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If You Pitch It, They Will Eat

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The McDonald's Corporation wants to be everywhere that children are.

So besides operating 13,602 restaurants in the United States, it has plastered its golden arches on Barbie dolls, video games, book jackets and even theme parks.

McDonald's calls this promotion and brand extension. But, a growing number of nutritionists call it a blitzkrieg that perverts children's eating habits and sets them on a path to obesity.

Marketing fast food, snacks and beverages to children is at least as old as Ronald McDonald himself. What's new, critics say, is the scope and intensity of the assault. Big food makers like McDonald's and Kraft Foods Inc. are finding every imaginable way to put their names in front of children. And they're spending more than ever -- \$15 billion last year, compared with \$12.5 billion in 1998, according to research conducted at Texas A&M University in College Station.

"What really changed over the last decade is the proliferation of electronic media," says Susan Linn, a psychologist who studies children's marketing at Harvard's Judge Baker Children's Center. "It used to just be Saturday-morning television. Now it's Nickelodeon, movies, video games, the Internet and even marketing in schools."

Product tie-ins are everywhere. There are SpongeBob SquarePants Popsicles, Oreo Cookie preschool counting books and Keebler's Scooby Doo Cookies. There is even a Play-Doh Lunchables play set.

While the companies view these as harmless promotional pitches, lawyers are threatening a wave of obesity-related class-action lawsuits. Legislators are pressing to

lock food companies out of school cafeterias. And, some of the fiercest critics are calling for an outright ban on all food advertising aimed at children.

"The problem of obesity is so staggering, so out of control, that we have to do something," says Walter Willett, a professor of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "The vast majority of what they sell is junk," Mr. Willett says of the big food makers. "How often do you see fruits and vegetables marketed?"

The increase in food marketing to children has closely tracked their increase in weight. Since 1980, the number of obese children, has more than doubled to 16 percent, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

School districts in New York and Los Angeles have responded by banning the sale of sugary beverages and snacks in school vending machines.

Most big food companies, despite some promises to offer healthier foods and in some cases to limit marketing in schools, deny that they are to blame for the epidemic of excess weight. They insist that sedentary behavior, a lack of exercise and poor supervision and eating habits are responsible.

Food companies say their commercials don't encourage overeating, that the foods they advertise are meant to be "part of a balanced diet," and that some foods are meant to be only occasional treats.

"We talk about offering carrot sticks," says Karlin Linhardt, the director of youth marketing at McDonald's. "And we have parents come in and say, 'We offer them carrot sticks at home. When we come to McDonald's we want a treat, french fries.'"

Why would companies take aim at children so energetically? Because they, increasingly, are where the money is.

"It's the largest market there is," says James McNeal, a professor of marketing at Texas A & M and an authority on marketing to children. "Kids 4 to 12 spend on their own wants and needs about \$30 billion a year. But their influence on what their parents spend is \$600 billion. That's blue sky."

In toy stores, children can become accustomed to food brands early by buying a Hostess bake set, Barbie's Pizza Hut play set or Fisher-Price's Oreo Matchin' Middles game. And, for budding math whizzes, there is a series of books from Hershey's Kisses on addition, subtraction and fractions.

Schools are also a major marketing site. With many school districts facing budget shortfalls, a quick solution has come from offering more profitable fast food from outlets like McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut.

Some schools have contracts to sell fast food; others have special days allotted for fast food.

The Skinner Montessori school in Vancouver, Wash., for instance, has "McDonald's Wednesdays" and "KFC Fridays." There are McDonald's McTeacher's Nights in Jefferson City, Mo., and Pizza Hut Days in Garden City, Kan.

"It's awesome. They love it," Tracy Johnson, director of nutrition for the 7,500-student school district in Garden City, Kan., says of the Pizza Hut food. "We also serve vegetables. We try to make it into a healthy meal."

According to a survey by the C.D.C., about 20 percent of the nation's schools now offer brand-name fast food.

Vending machines now dominate school corridors. Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have "pouring rights" contracts in hundreds of schools nationwide.

Lawyers and consumer advocates have harshly criticized educators for "commercializing the schools" and sending poor dietary messages to children.

"It seems very clear it's a breach of duty," says John Banzhaf, a professor of law at George Washington University in Washington and one of the lawyers pressing for class-action lawsuits against big food companies. "Schools get paid a kickback for every sugary soft drink or burger sold."

Some food companies heatedly defend their promotions, and their products. "I think our communication with children is appropriate; we're not shoving it down their throat," says Ken Barun, director of healthy lifestyles at McDonald's, adding, "To make a general statement that McDonald's food is unhealthy is wrong."

Industry officials concur. "These foods and beverages are safe, and consumers -- in some cases parents -- have to be the one to make the decisions about how much should be eaten," says Gene Grabowski, a spokesman for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, which represents the nation's biggest food companies. "The industry is trying very hard to be responsible in the way it markets these foods."

Still, legislators and school districts are rethinking school marketing. There are more than 30 bills before state legislatures around the country proposing to ban certain snacks and beverages from school vending machines, according to the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University in Tempe.

Television, of course, remains the most powerful medium for selling to children. These days there is no shortage of advertising opportunities with the emergence of the Walt Disney Company's Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, which is owned by Viacom, and the Cartoon Network, a unit of AOL Time Warner's Turner Broadcasting.

Marketers know that children love animals and cartoon characters, and industry observers say they have used that knowledge not just to create new shows, but to produce a new generation of animated pitchmen.

