

SIX TRICKS USED TO SELL JUNK FOOD¹

Melissa Breyer[©]

The nation's largest producer of baby carrots launched an advertising campaign earlier this year positioning baby carrots as the extreme new junk food. The send-up includes all the bells and whistles you might expect from the worst of seductive junk-food advertisers, replete with fancy new "junk food packaging." It's hilarious, but one has to wonder what this says about the efficacy of junk-food marketing. As in, if carrots are adopting these tactics, something must be working. And working well! According to the Federal Trade Commission, food makers spend \$1.6 billion annually to reach children through advertising; while obesity statistics show that 34 percent of adults and 17 percent of children are now classified as obese.

While many of the large-scale food production companies are leaning toward wellness initiatives, is the food industry really moving in the right direction, or are those just marketing ruses? Ultimately, makers of junk food have goals to meet and shareholders to please—can they really be spending millions of dollars trying to encourage people to eat less of their products? Me thinks, a big, fat, salty, sugary "no." Here are some of the tricks the junk food industry uses to subtly sway us into buying their wares.

1. Misleading labels

You'd think with all the regulations we have that labeling would be pretty straightforward—but if there's a workaround, there's a marketing department that will find it. Here are a few labeling tricks to look for.

- **Ingredients:** This is a tricky one, duping even the savviest of label scourers. Most of us know that ingredients are listed in order from most to least and we'll look to see where, say, sugars or fats are listed in the order. But, ingredient groups aren't required to be listed together. So, for example, an item could contain corn syrup, cane sugar, and fructose in seemingly minor quantities toward the bottom of the list—but if you combined them together in a general group of "sugar," they quickly move to the top.
- **"Made With Whole Grains:"** We keep hearing about the importance of eating whole grains, but just because a product touts that it is "made with" or "contains" whole grains doesn't mean that whole grains make up the bulk of it. Many grain-based junk food items are predominantly made with refined grains, with a spattering of whole grains thrown in for labeling credibility. Check to see where on the ingredient list the word "whole" is. If the first ingredient is "whole" wheat flour (or other grain), you're in luck. If it's way down the list, you've been punked.
- **Serving Size:** Serving size has nothing to do with the ingredients list, but it can have a dramatic effect on the nutrition panel. By divvying up a serving into several smaller servings, the less desirable nutritional elements (calories, sodium, fat, sugar, etc) are significantly reduced.

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2. Suggestive science

When the Children's Hospital of Boston performed a comprehensive review of food-industry sponsored studies of soft drinks, they found that the likelihood of conclusions favorable to the industry was higher among research sponsored by the food industry than those studies that received no industry funding. "If a study is funded by the industry, it may be closer to advertising than science," the author of the study says. The moral? Take studies touted by food companies with a grain of salt.

3. Enticing prices

If a product is promoted by its sheer, extreme size or the awesomeness of the deal, you might be witnessing the widely practiced pricing strategy known as "volume discounts." Two burgers for a buck? A pillowcase-size bag of chips for a few cents more? A cup of soda fit for a horse? It's a kind of hit-you-over-the-head sales tactic wherein you feel hard-pressed to pass up the bargain, even if it means opting for the less-healthy choice, and you ultimately end up buying more. When faced with this type of "value" remember that penny for penny, you will usually get more nutrition from spending more for a healthy food.

4. Marketing to children

The food industry understands that children are a very lucrative market. Kids in the U.S. have terrific purchasing power: children between 3 and 11 years old bought or influenced the purchase of \$18 billion worth of products and entertainment in 2005. Beginning in the early 1990s, food manufacturers launched new product categories, including "fun foods"—colored ketchup anyone?—designed to take advantage of children's increased spending power and independence. According to the Institute of Medicine, between 1994 and 2004 there were "3,936 new food products and 511 new beverage products targeted to children and youth."

Here's what to pay attention to:

- Celebrities, cartoon characters, movie tie-ins, toys: A study by the Rudd Center of Food Policy at Yale found that cross-promotion with characters, celebrities, toys and movie giveaways targeted at children and teens increased by 78 percent from 2006 to 2008—and only 18 percent of products examined met accepted nutrition standards for foods sold to youth.
- Novelty food shape or packaging: Can you say cartoon-character shaped pasta or day-glo yogurt in a squeeze tube? \$3 billion annually goes to packaging designed for children. If you have ever seen a 3-year old faced with the choice between a wholesome cereal in a plain yellow box versus a bright rainbow box emblazoned with princesses, I think you'll know that that \$3 billion is being spent effectively.
- Sponsorship of cultural, community, or educational events: Ronald McDonald visits schools to promote literacy, Coke and Pepsi have in-school fitness programs. The message they bring is, on the surface, great—but the subtext (eat McDonalds, drink Coke) is often the more-enduring lesson.
- Digital media: Cell phones, mobile music devices, broadband video, instant messaging, videogames, and virtual three-dimensional worlds have run amok with junk food marketing campaigns. Especially watch out for online "advergames"—interactive games in

which a company's product or brand characters are featured, functioning as both a game and an advertisement in one—and designed to, essentially, have your child live in a junk food ad for a few hours.

5. Manipulative visibility

It's not pure chance that junk food advertising ends up in places where there are children. Look for advertising and any kind of branding, even just small logos, in nurseries, pre-school centers, schools, children's clubs, playgrounds, sports facilities, family and child clinics, and pediatric offices. It's everywhere!

Also notice where junk food is positioned in stores. You will find loads of it placed in the highest visibility shelves and locations. Food companies often pay for these locations—like the end of aisles and near the checkout.

6. Marketing to parents

Children may respond to cartoon characters, but kids aren't the only demographic whose psyche can be enticed. Pay attention to images of a happy family with a slogan such as 'wanting the best for your family.' It's the parent equivalent of a Sponge Bob package; the irresistible draw. If you choose the other product, you don't want the best for your family—bad you! Look for marketing towards moms with emotive messages suggesting that the company is the parents' ally; that using the product will make you a better parent, or in any way suggests a parent or adult who purchases such a food or beverage for a child is a better, more intelligent or a more generous parent than one who does not do so.