



Cartoons draw calls for a ban

By Deborah Gough

Cartoon characters like the Paddle Pop Lion and Freddo Frog are being used increasingly across media platforms to lure children to unhealthy foods and should be banned, a health organisation has said.

While falling short of calling for "plain packaging" on sugary and fatty foods, the Obesity Policy Coalition said the federal government should ban marketers from using cartoon characters and giveaway toys to promote junk and unhealthy foods.

Coalition spokesman Professor Boyd Swinburn said cartoon characters were the common factor used to draw children to fattening foods and drinks but companies were now using free online games, apps, movies and other new media to promote unhealthy food.

"Cartoon characters and toy

giveaways are certainly the hook used to draw children in," he said.

"It is a huge battle, akin to the battle with tobacco over plain packaging."

Professor Swinburn said self-regulation had failed because some companies refused to sign up to industry codes and loopholes often allowed companies to escape criticism.

A Deakin University senior lecturer, Paul Harrison, said the food industry had allowed stricter rules on traditional advertising – whose power is on the wane – while developing online games, movies, product giveaways and health sponsorships.

These platforms "flew under the radar" of regulators, Dr Harrison said.

In *Advances in Communication Research to Reduce Childhood*

Obesity, released this month, Dr Harrison looked at the integrated marketing campaigns used for Nutri-Grain, Freddo Frogs and McDonald's Happy Meals and how they appealed to children.

He said marketers often cleverly used no logos to avoid criticism, but instead used characters and colours associated with their products.

"Children are not stupid. They can work out the association between a character and a product from a very young age, even if they are not together at the time," he said.

On one website, children were encouraged to create an avatar to interact with Freddo Frog. "These companies try to say that they are not advertising to children, but of course they are," Dr Harrison said.