns’ and thus ‘create a more compelling online experience for children’ (Story & French, 2004).

The current research

Given the role that food marketing plays in influencing dietary patterns in children (Hastings et al., 2006; McGinnis et al., 2006), the aim of this research was to explore the internet-based marketing tactics employed by eight leading Australian food companies that produce and distribute foods that are predominantly consumed by children. This research was conducted following a similar study in the UK – the UK Which? Food Fables Report (2006) which generated considerable discussion in the UK around the need to address the range of strategies food marketers utilise to target children. Conducting such research in Australia is the first step towards moving the debate about the inappropriate targeting of unhealthy food products to children beyond the current focus on television advertising.

Method

A multi-criteria approach was employed to identify the most appropriate food companies to be examined. The criteria used to select companies included: the highest volume advertisers

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1 The new AANA Code for Advertising to Children appears to cover all forms of advertising, including Internet (although is not specifically stated) – but its only specific references to food are not encouraging an inactive lifestyle and not containing misleading nutritional information.
by total dollar advertising spend for the financial year 2005/2006; the most frequently appearing brands in the January to December 2005 period in the seven leading Australian children’s magazines; food brands appearing in the top 50 of the most recent ACNielsen Top 100 Grocery Brands Report; and food companies included in the UK Which? Food Fables report (2006). The eight food companies selected for final analysis were Cadbury, Kellogg’s, Kraft, McDonald’s, Nestle, Streets, Coca-Cola and Uncle Toby’s.

The types of food products advertised to children by each company were identified. Nutritional analyses conducted by an independent dietitian – based on levels of energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar, sodium and dietary fibre – confirmed that many of the food products are not healthy overall, and many are high in sodium, sugar and saturated fat (detailed nutritional analyses of the products can be obtained from the authors). For example, while Kellogg’s manufacture some healthy cereals, ‘Coco Pops’, ‘Nutri-Grain’, ‘Froot Loops’, and ‘Frosties’ are all 32% sugar or more. Kraft Cheesy Pops do not list calcium on the packaging nutrition information panel. While the fibre content of ‘Traditional Oats’ is 10%, the fibre content of the Uncle Tobys ‘OT’s cereal bar’ (based on the ‘goodness of oats’) is a much lower 2.4%. Note that the authors do not claim that every product on the list is ‘unhealthy’ (e.g., Vita Brits and Fromage Frais could be considered everyday core foods), nor do they claim that overall ‘unhealthy’ products do not contain any nutritional value.

The study period ran from 5 March to 27 April 2007. Internet marketing practices were identified by a manual search and coding of the company websites, including brand- and product-specific sites. Two trained research assistants coded the data, with the first author adjudicating on any discrepancies. The research assistants conducted a comprehensive search of each company’s websites, including following links (such as opening and loading games and activities) and printed all relevant pages. Following the methodology used in the UK Food Fables report, we did not use a pre-determined coding guide but rather prepared a descriptive summary of marketing practices that appeared to target children.

Results

Company policies on marketing to children and obesity prevention

Six of the eight companies had a policy or statement on marketing to children which was readily accessible via their company website (Cadbury, Kellogg’s, Uncle Toby’s/Nestle, Coca-Cola and Streets (UniLever)). No details of the marketing policies of Kraft or McDonald’s were accessible via their website or made available when we contacted the companies.

Cadbury state that they will not advertise where children under the age of eight are likely to be the majority of the audience; Coca-Cola that they do not market to children under 12; and Kellogg’s and Nestle/Uncle Toby’s that they comply with children’s advertising guidelines in the AANA Code. The Cadbury Code of Practice includes not seeking to gain the address or other personal details of a child or to email children.

Internet marketing strategies that target children

All of the companies have websites or sections of sites that are devoted to children (with the exception of the Streets website which is targeted largely at young adults). Websites usually
present activities themed around the products and product characters (from simple puzzles and branded pictures which can be printed and coloured-in to interactive skill-based games), e.g., the main Nestle website includes a link to the ‘Milkybar’ ‘Rustle Up’ game that requires finding the 10 hidden Milkybars in a picture; and the ‘design your own Milo gear’ activity. “Kids Recipes” for cooking with Rice Bubbles are provided on the Kellogg’s page. The Uncle Tobys Roll-ups website features personalisation options where children can select their favourite Fruba character and view their themed profile page. On the main Kellogg’s page, there are also solutions to the puzzles and games printed on the cereal boxes.

