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USA: Advertisers/Brands
US Marketing Giants Draw Child Advertising Battle Lines

On the defensive from constant sniping by consumer advocacy groups and lawmakers, America's top three advertisers of packaged foods targeting children are preparing a counter-attack. General Mills, the Kellogg Company and Kraft Foods - combined annual spend on child-targeted advertising $380 million (?293.34m; £203.77m) – are spearheading a new lobby group, the Alliance for American Advertising. United in their cause the trio may be - but there is division as to defensive tactics.

Kraft announced earlier this month it will pull print, radio and TV advertising for products targeting the 6-11 age group [WAMN: 13-Jan-05]. But other alliance members fear the move could be seen as a tacit admission of responsibility for soaring child obesity. Also jumping the defensive hayride are the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the Association of National Advertisers and the Grocery Manufacturers of America. In a one-page position statement, the alliance disputes any link between plugging processed foods and fat kids. "There is not a correlation between advertising trends and recent childhood obesity trends," it insists. The paper quotes former Federal Trade Commission chairman Timothy J Muris, a George W Bush appointee, who dismissed advertising bans as "impractical, illegal and ineffective."

It also cites two separate bills introduced last year by Democrat members of the Senate: Tom Harkin of Iowa and Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. Both warned that "greater restrictions on advertising to children would be difficult legally to design or implement, and ineffective in combating obesity". In its report on the new alliance, the Wall Street Journal notes with prophetic overtones: "The food industry's effort to prevent legislation and potential litigation in some ways echoes earlier efforts by the tobacco and alcohol industries to prevent federal restrictions on the promotion of their products. But the WSJ overlooks a far more interesting fact: that these restrictions made no difference whatever to sales or consumption. Which could be taken to imply that advertising of these addictive products was unnecessary in the first place and a waste of money in the second.

As to an outright ban, a study carried out in 1990 (The Effect on Tobacco Consumption of Advertising Bans in OECD Countries) showed that in six of the twenty-two OECD countries that had implemented a ban on all forms of tobacco advertising, there was no negative effect on consumption. But ad agency and media honchos needn't make for the nearest window ledge just yet. Even if consumption remains steady sans advertising, the ongoing battle for market share will make that leap unnecessary.

Data sourced from Wall Street Journal Online; additional content by WARC staff.
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