

Food Marketing to Children: The Socialization of Food Preferences

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“Food marketing affects what children want to eat, what they’re willing to eat, what they do eat . . . [and] helps to shape what kids think of as food . . . ”

—Margo Wootan, *Director of Nutrition Policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (1)*

When you think about which foods you like, and why you like them, you probably don’t think, “Marketing. The foods I like are the ones that have been ‘sold’ to me since I was a little kid.” However, marketing—including marketing to children—plays a huge role in determining people’s food preferences, their eating behavior, and their understanding of the roles that food should play in their lives. Food marketing is ubiquitous in modern western culture, and it especially targets children. Chances are very good that it influenced you.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Food Companies Want to Reach Children to Ensure Many Years of Revenue

Children have their own pocket money to spend, and food items are what they tend to buy (2). They also influence parent purchases: their parents often consult with them about what to buy, and when they don’t, they nag them to do so. For years, marketers have encouraged children to pester their parents until the parents succumb to their request (3). More important than immediate purchases, however, is the potential for future purchases. Children have their whole buying lives ahead of them, and child customers become customers for life.

Marketing Works

Despite the protestations of the food industry that their marketing influences only brand preferences, marketing is an important modern cultural factor that influences what children think of as edible and desirable (2). Think about it: in the twenty-first century United States, we like bacon, soda, and Cheetos—not whale blubber or insects, as people do in other cultures, or bean porridge or hoe cakes, as Americans did in the 1600s. And Cheetos would not have even been thought of as “food” in the United States of the 1600s. Here and now, the food industry and its marketing are a major influence on what we consider desirable to eat.

Because marketing to children does, in fact, work (4), food companies spend a fortune both to do it and to protect their legal right to continue to do it. The food and beverage industry is worth \$1.5 trillion (5). In 2009, 48 major food corporations in the United States spent a total of \$1.79 billion just to market to children and teens ages between 2 and 17 (6). Between 2009 and 2012, food industry organizations spent more than \$175 million lobbying the federal government against changes in policy they feared would limit their ability to advertise to children (5).

HOW MARKETING INFLUENCES FOOD PREFERENCES AND EATING BEHAVIOR

Heavily Marketed Foods Tend to Be Branded, Processed, and Unhealthy

In the United States, more than 98% of television food commercials seen by children, and 89% of those seen by teens, are for products high in fat, sugar, or sodium (2). The Federal Trade Commission's analysis of the money spent on food marketing to children found the most marketed types of food to be "quick service restaurant food" (including "fast food"), carbonated drinks, high-sugar breakfast cereals, and snack foods, candy, and frozen desserts (in that order).

TABLE 1

48 major national food and beverage corporations spent approximately \$1.79 billion marketing to children aged 2–17 in 2009:

- Quick Service Restaurant foods (\$714 million)
- Carbonated beverages (\$395 million)
- Breakfast cereal (\$186 million)
- Snack foods, candy, and frozen desserts (\$123 million)

(Federal Trade Commission, 2012).

Marketing Develops Brand Loyalty

The goal of marketing is for consumers to develop, from an early age, an affinity for and loyalty to a brand. For this reason, marketers try to provide children with as many positive associations with the brand as possible—not to convince them in any kind of logical way that the brand is better, but rather to make them feel good about it (2).

And children are, indeed, "branded". Two-year olds recognize brand logos on product packages (7). By preschool, children recognize brands they've seen on television (8). In one study of preschoolers, researchers asked the children to taste food wrapped in McDonald's packaging and the same food wrapped in plain packaging. The children said the food—even the carrots—in McDonald's packaging tasted better (9).

Advertisements Teach Children What Is "Normal"

Although they don't realize it, children learn more from marketing and advertising than just about a brand of food. They also learn social norms—or at least what marketers want them to believe are social norms. Specifically, food ads portray products as tasty, fun, cool, and exciting, thereby instructing children that these are the dimensions according to which they should judge their food. Advertising's focus on the sensory and rewarding aspects of unhealthy foods creates "hedonic hunger", in which people develop thoughts, feelings, and urges about food that are completely separate from any physical hunger (2).

Given this, it is not surprising that marketing encourages eating as a behavior unconnected to nutrition. The majority of advertisements show kids snacking, rather than eating meals, encouraging them to understand that snacking on yummy food anytime and anywhere, because it's fun and cool and you want it, is normal and desirable (2).

Food Companies Lead the Way in Innovative Ways to Reach and Influence Children

Food marketing is ubiquitous. If you watched a morning of children's television, you would find that most of the commercials are for food. In fact, American children see approximately 13 food commercials every day on TV alone (4,700 a year); and teens see even more (16 per day, or 5,900 a year) (3).

