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Kids' techno tastebuds in junk food fight

Simon Canning

ANTI-OBESITY campaigners have opened up a new front in the war on junk food advertising, calling on the federal government to step in and regulate marketing in emerging media including the internet and mobile phones.

Research conducted by the Centre for Behavioral Research in Cancer found the vast majority of consumers wanted mandatory restrictions imposed on SMS, email, web and pay-TV marketing to children, saying the media were being used as a loophole by marketers that have scaled back their presence on free-to-air TV.

Jane Martin, senior policy adviser to the Obesity Policy Coalition, said that with the number of children owning mobile phones, using the internet and watching pay-TV on the increase, marketers were finding new ways to promote their products.

"Fearing greater restriction of advertising on free-to-air TV, junk food companies are increasingly looking to other, less regulated, avenues," Ms Martin said.

"Our research shows there is

overwhelming support for the government to also crack down on these forms of marketing."

Ms Martin said the use of games on websites was particularly concerning. The survey found 91 per cent of consumers questioned wanted the government to regulate the use of games or competitions on websites.

"Many companies are using the premise of education or game-playing to lure children to their sites so they can promote their products," she said.

"The child is actually engaging with the brand without really knowing, and they are also encouraging repeat visits."

Fast food deny they are targeting children with their marketing messages, but Ms Martin cited a Hungry Jacks website that asks kids to join a club that was only open to children aged under 12.

"These technologies are very direct and very targeted," she said. "These are integrated campaigns that are utilising these techniques and they are also very cheap; much cheaper than TV."

The survey found that 81 per cent of respondents wanted a complete ban on SMS or email advertising by junk food marketers, while 91 per cent were in favour of government regulation.

It also called for greater regulation of pay-TV advertising aimed at children.

"Junk food advertising on pay or subscription channels, particularly those popular with children, is largely unregulated," she said.

"However, 87 per cent of consumers want the government to take action to regulate junk food advertising in this medium."

The call for greater regulation of food advertising to children comes as marketers battle for the right to continue to advertise their products on another front: a National Preventative Health Task Force recommendation last week reportedly called for a ban of alcohol sponsorship in sport.

Sporting code executives have warned that such a move would wipe \$300 million from their revenues and cripple both professional and amateur sport.