**SStudy SSlams Industry SSelf-Regulation and Kids'**

**MMarketing**

**RRobert Wood Johnson Foundation Charges Fast**

**FFeeders Ignored Their Pledges**

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A new study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation charges that fast-food companies have not adhered to the food industry's self-regulation guidelines when it comes to marketing to kids.

The study, released Wednesday and dubbed "How Television Fast-Food Marketing Aimed at Children Compares with Adult Advertisements," said that fast-food companies tend to emphasize toy giveaways and movie tie-ins when marketing to kids on TV rather than focus on the food -- a practice that the study's authors said go against industry self-regulation guidelines set by the Children's Advertising Review Unit.

"Fast-food companies use free toys and popular movies to appeal to kids, and their ads are much more focused on promotions, brands, and logos—not on the food," said James Sargent, professor of pediatrics at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth and lead author of the study, in a

statement. "These are techniques that the companies' own self-regulatory body calls potentially misleading."

In the hotseat for the study are McDonald's and Burger King, the two restaurant chains that are part of the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. CFBAI, formed in

2006, is a voluntary program run by the Better Business Bureau that includes 17 food and beverage companies that have pledged to devote 100% of their child-directed advertising to healthier foods and lifestyles, or to not advertise to kids at all.

The study, which focuses on ads that aired from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010, claims that

99% of the ads for kids meals that aired during the sample time were attributable to

McDonald's and Burger King -- McDonald's accounted for 70%, and Burger King, 29%. Of all the fast-food ads that aired aimed at kids, 79% of them ran on four channels:

Cartoon Network (32.3%), Nickelodeon (18.3%), Disney XD (16.2%) and Nicktoons

(12.4%).

CCARU guiddelines

The study charges that both companies pledged to abide by marketing guidelines set by CARU, but did not follow them. The guidelines include a provision that says companies participating in CFBAI should make the actual food -- not toys or other promotions -- the primary focus of ads directed at kids. "Since children have difficulty distinguishing product from premium, advertising that contains a premium message should focus the child's attention primarily on the product and make the premium message clearly secondary," according to CARU's guidelines.

According to the study, "Although some of the foods presented in children's meals could be characterized as 'healthy,' little emphasis was placed on actually showing the food compared with adult advertisements from the same companies, and toy premiums and tie-ins were presented prominently in both the visual and audio elements of these advertisements. We conclude that these companies did not follow through with their self-regulatory promises during the study period."

Images of food packaging -- as opposed to the food itself -- were present in 88% of ads directed at kids, versus 23% of ads aimed at adults, the study found. "If the purpose is to advertise the food [to kids], that's not what we saw," said Anna Adachi-Mejia, co-author of the study and assistant professor at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College. She said that the study showed that fast-food companies were showing

packaging, toys, movie tie-ins and logos so kids would build a brand association, creating

"reasons other than food to go there."

OObesity epidemic

At the heart of this issue is the growing obesity epidemic, particularly in kids -- a problem that has no end in sight. Food and beverage marketers have been under fire for years for contributing to the obesity epidemic by marketing unhealthy products to kids. Consumer advocacy groups have long said that the elimination of kid-targeted marketing of unhealthy food and drinks could at least help curb the crisis.

Food and beverage marketers are standing by their self-regulating practices and take issue with the latest study. "Both McDonald's and Burger King have honored their commitments to CFBAI," said Elaine Kolish, director of CFBAI, in a statement. "Our independent monitoring shows that, as promised, both have limited their child-directed

advertising to meals meeting meaningful nutrition criteria. Both also have made improvements in the kid's meals they advertise to children compared to 2006, before CFBAI was launched."

"Burger King is committed to responsible marketing practices to children, and we disagree with the results of the study," said a spokesman for Burger King. "We work closely with CARU and CFBAI to make sure that our advertising properly balances the depiction of premiums and our pledge compliant kids meals."

"As a family brand, we take our commitment to responsible communication with our younger customers seriously," said a spokeswoman for McDonald's USA in a statement. "The study in question in based on data that is three years old and does not accurately reflect not our current advertising nor our commitment to promoting balanced choices, nutrition and active lifestyles in 100% of our marketing communications to children."

RRevamped kids meals

McDonald's has made strides in the last two years. Bowing to increased pressure for its kids offerings, in 2011 it revamped its kids meals to automatically include both a quarter cup of apple slices and a smaller size french fries (1.1 ounces), along with the choice of a hamburger, cheeseburger or Chicken McNuggets, and choice of beverage, including

fat-free chocolate milk and 1% low-fat milk.

In March 2012, McDonald's launch a Happy Meal campaign with a focus on nutrition. The campaign appeared to be a follow up to a nutrition declaration the company made around the time it unveiled the revamped Happy Meal that said it would commit 100% of its natioanl kids communications to promote nutritional messages. Ads for the Happy Meal that that have run this year include Ronald McDonald and product shots of the apple slices and milk, along with the well-recognized Happy Meal packaging.

The study notes that it cannot comment on any the content of children's ads after the sample time frame, which ended in June 2010. But Ms. Adachi-Mejia, said that even if chains like McDonald's are currently featuring healthier fare in its ads, "there's this issue of unintended consequences. If there's less fries, that's great, but they're still there." She added that when consumers, especially kids, are seeing healthier messaging such as apples or a theme of nutrition linked with items like fries that are historically considered unhealthy, "I'm not sure that's going to help."

FFTC report

The Federal Trade Commission in December issued a report that gauged the industry's progress since 2006, when CFBAI launched. The FTC found that from 2006 to 2009, ad

spending was down 19.5%, with most of that drop coming from decreased spending on TV ads aimed at kids. But simultaneously, food companies stepped up their spending to market to kids and teens in online, mobile, and viral marketing, by 50%, the report found.

The FTC report also said that "industry self-regulation resulted in modest nutritional improvements from 2006 to 2009 within specific food categories heavily marketed to youth, such as cereals, drinks, and fast food kids' meals."

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1. How do fast food restaurants market to kids?
2. Which fast food restaurant mentioned do you think is the most guilty at not marketing their food as healthy? How and why?
3. Which fast food restaurant do you think is the best at marketing their food to kids? Give an example.
4. Give an example of how food packaging (rather than the food itself) is marketed to kids.
5. Do you think fast food restaurants are partly responsible for the childhood obesity epidemic? Why or why not?
6. Give examples of how McDonald’s and Burger King have stepped up their efforts to market healthier food for kids.
7. How can fast food restaurants do even more to promote healthy eating at their establishments?
8. If you were to write a commercial for one of these restaurants where you were to promote healthy food choices for kids, what points would you include in your script?