But television is far from the only place where children are exposed to food marketing. In what researchers call a "360 degree" marketing strategy, marketers reach them in many other places (10). Children see "product placements" for food products in movies, TV shows, songs, and videogames (2). They attend sports and entertainment events sponsored by food brands; and the marketing they see for toys, games, and movies is co-marketed with food brands (2).

On their computers and cell phones, children play free "advergames" (Remember Millsberry.com? Some current examples are popsicle.com, lunchables.com and goldfishfun.com). It's no wonder the games are free—in reality, they are commercials in which children immerse themselves for hours. The advergames and brand websites that house them use child game-players to further market to their friends by encouraging them to send e-cards and to post about their play on social media (11).

Schools Are an Important Venue for Food Marketing

School is one place you might imagine would be free from marketing. Not so, however. Schools are a desirable venue for marketers. Outside of school, children are a fragmented market—the jock kids are separate from the theater kids who are separate from the geeky kids—and it's hard to reach all of them. Further, the marketing environment outside of schools is cluttered with a lot of different brands. In school, children are gathered together (not fragmented), and they are a captive audience. The marketing environment is also relatively uncluttered.

Even better for marketers is that children are especially susceptible to marketing in school because any marketing that appears there carries the apparent approval of teachers and administration.

Although many different products are marketed in school, food products are the most marketed there. When we interviewed school principals all over the United States, we found that two-thirds of schools nationwide have marketing for foods high in fat and sugar and Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value ("FMNV" are foods that have been defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as having virtually no nutritional value, such as soda and hard candy) (12). Another study, of high schools in Maine, found that despite a law forbidding the marketing of FMNV in Maine schools, 85% of the high schools have it (13).

Food Is Marketed in Many Ways in School

Appropriation of space and exclusive agreements. Sometimes food is obviously advertised in schools—on branded scoreboards in the gym or football field, or on branded soup tureens or freezers in the cafeteria. We call this "appropriation of space" because the brand physically takes up school space.

Vending machines are a special type of appropriation of space in that they don't only sell food, but they also serve as lit-up billboards that then dispense smaller ads—in the form of cans or wrappers—that are then dispersed throughout the school. Typically, they are brought into schools as part of an "exclusive agreement" with the school district that allows for only one brand of a particular product category—such as soft drinks—to be sold and marketed there.

Vending machines are such effective advertisements that one district administrator explained to us that although the Pepsi machines in his district's high schools must be turned off during the school day according to state policy, the Pepsi bottling company with which the district has an exclusive agreement maintains them in the schools primarily for their marketing value (14).

Typically, exclusive "pouring rights" contracts like the one mentioned above are signed for at least 10 years. This means that a child would be likely to see the same brand of soft drink—and only that

brand—at school for his or her entire academic career. One study of 20 California, CA, high schools found that 19 of them had vending machines, with a total of 276 total vending machines—that’s an average of 14 vending machines per school! (15).

Fundraising, sponsored programs, activities, and educational materials. Corporations also market food in schools by helping schools raise money, and by funding programs and activities and providing free educational materials. These are appealing to cash-strapped schools, although research has shown that they actually do not provide much in the way of funds to schools (12).

An example of how a company can market itself to schoolchildren by sponsoring a program is offered by Panda Express, the quick-service Chinese restaurant chain. Panda Express funds the Franklin Covey *Leader in Me* program in schools around the country (16). Although the *Leader in Me* program is not at all about food—it’s a character-development program—when Panda Express adopts a school for the program, marketing for the restaurants comes with it. The school becomes a “Panda Express School”. The local restaurant branch sends food and a big panda for the opening event, and all the children are told about the company’s contribution to their school and education (17).

Sometimes marketing is not for the product itself, as is the case with Panda Express, but rather for the world-view espoused by the corporation. Energy Balance 101, a resource of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, provides a good example. The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation describes itself as a “CEO-led effort to reduce obesity,” and the materials it offers to schools as part of Energy Balance 101 are consistent with the world-view of its member corporations (the Foundation’s Chair is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of PepsiCo; some of the other corporate members are General Mills [of Millsberry fame], the Kellogg Company, Nestlé, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association). A full list of corporate members can be found at <http://www.healthyweightcommit.org/supporters/members/>.

In other words, the stated goal behind the lesson plans, resources, and videos that the Foundation offers elementary school teachers through its Energy Balance 101 portal is to teach children about the balance between “energy in” and “energy out” (18). This is the mantra of the food industry: that no food is “bad”, that all foods have a place in a balanced diet, and that each individual is responsible for making sure that they engage in enough physical activity to burn up the calories they ingest.

