



Advertising dolled up as nostalgia takes the biscuit

Fine lines are making a joke of junk food advertising standards, writes **Deborah Snow**.

On the TV screen a giant blue-eyed doll with blonde pigtailed and a smile wobbles her way down a street crowded with families. Waving to children as she passes, she blows bubbles from an Allen's sweets bag which magically become lollies raining down on an eager populace.

Who is this ad targeted at? Children, to whet their appetites for Allen's sweets? Or is it a sop to adult nostalgia?

Responding to a complaint, the manufacturer Nestle claimed the latter. It told the Advertising Standards Bureau that the ad was "created for its adult audience ... to trigger for them happy memories of their childhood, reminding them of bright, happy, good times ... and to capture the wonderment of a parade".

Oh, and the doll? "A timeless childhood object which adults could relate with their childhood... [not] a modern-day children's object ... to relate with children of today."

Many might regard the reasoning as specious; the bureau accepted it.

The Allen's ad was cited this week in a report released by the Australian Communications and Media Author-

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ity, as the media watchdog grappled again with the vexed question of marketing junk food to children.

Fine distinctions between audience types carry huge importance under the industry's own, narrowly defined codes, because if an ad is not deemed to be "primarily" aimed at children, then it doesn't have to adhere to tighter restrictions on advertising unhealthy food.

It's the kind of hair-splitting that has critics like Jane Martin from the Obesity Prevention Coalition fuming. "Children can relate to that ad. To say it's about *primarily* invoking nostalgia in adults, that's just a cop-out," she argues.

Another example cited in the authority's report dissects an ad showing two young boys playing with Oreo biscuits and glasses of milk.

Again, direct appeal to children was deemed purely incidental. The advertiser told the Advertising Standards Bureau the ad was designed for mothers, a "light-hearted portrayal of the way kids make games out of everyday objects and scenarios." The bureau agreed.

Kathy Chapman of Cancer Council NSW says findings like this show the fast-food and snack industry cannot be trusted to self-regulate.

"It just shows they are taking only little fairy steps, trying to be seen as good corporate citizens but not doing anything to reduce the number of ads that children are seeing of these unhealthy foods," she argues.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council, which represents snack food manufacturers, disagrees. It introduced voluntary codes nearly two years ago and maintains that self-regulation is working. It says junk food ads in time slots designated as "children's TV" are disappearing.

But again, critics take issue with the definition of children's TV.

The anti-obesity lobby points out the most popular programs for the five to 12 age bracket – such as *The Simpsons*, *Junior MasterChef* and *Modern Family* – are deemed "family" viewing because children make up less than half their total audience, which exempts them from classification as children's programming.

A Sydney University epidemiologist, Professor Bruce Neal, says such a narrow definition covers a small proportion of the time that children

actually watch TV. "What do I think the industry is doing? I think they're doing the bare minimum to try and keep regulation from the door."

Rather than pull the advertisers into line, the authority has washed its hands of the problem.

Its report this week found the industry's voluntary codes to cut back marketing junk food to children had been of "unclear" impact. Yet rather than investigate further, it has opted to dump the problem at the feet of a newly formed body, the Australian National Preventive Health Agency.

ANPHA, as the new body is called, has more in common with health experts than the media watchdog, but it has far fewer teeth.

"I think [the authority] has completely ducked their responsibility," says the director of the Public Health Advocacy Institute, Professor Mike Daube. "To handball it to ANPHA, which has got a whole lot of other roles as well and no statutory powers ... leaves biblical handwashing in the shade."

The Food and Grocery Council remains adamant there is no evidence linking food advertising to obesity.

Daube despairs of any tougher action any time soon. In a recent edition of the West Australian medical journal *Medicus* he wrote it was "hard to escape the conclusion that despite good intentions and a large and growing health and community problem, action to reduce overweight and obesity faces so many obstacles that we might as well give up".

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Trick or treat ... the dolly with the lollies, from the Allen's advertisement.