

Letters to the Editor

Marketing of unhealthy food to young children

Time to get angry, get active

Madam

Your columnist Geoffrey Cannon⁽¹⁾ is clearly one of the world's most benign parents. While gently chastising governments when they fail to regulate the more harmful products of commerce, he sweetly suggests that the food industry is only doing what it is set up to do – sell its products – when it markets its junk to children. He reserves his criticism for civil society groups who are 'mistaken' for being 'anti-industry'.

Most parents come to feel differently. Firstly, they are anxious about what their children eat and what they as parents should be trying to do about it. Then a few of them get angry about what they are being sold and at the cynical, manipulative methods being used to do the selling. Lastly, just a few parents move to the stage of getting active and making complaints – complaining at the supermarket checkout about the array of confectionery at child height, complaining at the school about the lack of water fountains, complaining at the swimming pool about the vending machines, complaining to their governments about TV advertising to kids. And they may get more active, by joining and supporting civil society groups who are lobbying to get regulations in place so that parents – all parents, not just the active ones – benefit from a less commercialised world for their children.

It is mischievous to suggest that civil society is crudely anti-industry and should only target the sections of industry which makes harmful products. That is exactly what civil society groups are doing – and what is more, we can thank civil society for the creation of one of the most interesting developments of the decade: the definition of junk food using nutrient profiling⁽²⁾. This has helped regulators and the industry see exactly what needs to be targeted, and it has led the UK government to put this definition on the statute books, much to its credit.

And before Geoffrey Cannon excuses junk food companies for only doing their job, he should know just how bad they get. I have infants' counting books which use branded confectionery (M&Ms) to teach children numbers. I have kids' competition vouchers to 'win your weight in Kinder chocolate'. I have promises to remove sweets from the checkout from a supermarket, which were reneged upon a year later. I have chief executive witness statements saying they do not encourage children to pester their parents, from the same company that advertised for marketing staff to develop their 'pester power' team. I have promises from companies not to market to children under 12, while I find

their logo emblazoned on toddlers' sports vests and on swimming kit for primary schools.

I could go on, but the point is simple: We will not encourage companies' good behaviour by excusing their bad behaviour, nor encourage better corporate responsibility by smiling benignly at their irresponsibility.

Time to get a little angry, Geoffrey. And then get active – with us!

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Mcdonald's continues to lure kids with toys

Madam

Your 'Out of the Box' column rightly condemns transnational food and drink manufacturers for promoting their products with aggressively marketed toys that attract young children⁽¹⁾. This abuse of children is worldwide.

At the EU level, the European consumer organisation BEUC is pressing for legislation to protect children from unhealthy food marketing. In the UK, the Children's Food Campaign, which I represent, has long been pressing for restrictions on the advertising and marketing of junk and other unhealthy foods and drinks to children. Advertisements for unhealthy foods are no longer allowed during children's programming, but are still permitted during programmes with a significant child audience, so we continue to campaign for a ban up to the 'watershed' of 9 pm. This would eliminate over 80% of instances of children watching unhealthy food advertisements⁽²⁾. Much of the remainder would come from TV channels broadcast from outside the UK, emphasising the importance of international legislation. Public opinion is supportive – four-fifths of parents surveyed by the consumer group Which? believe that unhealthy foods should not be advertised when children are most likely to be watching television⁽³⁾.

Partly as a result of restrictions on TV advertising, food and drink manufacturers and caterers are increasingly

using non-broadcast marketing techniques to reach children, including young children. Their techniques include toys, games and competitions, using websites with branded online activities clearly targeting children.

Your columnist mentions the McDonald's 'Happy Meal' marketing of toys. In some areas of the UK such as Liverpool, there have been attempts to pass local by-laws to prevent the use of toys as a marketing inducement. However, the company will not stop using toys to market their products to children. A member of McDonald's UK's Happy Meal marketing team has promised: 'Next year, we'll have even more competitions and activities in restaurants to make sure every visit is a genuine family treat'⁽⁴⁾.

Some food companies have made commitments to stop or restrict marketing to children, but such responses have been patchy at best and in some cases virtually meaningless. For example, PepsiCo has made much of its public pledge not to target its marketing at children⁽⁵⁾. However, in January 2009 the Children's Food Campaign spotted finger puppets clearly aimed at young children on the company's website. Later that month a debate organised by the Centre on Global Change and Health was held at University College London entitled 'What role should the corporate sector play in tackling the global obesity pandemic?'⁽⁶⁾. At that event Derek Yach, PepsiCo's Director of Global Health Policy, was confronted, and expressed disappointment that the puppets were on the website. They have since been removed, but the incident shows that voluntary corporate commitments are not reliable.

The evidence-based judgement is that guidelines and voluntary commitments made by food and drink companies that have global strategies to increase their sales of unhealthy food are not working and will not work. What parents and all concerned can trust, is comprehensive

international legislation to protect children from the marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks, and from the burden of disability and disease that follows the high consumption of these products.

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Editor's note

We have received more correspondence on this topic, to be published next month. We will be pleased to receive responses from representatives of the food and drink companies mentioned here, for possible publication.