Some critics say children often can't differentiate the programs from the commercials and that food companies and producers of children's shows have helped blur the line by creating characters that leap back and forth, from pitchman to program character.

SpongeBob SquarePants has his own show. But he also sells Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, Popsicles, Kleenex, DVD's, skateboards, fruit snacks and dozens of other products.

In fact, a series of big marketing alliances has bound food companies and television show producers like never before. Disney, for instance, has teamed up with McDonald's on movies and product tie-ins. Disney and Kellogg collaborate on a line of cereals that includes Disney Chocolate Mud & Bugs. And Nickelodeon has struck marketing deals with the Quaker Oats Company and General Mills Inc.

"The programs have become advertising for the food, and the food has become advertising for the programs," says Professor Linn of Harvard.

During Nickelodeon's "SpongeBob SquarePants" 30-minute cartoon last week, more than half the commercials were about food. The spots showed that children who consume "Go-gurt," the new yogurt- on-the-go, loved skateboards and danced on the walls.

A child who poured milk on his Post Honey Comb cereal was transformed into the raffish Honey Comb monster named the Craver. Children walked into walls after seeing other youngsters' tongues tattooed with Betty Crocker's Fruit Roll-Ups. And two others reveled in having so much sugar on their Kellogg's Cinammon Krunchers cereal that even the tidal wave of milk that washed over their treehouse couldn't wipe off the sugary flavor.

But do these commercials really resonate with children? Marketing experts say yes; the children do, too.

Nicky Greenberg, who is 6 and lives with her parents in Lower Manhattan, often spends her afternoons watching Nickelodeon. She can sing the theme song from "SpongeBob SquarePants," and she says her parents buy her Kellogg's Cinnamon Toast Crunch because she loves the commercials.

"On the commercial," she says, "there's a captain that goes on a submarine, and there's an octopus, and three kids. And then the girl says, 'Just taste this pirate.' And the pirate says, 'Ayyy, Yummy!' "

The reaction was no different last week at a supermarket on the South Side of Chicago.

Tatanisha Roberson, who is 8, was riding on the front of a shopping cart pushed by her mother, Erica, 24, heading toward the cereal aisle.

The question was posed: What kind of food is Tatanisha interested in? "Anything that comes on the TV, she'll get," her mother said, rolling her eyes. "Rugrats Fruit Snacks; Scooby Doo Fruit Snacks; Flintstone's Jell-O."

In private, some company executives complain that when parents go to the grocery store they don't buy the healthy products that are offered. Professor McNeal at Texas A & M says the companies are a scapegoat.

"I don't think they should be singled out," he says. "Mom blames everyone but herself. There's an abdication of the parents' role. You've got 70 percent of moms who are working, so when they're home they try to please their kids."

The big food companies say they follow a set of guidelines for television advertising enforced by the Children's Advertising Review Unit, which was set up and financed by advertisers to regulate themselves.

The companies say their ads don't show overeating or make false health claims.

Officials at the Children's Advertising Review Unit acknowledge that they don't look at the collective message food companies send to children. "We're not nutritionists," says Elizabeth Lascoutx, a spokeswoman for the unit. "We're not in the position to say this food item cannot be part of a healthy diet."

Sensing a backlash to advertising and promotion, especially in schools, Kraft said last month that it would end all in-school marketing efforts. And General Mills, the maker of Cheerios, says that in-school marketing is wrong.

"We just view it as inappropriate," says Tom Forsythe, a spokesman for General Mills. "There's no gatekeeper; they're a captive audience."

Some marketing deals have come under pressure. For example, last week, the British Broadcasting Corporation said it would no longer allow its children's television characters to be used in fast-food sponsorships with companies like McDonald's after consumer groups criticized the public broadcaster for helping promote junk food.

Some companies deny that they even market to children. Both Coke and Pepsi insist that they direct their products only to teenagers and adults. And Yum Brands, which operates KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, says it does not market to children or have operations in schools.

But sometimes the evidence would seem to contradict those statements. Coke signed a multimillion-dollar global marketing deal tied to the Harry Potter character in 2001, and many schools, like the one in Garden City, Kan., have contracts to serve food from Pizza Hut.

Amy Sherwood, a spokeswoman for Yum Brands, says, "That must be a local deal with the franchisees and those schools because we don't do that on a national level."

Kari Bjorhus, a spokeswoman at Coke, said: "We absolutely don't market to children. Our feeling with Harry Potter is it really appeals to the whole family."

Yet with regulators, lawmakers and others mounting campaigns that seek to make big food companies look like big tobacco companies, which have been sued over marketing campaigns geared toward youths, something is bound to change, industry experts say. The World Health Organization and even Wall Street analysts are calling on big food companies to rein in their marketing campaigns and change the way they do business.

"The food industry will have to review its marketing practices and transform itself, in our view, regardless of potential regulation or litigation," Arnaud Langlois, an analyst at J. P. Morgan, wrote in a report last April.

There is a need to set specific standards on what is marketed to children, according to Professor Willett at Harvard. "We don't sell children guns, alcohol or drugs, but we do allow them to be exploited by food companies."

Even some influential marketing experts are beginning to think their clients might come around.

Dan Acuff, a leading children's marketing consultant, says that when profits are at stake, companies listen.

"If it's going to hit the bottom line, they'll listen," he says. "You'd like them to have a conscience, but conscience and bottom line are not in the same paradigm in the corporate world."