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Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children

Concerned about the high rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, policy-makers in Congress, the Federal Trade Commission, and agencies such as the Institute of Medicine have explored a variety of potential contributing factors, including the marketing and advertising of food products to children. One area where policymakers have expressed interest, but have also noted a lack of publicly available data, is the food advertising targeted to children. In order to help fill this gap, the Kaiser Family Foundation, "The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 19th July 2006", released the first comprehensive analysis of the nature and scope of online food advertising to children, to help inform the decision making process of policymakers, advocates, and industry.

Methods

The study was designed by staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation in collaboration with Elizabeth Moore, Ph.D., associate professor of marketing at the University of Notre Dame. Professor Moore and her colleagues collected and analyzed the data, and she authored the report to the Foundation, on the findings. All websites were accessed and content was coded during the period from June through November 2005.

Using data from Competitive Media Reports, researchers identified the top food brands advertised online and then searched for corporate or brand websites for these food products. Any sites offering advergaming and the online marketing of Food to Children identified in the study were included in the study. A total of 96 brands were identified through this process. Websites for these brands were included in the study if they had content that addressed children age 12 and under. In most cases, these were websites whose primary audience was children; in some cases, the primary audience appeared to be other teens or all ages, with content or separate sections likely to appeal to children. Only websites sponsored by a company with advertising revenue really looked like, there can’t be effective oversight or policymaking, whether by the industry or by government, she noted. The advertising industry has announced that it is developing more detailed voluntary guidelines for online marketing to children, expected to be released shortly.

The study included detailed analysis of 77 websites, including more than 4,000 unique web pages. Based on data from Nielsen NetRatings, these sites received more than 12.2 million visits from children ages 2-11 in the second quarter of 2005.

Advergaming

About three-quarters (73%) of the websites in the study included advergaming, ranging from one to more than 60 games per site. In total, the sites in the study contained 546 games featuring one or more food brands, such as the Chips Ahoy Girl Scout Shootout, Chuck E. Cheese's Tae Tae Too, the M&M's Trivia Game, and the Pop-Tart Slam. For example, on Kellogg's' FrootLoop site children can "race against time while collecting delicious Kellogg's cereal", and at the Lucky Charms site they can play Magic's Adventure and "learn the powers of all eight Lucky Charms cereals". To encourage additional time spent at the website, many of the games promote report playing (71%) offer multiple levels of play (45%), or suggest other games the visitor might enjoy (22%).

Viral marketing

Almost two-thirds (64%) of the sites in the study use viral marketing, in which children are encouraged to send emails to their friends about a product, or invite them to visit the company's website. For example, at julycfruit.com users were encouraged to "send a friend this fruitylicious site" and told that if they "send this site to 5 friends" they would get a code that could then be used to access additional features. Other sites encourage young users to invite friends to help them "redeem" their online "rooms," challenge them to play an advergame on the site, or send them an "e-card" featuring the company's brand or spokescharacter. For example, on Kinder's HollowTree website, children are invited to send a friend some "Elfin Magic" in a birthday email.

Television Advertising

Half (53%) of all sites in the study have television commercials available for viewing. On Kellogg's' Frootloop site, children can earn stamps by viewing commercials in the 'beater.' On the Lucky Charrms and Frootloop sites, students "webisode" unveil animated stories featuring brand characters and products. On Skitch.com, users are told they can watch the ads "ever and over right now! instead of having to wait for them to appear on TV.

Nutrition Information

Half of sites (53%) included nutritional information such as that found on a product label, and 44% included some type of nutritional claim, such as "good source of vitamins and minerals."

Twenty-seven percent of all sites have information about eating a healthy diet, such as the number of servings of fruits and vegetables that should be eaten daily. For example, on Nestle's Healthy Kids website, food.nestle.com included such features as "facts about nutrition" and "decipher the secrets of the food Pyramid.

Incentives for Product Purchases

Almost four in ten sites (38%) have incentives for the user to purchase food so they can collect brand points or stamps that they can then exchange for premiums (such as gaining access to new games or purchasing brand-related clothing). For example, children are encouraged to purchase specially-marketed packages of bubble tape games that enter the codes online to get free Nintendo game titles.

Memberships, Registration, and Marketing Research

One in four (25%) sites offer a "membership" opportunity for children age 12 or younger. Children who sign up on websites may be proactively informed about new brands, exclusive offers, and new television commercials available for viewing. Thirteen percent require parental permission, and 12% do not.

Thirty percent of sites include polls or quizzes, some of which were used to ask visitors their opinions on products or brand-related items. For example, on castric.com, visitors are asked to vote for "the dollar menu item you crave the most" and for "your favorite McDonald's 53 icon character.

Extending the Online Experience Offline

Three out of four (76%) websites studied offered at least one "extra" brand-related option for children, such as access soar or wallpaper for a child's computer, printable coloring pages, branded CD covers, or brand logo and characters that can "live" on the child's computer desktop.

Educational Information

Thirty-five percent of sites offer some type of educational content, ranging from historical facts about dinosaurs to astronomy, sports or geography. A third (33%) of sites include what the study has dubbed "advergaming," a combination of advertising and education, such as using a brand character to present educational topics, or covering topics such as the history of how chocolate is made on hershey.com

Website Protections For Children

Almost 9% of the sites in the study provided some information specifically labeled for parents, such as what type of information is to be collected from children (the site), legal disclaimers (8%), a "contact us" (7%), statements about the use of "cookies" (6%), and statements of compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) (4%), or adherence to Children's Advertising Review Unit's (CARU) guidelines (46%).

On all websites where personal data was required (beyond a first name, screen name or email address for one-time use), mechanisms were in place to ensure that children age 12 and under did not solicit any information without parental permission.

Although CARU's guidelines state that "advertising content should be clearly identifiable as such" on product-driven websites, only 18% of the websites studied included any kind of "ad break" or other notice to children that the content on the site included advertising.

Sweepstakes & Promotions

Two-thirds (65%) of all brands in the study have promotions in which children may participate in some way. They include sweepstakes (such as the chance to win a Nintendo Game Cube system on bubbletape.com or a trip to Nickelodeon on pbgoldfish.com), or the chance to get free merchandise related to the food product.