

An analysis of the content of food industry pledges on marketing to children

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Abstract

Objective: To identify pledges made by the food industry to change food marketing to children worldwide, examine their content and discuss their potential to reduce the harmful effects of food marketing to children.

Design: A search for pledges and specific commitments made by participating companies and a content analysis of their scope and criteria used to define the marketing covered or excluded.

Setting: Global.

Subjects: Food industry pledges.

Results: Between 2005 and 2009, the food industry developed thirteen pledges on food marketing to children, involving fifty-two food companies. Two of the pledges were global, two were regional and nine applied to specific countries. Three were specific to the soft drinks industry and to the fast-food industry, with the rest being food industry wide. Ten of the pledges required companies to publish individual commitments; a total of eighty-two such commitments were published, many of which extended beyond the minimum standards set in the pledges. All pledges included definitions of children and child-targeted media, as well as the communication channels and marketing techniques covered, and permitted companies to set criteria for foods that are exempted from any restrictions. There were many similarities between the pledges and individual commitments; however, there were also many differences.

Conclusions: The development of pledges on food marketing to children in such a short span of time is impressive. However, limitations and inconsistencies in the pledges and commitments suggest that the food industry has a long way to go if its pledges are to comprehensively reduce the exposure and power of marketing to children.

Keywords
Food marketing
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In 2004, WHO called on the private sector to take action to address the problems associated with food marketing to children⁽¹⁾. This followed from the publication of a systematic review in the UK that established an association between advertising of food through television (TV) and children's knowledge about food, their preferences and behaviour⁽²⁾. These findings were used as evidence for the development of a regulation in the UK restricting food advertising to children under the age of 16 years⁽³⁾.

The UK findings were confirmed by a second systematic review conducted in the USA for the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies of Sciences⁽⁴⁾. As a result, the IOM recommended that the food and beverage industry shift its marketing practices to children away from products high in added sugar, salt and fat, and stated that if the industry proved unable to achieve such a reform voluntarily then Congress should intervene with

legislation. In the European Union (EU) as well, the then Health and Consumer Commissioner stated in 2005 that the food industry needed to take voluntary action to stop 'advertising directly to children' or face legislation⁽⁵⁾.

It was into this environment that food industry 'pledges' to 'change' food marketing to children began to emerge in 2005–2006. Although voluntary in nature, the pledges are quite different from the self-regulatory 'guidelines' and 'codes' developed by the food and advertising industries in earlier years⁽⁶⁾. These guidelines and codes were concerned only with guiding the content of advertising; in contrast, the pledges impose restrictions on the foods that can be advertised. Guidelines and codes were also generally issued by an individual company or trade group (e.g. food industry trade associations, self-regulatory organisations for advertising); pledges, in contrast, involve a series of participating companies with a secretariat hosted by some form of trade group.

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