



## RETAILSCENE

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# To market or **not** to market to kids

*Rethinking your marketing strategies to children*

**E**arlier this year Kraft Foods Inc. made what some might call a bold move. The company announced that it would “change the mix of products it advertises on television and radio, and in print seen primarily by children age six to 11.”

What that means is starting this year kids between six and 11 will no longer see ads for products such as Kool-Aid, Oreos, Chips Ahoy!, several Post children’s cereals and some varieties of Lunchables. The company will “increasingly” advertise products that meet its Sensible Solution criteria instead.

Kraft’s move is extreme at first glance. It was made in response to public pressure over the rising obesity rates among children. But not everyone agrees that advertising is the culprit. Jeffrey Axelrad, adjunct professor at George Washington University Law School, believes it’s altogether the wrong approach. Axelrad has written on the topic of whether government should step in and restrict advertising of food to children.

Advertising, he says, “isn’t a major factor affecting children’s health.” He points to a study carried out by Ofcom ([www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk)), an independent regulator in the U.K. The study found that, for instance, having meals as a family – what more and more families are finding difficult to do – is a more important factor affecting children’s health.

But as more families are now beginning to pay attention to what their children eat, says Axelrad, “companies might well be advised to try to sell products that will appeal to those families.”

That’s how companies should evolve their product lineups and marketing strategies – by responding to consumers. And as more companies do rethink their product lineup and mes-



sages to kids – especially in this climate of social responsibility and awareness of healthy eating – there are opportunities. Stephen Kline, director of media analysis laboratory, School of Communications at Simon Fraser University in B.C., hopes food companies see it that way.

Kline has written on the issue and also does media education with children. He’s found that children are confused about nutrition and that food companies can make a positive contribution by helping educate them. Kids, for instance, don’t know what calories or kilocalories are and how much activity is necessary to burn them off. Adults might make that equation, but kids often don’t.

“McDonald’s has done a lot of work to show that they’re advertising active kids. But how active do you have to be to work off the energy and the fats you’ve consumed?” he says. “Kids don’t know this and, therefore, it’s not possible to say that kids are savvy consumers yet.” (Kline says he’s working on signage that will help kids understand how active they have to be.)

Kline is also part of an international study looking at the direction children’s advertising is taking. He doesn’t think companies necessarily need to follow Kraft, but responsible marketing strategies – in whatever form – don’t hurt. For

right now, he says, food companies can take a “far sighted public relations approach” and help kids understand the risks of sedentary lifestyles and different food choices.

“It’s hard,” he says. “I get frustrated because this is not a radical position. It’s a fairly obvious and reasonable one but it’s hard to make sure kids are getting the knowledge about healthy eating and nutrition in a way that makes them empowered to actually choose healthier foods.”

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