



Children taking the bait in junk food marketing

By Tamara McLean

Australia's leading junk food manufacturers have been lambasted for their "trickery" and aggressive marketing to children in a new report calling for an overhaul of advertising regulations.

An independent review commissioned by the Cancer Council Australia has uncovered what researchers describe as extensive promotion of unhealthy products directly to children and manipulative methods to link them with health and fitness.

The report analyses the public policy statements of eight of the nation's largest food companies.

It found many pledged but failed to deliver on their commitment to responsible marketing to children.

Lead author Professor Sandra Jones, from the University of Wollongong, said, "Our findings suggest that, despite these policies, most of the products promoted to children – and recalled by children – were those high in sugar, fat and salt."

The Cancer Council is calling for regulation of junk food marketing to children to try to stem an expected surge in obesity-related cancers.

However, manufacturers say food advertising has been proven to have little bearing on obesity and say the report is designed to influence the results of the Australian Communication and Media Authority review into food advertising.

The report found Cadbury, Kellogg's, Kraft, McDonald's, Nestle, Streets and Uncle Toby's marketed directly to children. Coca-Cola "aggressively" targeted teenagers.

Cadbury was found to make heavy use of fantasy themes to sell its chocolate, while Natural Confectionery Company "introduced the idea of 'healthy lollies'".

Kraft and Nestle were criticised for "cute" characters on packaging designed to entice children, while McDonald's focused on collectable toys that encouraged repeat visits.

Kellogg's, Nestle and Uncle Toby's linked their products to sports events and athletes to "imply that consumption increases energy levels and physical performance".

The chairman of the Cancer Council's nutrition and physical activity committee, Terry Slevin, said the report showed the extent to which companies advertised to children, rather than to their parents.

"Use of online games, quizzes, competitions, cartoon characters, print advertising, premium prizes, toys and other marketing trickery makes promotion of unhealthy food a complex web that often goes undetected by parents who are doing their best to encourage healthy eating," he said.

"And where advertising is apparently targeted at parents, the emphasis is often on an association with health and fitness, even though in most cases the products are high in sugar, saturated fats and salt."

He called on the Federal Government to introduce marketing restrictions aimed at stopping future increases in the six potentially fatal cancers linked to obesity.

Australian Association of National Advertisers executive director Collin Segelov said there was no "trickery" being employed, "just advertising and marketing communication appropriate to a democratic, free-enterprise society".

AAP



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

KRAFT:

Actively promotes its products as healthy food overall to parents by only highlighting certain aspects of the nutritional value; features cute characters on packaging and their website pages for kids imply that their products should be consumed regularly by children and as a substitute for fresh fruit or regular cheese.

KELLOGG'S:

Actively promotes its products as healthy food overall to parents by only highlighting certain aspects of the nutritional value; implies that consumption of the products increases energy levels and physical performance; relies on brand-specific cartoon characters designed to appeal to children and include give-aways in the products.

NESTLE:

Implies that consumption of the products increases energy levels and physical performance; packages the same product with different characters to develop brand loyalty; Nestle's Milo is clearly associated with sport and healthy lifestyles, despite its high sugar content.

UNCLE TOBY'S:

Implies that consumption of products increases energy levels and physical performance; uses appealing young sporting celebrities in product and corporate promotions; has a website for its Roll-Up product, which allows children to join a mailing list.

CADBURY:

Makes heavy use of fantasy themes that are highly appealing to children; a lot of products are affiliated with cartoon characters including Caramello Koala and Freddo Frog; has named a product in its Natural Confectionery Company line after the famous Australian cartoon character Blinky Bill.

COCA-COLA:

Is perceived as having a desirable social image among teenagers, and the Coca-Cola website creates a positive association with the brand; its new product, Mother energy drink, promotes an unhealthy product as natural, via drug-related associations; targets young adults by placing print advertisements in magazines for teenagers.

MCDONALD'S:

Heavily targets children, with marketing focused on the collectible toys rather than on the foods themselves; offers a range of "bundled" products where the purchase of a group of menu items is cheaper than the combined price of the individual items; had a series of safety advertisements targeted at children featuring McDonald's characters, including Ronald McDonald.

STREETS:

Promotes to children using cartoon characters; has associations with celebrities, and games and quizzes feature in its print advertising; advertisements in children's magazines are often presented as content and may not be perceived as advertising by children.