Free downloads are common: the Natural Confectionary Company (TNCC) site by Cadbury has downloadable screensavers and backgrounds; Kraft homepage downloads include a television commercial that can be downloaded and saved - designed around Moo, the Kraft Dairy Bites mascot. The child-targeted site for the Uncle Tobys Roll-Up product line offers downloadable party invites, door hangers, desk top wall papers and posters which feature the Frubas.

Direct advertising is evident, such as in the “KidsChoice” section of the McDonald’s website which features the food and toys currently offered in a McDonald’s Happy Meal and upcoming toys. Nutritional statements about products are present such as the following from the Kellogg’s site: “Coco Pops® has no artificial colours, no preservatives and a mix of eight essential vitamins and minerals. Coco Pops® is a good source of vitamins B1, B2 and Niacin, which help release energy from food… It provides iron, zinc and folate, plus calcium for strong bones and vitamin C for healthy teeth and gums.”

Websites present opportunities for the company to gather personal contact details from the children. The Nestle product specific Noodolbot website allows children to become members by providing their name, age, gender, country. address, email address, home phone number and mobile number. In a nod to parental consent they are also requested to “check with your parental beings that it is ok for you to be here and to receive messages from us...”. The Uncle Tobys Roll-Up page invites children to “join Frubalia”, so they can become a Fruba and keep track of games scores etc. – in order to join they need to provide their name, date of birth, email, state of residence and gender. The “Ronald” section of the McDonald’s website which offers children the opportunity to write to Ronald so he can write back to them. On the Kellogg’s product specific Coco Pops website, children are invited to “register in Cocoland” so they can “do cool things, like saving your high scores and collecting cool Coco cards.” In order to register, they need to provide their name, date of birth (optional) and an email address; and are asked to “please get one of your parents to tick here if they agree that you can get these emails.”

Some sites also have spaces for parents to download kids activities, bedtime stories, party invitations and the like – all with product and company themes and characters, e.g., the main Cadbury company website “Party Pals” link, and the Nestle Nesquik site which has two ‘doors’: one for parents and the other for ‘kids only’.

Targeting teens

We also identified a number of marketing strategies targeting teens, a detailed examination of which is beyond the scope of this paper. These included the use of music associations (such as music downloads and MP3 promotions); sporting associations (such as extreme sports challenges and opportunities to create your own sporting footage and upload it to the
website); an emphasis on peer acceptance and approval; and the use of viral marketing and branded pages on social network sites.

Discussion

Literature tells us that childhood obesity has negative health consequences and leads to poorer quality of life, and also that food marketing can affect children’s food preferences, purchase requests and consumption, and is a probable causal factor in the problem of obesity. That the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and teenagers takes place in a largely unregulated environment should be of genuine societal concern. Further, most of these food companies have carefully worded policies and statements that aim to assure the Australian public that marketing activities engaged in by our food companies are thoughtful and responsible. This is despite all companies engaging in the use of marketing tricks and strategies targeted at influencing the food beliefs, attitudes and preferences of children and teenagers – suggesting that the policies represent more of an interest in being seen to do the right thing rather than a genuine commitment to improve their marketing practices.

Perhaps the most blatant, and concerning, of these strategies is the collection of detailed personal information from children and/or teenagers, which was evident on the websites of five of the eight food companies we analysed. The majority of the child-targeted sites provided only very token attempts at ensuring that parents consented to their children providing this information – such as asking them to ‘check with your parents’ or to tick a box to confirm that their parents approved. This was despite collecting large quantities of personal information that many parents may find concerning (including home addresses and telephone numbers). Some companies, such as Coca-Cola, go a step further by collecting detailed personal information about interests, spending patterns and Internet use.

Another tactic that was evident on many of the sites was the use of WOM or viral techniques to encourage young people to distribute the marketing messages to their friends or, in some cases, pass on their friends’ contact details to the company.

In April 2008 the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) announced ‘significant changes’ to its advertising to children code which included: the expansion of the definition of ‘advertising’ to capture ‘marketing communications’ (which includes product websites targeted primarily at children), are subject to the Code; and a strengthening of the privacy provision to ensure parental knowledge and approval is granted before a child supplies personal information in response to advertising/marketing communications targeted at children. However, the Code was silent on how these new provisions will be implemented and monitored and, importantly, what processes food companies will be required to follow to ensure parental consent. It will be interesting to see whether the changes to the Code result in any significant improvements to current child-targeted marketing practices.

Acknowledgement

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References


