

10 Things the Food Industry Doesn't Want You to Know

By Adam Voiland

Two nutrition experts argue that you can't take marketing campaigns at face value

With America's obesity problem among kids reaching crisis proportions, even junk food makers have started to claim they want to steer children toward more healthful choices. In a study released earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that about 32 percent of children were overweight but not obese, 16 percent were obese, and 11 percent were extremely obese. Food giant PepsiCo, for example, points out on its website that "we can play an important role in helping kids lead healthier lives by offering healthy product choices in schools." The company highlights what it considers its healthier products within various food categories through a "Smart Spot" marketing campaign that features green symbols on packaging. PepsiCo's inclusive criteria--explained here--award spots to foods of dubious nutritional value such as Diet Pepsi, Cap'n Crunch cereal, reduced-fat Doritos, and Cheetos, as well as to more nutritious products such as Quaker Oatmeal and Tropicana Orange Juice.

But are wellness initiatives like Smart Spot just marketing ploys? Such moves by the food industry may seem to be a step in the right direction, but ultimately makers of popular junk foods have an obligation to stockholders to encourage kids to eat more--not less--of the foods that fuel their profits, says David Ludwig, a pediatrician and the co-author of a commentary published in this week's Journal of the American Medical Association that raises questions about whether big food companies can be trusted to help combat obesity. Ludwig and article co-author Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University, both of whom have long histories of tracking the food industry, spoke with U.S. News and highlighted 10 things that junk food makers don't want you to know about their products and how they promote them.

1. Junk food makers spend billions advertising unhealthy foods to kids. According to the Federal Trade Commission, food makers spend some \$1.6 billion annually to reach children through the traditional media as well the Internet, in-store advertising, and sweepstakes. An article published in 2006 in the Journal of Public Health Policy puts

the number as high as \$10 billion annually. Promotions often use cartoon characters or free giveaways to entice kids into the junk food fold. PepsiCo has pledged that it will advertise only "Smart Spot" products to children under 12.

2. The studies that food producers support tend to minimize health concerns associated with their products. In fact, according to a review led by Ludwig of hundreds of studies that looked at the health effects of milk, juice, and soda, the likelihood of conclusions favorable to the industry was several times higher among industry-sponsored research than studies that received no industry funding. "If a study is funded by the industry, it may be closer to advertising than science," he says.
3. Junk food makers donate large sums of money to professional nutrition associations. The American Dietetic Association, for example, accepts money from companies such as Coca-Cola, which get access to decision makers in the food and nutrition marketplace via ADA events and programs, as this release explains. As Nestle notes in her blog and discusses at length in her book *Food Politics*, the group even distributes nutritional fact sheets that are directly sponsored by specific industry groups. This one, for example, which is sponsored by an industry group that promotes lamb, rather unsurprisingly touts the nutritional benefits of lamb. The ADA's reasoning: "These collaborations take place with the understanding that ADA does not support any program or message that does not correspond with ADA's science-based healthful-eating messages and positions," according to the group's president, dietitian Martin Yadrick. "In fact, we think it's important for us to be at the same table with food companies because of the positive influence that we can have on them."
4. More processing means more profits, but typically makes the food less healthy. Minimally processed foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables obviously aren't where food companies look for profits. The big bucks stem from turning government-subsidized commodity crops--mainly corn, wheat, and soybeans--into fast foods, snack foods, and beverages. High-profit products derived from these commodity crops are generally high in calories and low in nutritional value.
5. Less-processed foods are generally more satiating than their highly processed counterparts. Fresh apples have an abundance of fiber

and nutrients that are lost when they are processed into applesauce. And the added sugar or other sweeteners increase the number of calories without necessarily making the applesauce any more filling. Apple juice, which is even more processed, has had almost all of the fiber and nutrients stripped out. This same stripping out of nutrients, says Ludwig, happens with highly refined white bread compared with stone-ground whole wheat bread.

6. Many supposedly healthy replacement foods are hardly healthier than the foods they replace. In 2006, for example, major beverage makers agreed to remove sugary sodas from school vending machines. But the industry mounted an intense lobbying effort that persuaded lawmakers to allow sports drinks and vitamin waters that--despite their slightly healthier reputations--still can be packed with sugar and calories.
7. A health claim on the label doesn't necessarily make a food healthy. Health claims such as "zero trans fats" or "contains whole wheat" may create the false impression that a product is healthy when it's not. While the claims may be true, a product is not going to benefit your kid's health if it's also loaded with salt and sugar or saturated fat, say, and lacks fiber or other nutrients. "These claims are calorie distracters," adds Nestle. "They make people forget about the calories." Dave DeCecco, a spokesperson for PepsiCo, counters that the intent of a labeling program such as Smart Spot is simply to help consumers pick a healthier choice within a category. "We're not trying to tell people that a bag of Doritos is healthier than asparagus. But, if you're buying chips, and you're busy, and you don't have a lot of time to read every part of the label, it's an easy way to make a smarter choice," he says.
8. Food industry pressure has made nutritional guidelines confusing. As Nestle explained in *Food Politics*, the food industry has a history of preferring scientific jargon to straight talk. As far back as 1977, public health officials attempted to include the advice "reduce consumption of meat" in an important report called *Dietary Goals for the United States*. The report's authors capitulated to intense pushback from the cattle industry and used this less-direct and more ambiguous advice: "Choose meats, poultry, and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake." Overall, says Nestle, the government has a hard time suggesting that people eat less of anything.

9. The food industry funds front groups that fight antiobesity public health initiatives. Unless you follow politics closely, you wouldn't necessarily realize that a group with a name like the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF) has anything to do with the food industry. In fact, Ludwig and Nestle point out, this group lobbies aggressively against obesity-related public health campaigns--such as the one directed at removing junk food from schools--and is funded, according to the Center for Media and Democracy, primarily through donations from big food companies such as Coca-Cola, Cargill, Tyson Foods, and Wendy's.

10. The food industry works aggressively to discredit its critics. According to the new JAMA article, the Center for Consumer Freedom boasts that "[our strategy] is to shoot the messenger. We've got to attack [activists'] credibility as spokespersons." Here's the group's entry on Marion Nestle.

The bottom line, says Nestle, is quite simple: Kids need to eat less, include more fruits and vegetables, and limit the junk food.