
Introduction

**Memo Set on the Implications of
Digital Food and Beverage Marketing
to Children and Adolescents**

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Food and beverage marketers are at the forefront harnessing the power of the digital media to promote their products to children and adolescents. Until recently, much of the research on the relationship between food marketing and the youth obesity crisis has been focused on television. The Institute of Medicine has said unequivocally that TV commercials for food and beverages entice children to desire and consume foods they should avoid. But today's digital marketing environment has unleashed powerful new techniques targeting young people online with powerful interactive ads.

Food companies send mobile coupons to kids' cell phones. Online videos, games, social networks, and virtual worlds are embedded with interactive food marketing applications—one can even order a pizza with a click. Rather than 30 seconds at a time, children now spend an average of 23.7 minutes on Web sites using games and spokescharacters to sell sugary cereals. African American and Latino youth, and teens in general, are the focus of sophisticated (and industry award-winning) campaigns designed to promote unhealthy food products.

Public health advocates have been concerned about the effects of television marketing of food and beverages for some time. But few know much about the unprecedented level of engagement and intimacy with which digital marketing reaches children and youth. To help the field understand just how the food marketing ground has shifted beneath them, Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Center for Digital Democracy teamed up with the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN) to explore the implications of the new digital marketing landscape. We commissioned memos from leading experts on child and adolescent youth development, as well as on the new media marketing landscape, to address the implications of digital food marketing to youth. The memos in this set provided the background for discussions among researchers, legal scholars, and public health advocates as they gathered in June 2009 to deliberate the best ways to approach the new era of food marketing.

Berkeley Media Studies Group commissioned memos to lay the foundation for understanding the implications of digital food and beverage marketing:

- In "Opportunities for Addressing Interactive Food & Beverage Marketing to Youth," Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy and Professor Kathryn Montgomery of American University explain that food companies have moved aggressively into digital marketing because that is where children and teens spend so much of their time. And while the new digital landscape remains somewhat fluid, the techniques converge around key imperatives: keep audiences — in this case, children and teens — connected, immersed, and engaged. And, at the same time, collect data on every move they make so that the next ad can be even more precisely targeted.
- The situation is even worse for those who suffer most from conditions like diabetes. In "African American & Hispanic Youth Vulnerability to Target Marketing: Implications for Understanding the Effects of Digital Marketing," American University Professor Sonya Grier explains that the food marketing African American and Latino youth encounter features more food advertising and tends to promote less healthful foods. She notes that these effects are likely exacerbated by the fact that youth of color take up digital techniques at faster rates — so much so that they are sought after by food marketers.
- The precision with which ads are targeted digitally raises red flags for brain researchers who are discovering that old models of vulnerability do not hold. In "Research on Child Development: Implications for How Children Understand and Cope with Digital Marketing," Professor Louis Moses of the University of Oregon explains what scientists currently understand about how young children's brains respond to marketing.
- Professors Frances Leslie, Linda Levine, Sandra Loughlin, and Cornelia Pechmann, all of the University of California, Irvine, describe how theories on children's cognitive ability and its relationship to marketing need to be revised. In "Adolescents' Psychological & Neurobiological Development: Implications for Digital Marketing," they synthesize the latest brain research showing adolescents are also vulnerable to advertising messages.

- In “Changing the Rules of the Game: Implicit Persuasion and Interactive Children’s Marketing,” scholar Agnes Nairn who teaches in the EM-Lyon Business School, the Rotterdam School of Management, and the University of Bath in the United Kingdom, analyzes the implications of new research which demonstrates how advertising is processed by the subconscious.
- Leading legal scholars Paul Schwartz from the University of California, Berkeley, and Daniel Solove from George Washington University, describe the limits of current online privacy practices in their memos “The FTC’s Role in Privacy Protection: Implications for Food & Beverage Marketing” and “Notice and Choice: Implications for Digital Marketing to Youth.” Marketers assume that because users must agree to the terms of the site before they choose to enter, that users have agreed to the behavioral marketing that follows. But most of the time, users just want to enter sites without understanding what they’ve compromised in terms of privacy and data collection about their actions online.
- Professor Angela Campbell of Georgetown University Law Center’s memo, “Recent Federal Regulatory Developments Concerning Food and Beverage Marketing to Children and Adolescents,” outlines what has been done so far at the agencies that have responsibility for monitoring media the effects of unfair or deceptive marketing: the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission.

Questions about digital food and beverage marketing and their health effects loom large. The implications of the new research on children and adolescents’ cognitive brain development, and the role of neuropsychological research on food marketing to youth, require action by policymakers and the public health community. For the last two years, Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Center for Digital Democracy have partnered with NPLAN to bring together scholars and advocates who can inform the field about how food and beverage companies are using the latest in digital marketing techniques to target children and youth. The memos collected here provided the starting point for discussions at our June 2009 meeting, and we hope they will help public health advocates, industry representatives, federal regulators, consumer groups, scientific researchers, and legal scholars better understand the implications of current practices of food marketing to children.

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