

Invited commentary

Food packaging: the medium is the message

In considering the marketing of food products to children, the role of packaging warrants closer attention. The use of packaging as a marketing vehicle is evidently increasing. Marketing analysts suggest two reasons for this. First, many food choices are made at the point of sale, so 'the package becomes a critical factor in [the] consumer decision-making process, because it communicates to consumers at the time they are actually deciding in the store'⁽¹⁾. Second, the nature of the food advertising market is changing. Estimates from the USA suggest that expenditure on food advertising is declining⁽²⁾, and that other methods of marketing such as packaging now have greater weight in the marketing mix^(3,4).

Food packaging has two basic functions. The first is practical. Packaging extends the shelf-life of the product, and makes it easier to transport and display. Second is its marketing function. Packaging is now an essential component of the integrated marketing strategies of the food industry. It combines all the 'Ps' of marketing: the package contains the *product*, *packages* convey messages about product attributes to consumers as part of *public relations*, and often its *price*, while also carrying *promotions*. By combining all these different aspects, packaging has become an integral part of the product⁽⁵⁾.

How food packaging is used to attract children

The most obvious marketing technique used on packaging to attract children is promotions, like competitions, collector promotions and premiums (Box 1). Many of these take the form of cross-promotions, in which manufacturers use the products of other companies such as animated characters and toys from television, movies and Internet games to promote their own products. Other ties are with 'branded' athletes, sports teams and events, theme parks, and charities. The US Federal Trade Commission recently reported that cross-promotions on packaging are now a significant strategy used to market foods to children and adolescents⁽⁶⁾. Another recent study found that the use of cross-promotions on food packages targeted at children in the USA increased by 78% between 2006 and 2008 in the supermarket surveyed, and only 18% of the cross-promoted products met accepted nutrition standards⁽³⁾. More than half of the cross-promotions appealed primarily to children between 6 and 12 years of age, and over one-fifth targeted pre-school children⁽³⁾.

Box 1

Attributes of child-friendly food packaging

- The application of promotions, notably competitions, collector promotions and premiums, which often use cross-promotions.
- The application of nutrition and health-related information and/or claims.
- Size and shape.
- The packaging 'technology', such as additions like straws, how it opens and closes, how freshness is maintained, durability.
- Typescript used for the different written pieces of information.
- The colours used on the package.
- Other visual imagery, such as shapes, symbols, and the depiction of the food product.
- The depiction of the brand and brand characters.

These on-pack promotions typically form part of broader campaigns promoting the product that include other techniques like advertising and retailer displays. Promotions may also play a public relations role if they are for charitable, educational or health-related activities. Public relations is also one of the functions of on-pack nutrition information and nutrient and/or health claims. As well as providing information, these are designed to boost the image of the company and are increasingly used as a form of promotion. 'Health' sells, and nutrient and health information and claims are used to imply to parents that the product is suitable and 'good' for their children.

Often (perhaps less so for child-targeted products), the package also displays the price of the product. The size of the package is also a crucial part of the pricing strategy: large packages, for example, often have lower unit prices than smaller ones, intending to give the impression to parents of good value. But package size may also be small in order to directly attract children. Convenient or fun package shapes can also be used to attract children, as well as the so-called 'packaging technology', such as the application of straws to small juice packages. Parents may also be encouraged to buy products for their children with technologies that make the product easier to handle, such as ease of opening and closing for snacks when on the move.

The importance of typescript, colour and other visuals to attract children has been highlighted by a recent Canadian study⁽⁷⁾. The study found that the food packages examined were dominated by four colours: blue, yellow, red and green. About 85% of the food products surveyed used graphics and typescripts that were like those used in cartoons, or as if drawn by children. Three-quarters of the packages included a cartoon visual, a tenth used a competition to attract children, and over three-fifths included a nutrition claim on the front of the package.

Then there is branding, which is an intrinsic part of packaging. Unlike the loose sacks and wrapping once used, individual packs provide a place to stamp a brand. Branding distinguishes the product from the same or similar products made for other companies, and aims to create 'brand loyalty'. In other words, children learn to like and trust the brand and so stay with it for life, and may also buy other products made by the same company. Along with the other attributes of the package, the brand characters used on the packaging of products aimed at children are an important part of building this brand identity⁽⁴⁾. As put by the food company Kellogg's: 'The packaging has to provide a representation of the brand identity and appeal to the target market'⁽⁸⁾.