Although we all do need to take responsibility for our health, the food industry’s approach relieves itself of responsibility for producing and encouraging children to eat foods high in added sugar, salt, and fat, and transfers that responsibility to the children themselves. Although the industry is certainly entitled to hold a self-interested perspective, when it presents it to children in school, via their teachers, it is no longer presenting it as a perspective but rather promoting it as fact—to be learned just as math or science facts are learned and to be believed because the teacher endorses it.

Digital marketing. Another important way that corporations market food to children in schools brings us full circle back to the “360 degree” marketing strategy’s emphasis on reaching children through their technological devices. More and more, schools and teachers encourage students to spend time online. Many schools have incorporated “1:1 programs,” in which each student is provided with her own laptop or tablet. Even without an individual computer, students spend a lot of their educational time online. In fact, one researcher told us that Maine elementary school teachers she interviewed reported that their young students spent an average of 3 hours daily on computers (19).

When children spend time online sites, they visit (e.g., dictionary.com) track and record their behavior for the purpose of developing a behavioral profile for use in targeting marketing to them. The behavioral profile is “anonymized”, which means that the marketers that buy it don’t know any given child’s personally identifying information, but they do know her interests based on which sites she visits. Adults’ behavior is tracked the same way, of course, but adults are not sent naively into the online seas in the same way that students are by their schools.

Sent online to an educational site, children are likely to wander from it to linked commercial sites. One extremely successful such a site is *My Coke Rewards*. Coca-Cola is the most successful digital marketer in the world, and actively targets at teen and young adult audience (17). Just one indication of Coke’s digital success: of 10.6 billion total social media brand impressions generated by the Top

100 brands in July 2012, 1.4 billion were generated by Coca-Cola (not even counting those impressions generated by Sprite, a Coca-Cola brand that came in eighth place. Second-place Apple generated only 719 million impressions) (17).

My Coke Rewards was launched in 2006 and is still active, with 15 brands and the option for participants to donate their points to participating schools. Participants create online accounts at *MyCokeRewards.com* so that they can enter PIN codes printed on bottle caps and cartons to redeem rewards.

These are specific techniques used to target teens via *My Coke Rewards*: creating immersive environments that keep visitors engaging with the site (i.e., with its participating brands), infiltrating social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, sending news alerts, rewards info, sweepstakes opportunities, bonus points, and other exclusives via location-based and mobile marketing, collecting personal data both from visitors themselves and from others whose profiles suggest that they would be likely to be interested in the program, and studying the subconscious in order to try to trigger it (20).

With each visit to the site, participants supply “demographic and psychographic details” that allow Coke’s marketing team to “identify consumers across brands and experiences, and learn when and how to connect with them”—by, for instance, personalizing the look and messaging of a particular web page, email, or mobile content, or by sending an exclusive offer (17).

These strategies are pioneered and mastered by Coca-Cola and other food corporations (e.g., Frito-Lay, McDonald’s, PepsiCo), but are used widely by countless companies on the Internet, where encouraging consumer “engagement” with brands is the prime marketing goal (20). Children visit commercial sites on their “own” time, but are also guided to them when they enter the online marketplace for educational purposes.

