

The big debate: Are food ads to blame for child obesity?

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While the food industry has taken a series of initiatives to restrict advertising of unhealthy products to children, consumer groups are not convinced and call for the development of stricter criteria. EurActiv hears arguments from both sides of the debate in parallel interviews.

Background

Marketing of food and drink in the EU is currently based on a self-regulatory approach, whereby companies voluntarily agree to follow certain codes of conduct and restrain themselves from promoting unhealthy foods, in particular to children.

Sedentary Western lifestyles and over-eating have increased obesity levels have led the European Commission to take policy initiatives.

The 2007 strategy on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues, confirmed the existing voluntary approach to regulating food marketing and advertising, arguing it can be more efficient at tackling the issue. But it said that the situation would be reviewed in 2010.

In an effort to ward off regulation, industry groups have since launched a series of initiatives to limit food and drink advertising to children under the age of 12 on TV, in print and on the Internet. The best-know example of such initiatives is the World Federation of Advertisers' EU pledge.

But consumer organisations, while welcoming voluntary restrictions as a step in the right direction, want the marketing to children of foods high in fat, sugar or salt to be stopped altogether and have little trust in industry's pledges to self-regulate.

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Regulation of marketing to children varies considerably across Europe and few countries have specific rules on food marketing.

The food industry claims to have "dramatically shifted" the balance of products advertised to children under the age of 12 since major brands signed an EU pledge in 2005.

Food manufacturers claim they are now increasingly directing their advertising spending towards "better for you" options.

Children's exposure to products that do not qualify as "better for you" has been reduced by 60%, says Will Gilroy, director of communications at the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA), which represents national advertising associations and the world's biggest marketers, including several food and drink companies.

In some cases, they have taken even bolder steps by pulling out of children's airtime altogether, he adds.

However, consumer groups are not convinced. Specific targeting of children "has not stopped yet," said Ruth Veale of the health and safety department at European consumers' organisation BEUC.

And while the industry's EU pledge is certainly "a step into the right direction," there are a lot of 'buts' and loopholes, Veale said.

Shift from TV to other media

For example, BEUC complains that "the pledge does not cover all forms of media". While there may be a 99% compliance rate on advertising to children in television, Veale believes "industry is getting more inventive in their way of marketing to children".

Over the years, food firms have shifted their advertising from TV to the Internet and video games, she notes. Indeed, the emergence of digital marketing has created a huge opportunity for advertisers, with online ad spending growing by 40% in 2008.

The European soft drinks industry (UNESDA) admits that the Internet plays an "increasingly important role in the marketing mix," but stresses that online advertising is only targeted at adults and teenagers.

However, Veale argues that this is not enough, because children watch a lot of television or visit Internet sites that are not specifically aimed at them. In that sense, though, it seems almost impossible to stop all food advertising, as companies have a legitimate right to market their products.

"I believe that you can't shelter children from a commercial world," said Will Gilroy, noting that children watch TV at any time of day, are always on the Internet and see outdoor advertising on the street like anybody else.

However, this does not mean that industry should do nothing, Gilroy added, suggesting that advertising aimed at children should concentrate on "healthier for you" products. Moreover, he says more effort should be made to educate children to take a critical view of today's commercial environment.

Putting pressure on parents

According to BEUC, other loopholes in the industry's pledges include adjusting nutritional values to determine whether or not advertising can be authorised, as well as varying age criteria.

"The development of nutritional criteria is not transparent – we don't know how they came up with them. We would like to have scientific criteria [...] developed to determine what foods should and should not be advertised to children," said Veale.

Meanwhile, the WFA's Will Gilroy spoke of the "cumulative effect" of advertising, whereby children are exposed to successive adverts for chocolate, burgers and sugary soft drinks, for

example. This, he said, has an impact on children's food choices and preferences, which in turn has an impact on their health.

Gilroy stressed that the industry's commitments mean that brands refrain from appealing directly to children, undermining parental authority or promoting unhealthy lifestyles. In fact, "healthier for you" advertising targeted at children can actually "help parents to support their efforts to ensure healthy lifestyles," he said.

But Ruth Veale points to some perverse effects of this trend, saying "we have seen a shift by companies away from advertising to children to advertising to parents". Such targeting includes ads suggesting that "if you are a good parent you should be giving your child this," she says. Similarly, manufacturers have started promoting chocolates branded as a "perfect portion size for children".

Food ads and obesity

There is no definitive statistic on the role played by advertising and marketing in people's food choices.

But Ruth Veale claims BEUC research has shown that almost 70% of people chose a product thanks to a health or nutrition claim, which suggests that advertising plays a major role. As for making claims, responsible marketing touches upon adults as well, she said.

"This is why scientific evaluation of claims by the European Food Safety Authority is necessary and nutrient profiles are necessary, because we don't want a product high in salt, sugar or fat to bear a claim," she stressed.

But Will Gilroy underlined that fixing obesity "will take a bird's eye view of all the contributing factors". He cited a study estimating the impact of food advertising on food choices at just 2% and regretted that there is "a disproportionate focus on marketing and advertising" in the obesity debate. In fact, he sees the whole debate as an "easy fix" for politicians eager to make a difference in a four-year term.

On the other hand, Gilroy does recognise that politicians have difficult choices to make. "It is difficult to be pragmatic and see the big picture" about how different issues interplay, he said. As a consequence, policymakers face difficult decisions on cross-sectoral topics such as education, urban planning, healthcare investment and promoting physical activity over a sustained period of time, he explained.

However, Gilroy seems to be well aware of a trend towards stricter advertising regulation. "There will always be an inclination to restrict marketing, because it is the most visible of any company's activities," he said.

Next Steps

- **8-9 Dec. 2010:** European Commission and Belgian EU Presidency conference on nutrition.