Effects of food packaging

Several studies have examined the effect of food packaging. A US study on the perception of breakfast cereal packaging by children showed that packaging helps to create brand awareness, because it 'has the power to evoke images of its products, brand names and salient attributes from the memories of young, inexperienced consumers'⁽⁴⁾. A focus group study on breakfast cereals in the UK also found that children can recognise the characters used on the front of breakfast cereal packs⁽⁸⁾.

Packaging also shapes consumer perception of the product. Research on adults indicates that shoppers use packaging to aid their decisions at point of purchase⁽⁹⁾. Package attributes such as colour and technological features have been found to affect product choice, depending on the type of consumer^(1,10). Packaging also influences what children think about food products. In another Canadian study, focus groups were used to identify how children respond to food packaging⁽¹¹⁾. The study indicates that children are affected by the look of food packages and the on-pack promotions. The results varied with age: younger children were more likely to choose a product because of cross-promotions, while older children were more influenced by the visuals of the package. Several of the children said that it was the colour of the packaging that attracted them to the product.

Another study from the USA has examined how packaging – especially the brand on the package – affects

perceptions of taste⁽¹²⁾. A total of sixty-three children aged 3–5 years were provided with five pairs of identical foods and drinks from McDonald's, with one of the pairs being in branded McDonald's packaging and the other in plain packaging. The children consistently preferred the taste of the food in the branded packaging, even though it was exactly the same as the food in the plain packaging. An older study from the UK also has found that attractive packages targeting children are likely to encourage them to pester their parents to buy the product⁽¹³⁾. In the focus group study, mothers said they yield to this pressure if they perceive the product as being 'healthy'. Mothers also preferred colourful packaging of 'healthy' yoghurt relative to plain packaging and said that that colourful, captivating packaging is more likely to encourage children to try 'healthy' foods.

However, packaging can mislead children and parents into thinking that the product is 'healthy' when it is not. The Canadian studies^(7,11) found that most of the products with nutrition claims targeted at children were actually not very nutritious when judged against the cited nutrition criteria, but children perceived products as 'healthy' simply because the package included claims. They also said that the presence of an ingredient list, a 'health' front-of-pack symbol, or a symbol denoting that the food contained no allergenic products, made them think the product was healthy. Colours (especially green) and pictures on the front of the package also affected their beliefs about whether the product was healthy or not. A study on the perception of breakfast cereal packaging – which predated the extensive use of front-of-pack symbols – found that children were not aware of the nutrition label, suggesting that visuals have a much more powerful impact in conveying the perception of healthiness to children⁽⁴⁾. In a real sense, the packaging has become the product.

So what should be done?

The whole point of taking action to reduce the amount of food marketing to children is to lessen preference for, and sales and consumption of, fatty, sugary and/or salty processed foods. If packaging attracts children to eat these products, then there is a case for intervention. But packaging is not subject to any of the regulatory approaches to food marketing to children⁽¹⁴⁾. And while a number of leading transnational food and drink manufacturing companies have pledged, more or less, that they will not advertise any products directly to children under the age of 12, or else will only advertise products that meet their own nutrient criteria, child-friendly packaging is not included in the pledges^(15–18). In fact, one of the core principles of industry-led efforts to address marketing to children is that it should only concern promotions that target children directly, and, as shown here, packaging is used to target children both directly and indirectly

(via their parents) putting it outside the scope of the pledges. As put by Unilever, packaging is excluded from their pledge on marketing to children because it is 'primarily influential to the consumer at the point of purchase, when adults accompany very young children and make final purchasing decisions'⁽¹⁸⁾. In other words, it is perfectly legitimate to use marketing techniques, however powerful, when these target adults as well as children even though the aim of boosting sales is the same.

There is a whole other, probably even more important, reason why regulating packaging would not be a popular move with transnational and other food and drink manufacturers: the package is now an inherent part of the product. The medium of the package contains the message of the product. This means that changing the package is essentially reformulating the product, so de-kiddifying the packaging would not just change the more superficial ways in which products are marketed (as implied by current voluntary marketing pledges), or their content (such as changing the levels of salt, sugar, etc. as implied by current industry reformulation strategies), but the entire essence of the product. That makes intervening in packaging a politically more dangerous game than regulating advertising – and, potentially, even more effective.

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