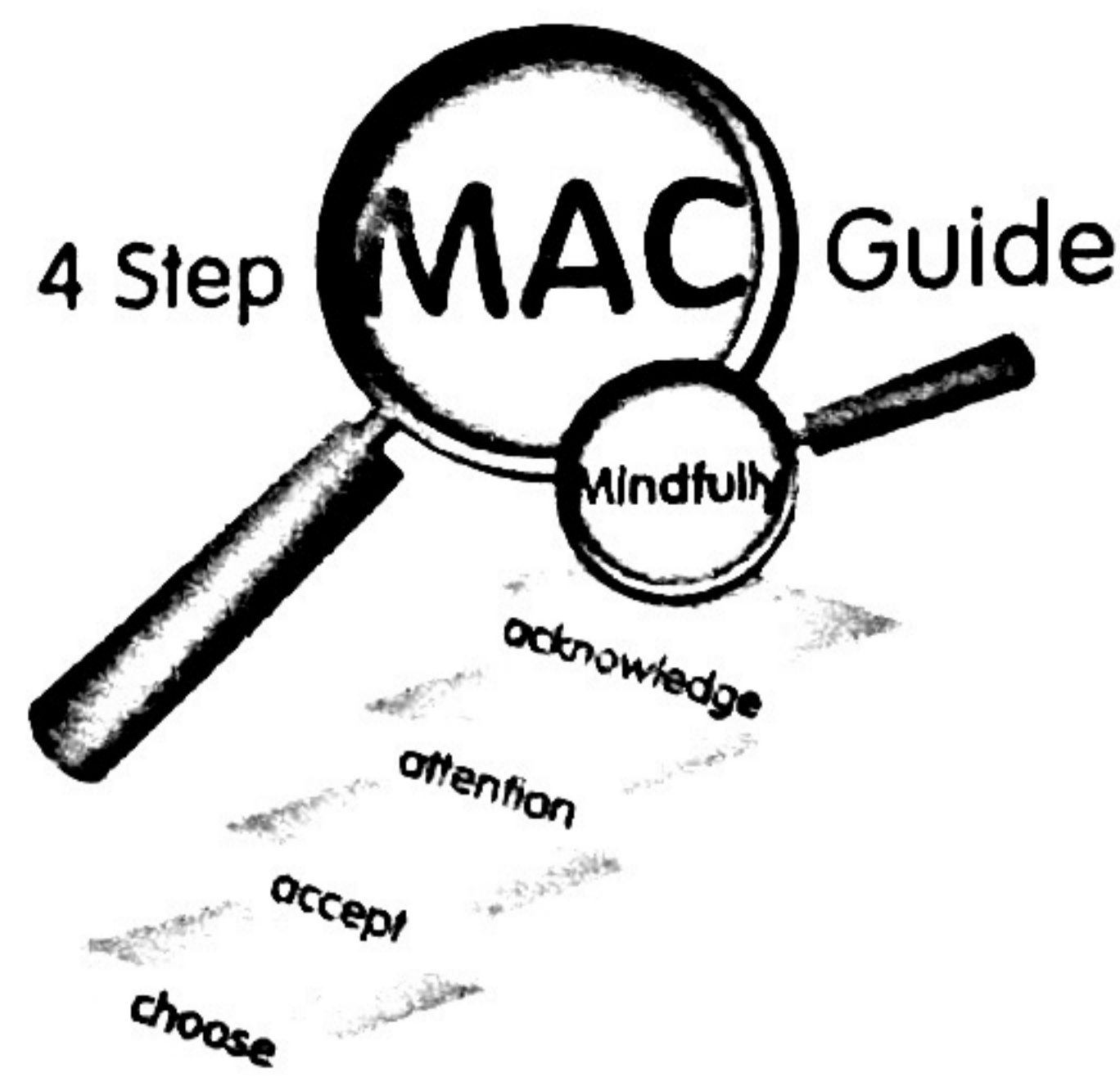
CLOSING THOUGHTS

It has been said that the food industry is “working from the playbook of the tobacco industry.” To some extent this is true: the industry aggressively markets its products and worldview, denies responsibility for the epidemic of metabolic syndrome and obesity, and has funded research that it can point to in countering scientific findings that incriminate its products (21).

However, marketing has leaped forward in its sophistication in the twenty-first century, and food corporations are at its forefront. The industry’s active targeting of children is designed to create customers now and in the future by influencing children’s developing preferences about food and food brands, their eating behaviors, and their understanding of the role of food and exercise in their lives.

How Mindfulness Can Help

Marketing is so omnipresent in the background of the modern Western lifestyle that most people tend to discount the extent of its influence on them. Knowing that food marketing works, and that it has likely worked on you, can be overwhelming and threatening. A mindful approach to this knowledge can help on several levels.



Activity One: Marketing and You

Take a few moments to reflect on and journal your thoughts about this chapter. Did anything surprise you? Do you notice any feelings about what you've learned? Are you surprised by your response?

Remember to:

1. acknowledge your thoughts and feelings;
2. pay attention to them;
3. accept them without judgment; and
4. make a choice in how you will experience your thoughts and feelings, and how you will act on them.

Being curious and gentle with your experience can be a helpful support for this activity.

Activity Two: Mindful Eating

Food that is marketed as “healthy” is often still processed, and still contains added sugar, fat, and/or salt. Granola is a good example. Why not try making your own, truly healthy granola? Take some unsalted, raw nuts (a mix of pecans, walnuts, and almonds is especially good) and some rolled oats. Spread them out on a cookie sheet and bake them for 10 minutes at 350 degrees, until lightly toasted (oats should be tan-colored and nuts slightly darker than they were before. Check them periodically to make sure they don't burn—if you smell nuts, they're probably burning!). Let them cool.

Try your granola mixed with plain yogurt and some fresh fruit. Berries and bananas are naturally sweet. How does your creation—unbranded, with no added sugar or salt—taste to you? What are your thoughts and feelings in response to this new taste sensation? As you pay attention to them and accept them without judgment, you will be in a position to choose—now and in the future—the food you eat.

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