

ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD AND HEALTH FORUM

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Food Advertising and Children

Wednesday, 24 March 2004

Room C, 1 Parliament Street

CHAIRMAN: Lord Rea

SPEAKERS: Professor Gerard Hastings, University of Strathclyde

David Croft, Co-Operative Group

Introduction

1. Lord Rea welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologised for the small venue. He welcomed the two speakers and invited Gerard Hastings to make his presentation. Lord Rea reminded the audience that Gerard Hastings was an adviser to the Health Committee's inquiry into Obesity, which still had witnesses to hear and which was not due to report until May.

Professor Gerard Hastings

Introduction

2. Gerard Hastings explained that his talk would focus on three areas. Firstly, the obesity problem. The food industry's marketing is implicated – it is not the whole problem but does play a part. Secondly, the nightmare scenario that the food industry follows the route taken by the tobacco industry down the line of recalcitrance. And thirdly, the opportunities that this scenario presents for constructive engagement. For those people who work in marketing, a recognised threat can also be viewed as an opportunity.
3. Obesity is a big public health problem. The evidence base is clear and clearly implicates advertising in particular and marketing in general.

FSA Review

4. The FSA-commissioned report, *Does Food Promotion Influence Children? A Systematic Review of the Evidence*, examined the scientific literature from the last thirty years to determine: the extent and nature of food promotion to children; and the effect, if any, that this promotion has on their food knowledge, preferences and behaviour. The Review examined two questions: (i) What is the extent and nature of food promotion to children? (ii) What are the effects of food promotion on children's food knowledge, preferences and behaviour? The review encompassed an awesome methodology. If it had been known how arduous the FSA Review was going to be beforehand, the authors probably would not have gone ahead with it. This was the first time in the UK that a 'Systematic Review' method had been used to examine evidence on food promotion. Comprehensive, rigorous, transparent and replicable procedures, based on those employed in biomedical sciences, were used by a team comprising four universities (Strathclyde, York, Oxford and City University) as well as an advisory group, which included industry representatives as well as academics. A peer review also ran constantly alongside the research.

Findings

5. **Food Promotion to Children:** The Review found that food dominates advertising to children and this can be broken down into five categories: soft drinks; pre-sugared cereals; confectionery; snacks; and fast food restaurants (which have gained prominence in the past ten years). Food is the most advertised product for children, except for toys at Christmas time. Everyone agrees that the advertised diet contrasts with the recommended diet in terms of high fat and sugar.
6. **The Effects:** The job of those conducting the review was to look at all the research studies in the past 30 years and see the scientific evidence. The Review found that food promotion does influence children's nutritional knowledge, their food preferences, purchasing and purchase-related behaviour, consumption and their diet and health-status. Often the choice would be between, for example, a Kit Kat and a Penguin Biscuit and not a Kit Kat and a banana. It is very clear that food promotion affects total category sales and brand switching.
7. **Size of Effect:** This is difficult to say and it will probably never be possible to give a definite answer – comparing advertising with pricing is like comparing apples and oranges. It is very clear, and crucially so, that advertising is independent of other factors. So in answer to the question, does food promotion affect total category sales, brand switching or both, the answer is that the evidence for category effects is identical to that for brand effects. If you accept one, you have to accept the other.
8. In summary, the Review found that the advertised diet contrasts strongly with the recommended diet. There is sufficient evidence to show that food promotion has an effect on children, particularly their food preferences and purchasing behaviour (including pester power). The evidence is likely to understate the effects of other marketing activity and 'indirect effects'. This includes the complicated strategies that marketing people devise and also other forms of advertising such as endorsements, different types of packaging and offers. This is known as 'Integrated Marketing Communications Mix.'
9. The findings of the Review have been strongly endorsed and have attracted enormous public and media interest. A series of quickly convened academic seminars have also

been agreed as well as a seven-stage Peer Review. Comments relating to the FSA Review are positive, coherent and back each other up. They include:

- “honest to the reality of the research landscape”
- “in summary, the view of the meeting was that existing studies...could only underestimate its effect”
- “a fine example of triangulation”
- “provided sufficient evidence to indicate a causal link between promotional activity and children’s food knowledge, preferences and behaviours”

10. There was enormous media interest in the Review and all of it was supportive and picked up on public opinion. The only criticism came from Alexander Chancellor who wrote in *The Guardian*, “stupefyingly obvious.” The Report was formally ratified by the FSA Board on 11 March 2004.

The Problem and the Solution

11. Obesity is a public health time-bomb. Advertisers in particular and marketing in general are implicated although, as always in social science, it is possible to argue with the evidence produced by the Review. However, arguing with evidence is terminally bad PR leaving advertisers/marketers in a catch 22 position if they decide to go down that route – if food companies insist that they are not part of the problem then they cannot be part of the solution. Following that route would find food companies in a similar situation to that faced by the tobacco companies.

12. The FSA’s advice would be, ‘there is an effect – accept it’. Good marketers would recognise this threat for the potential opportunity that it is. If one food company does not recognise this then competitors surely will. The solution is constructive engagement.

Lessons from Tobacco

13. The strategy of the tobacco industry over the last 30/40 years has been one of denial about the health risks and the effects of marketing. This approach has resulted in doubt and confusion as well as an aggressive protection of self-interest and a bunker mentality. Imperial Tobacco continues to deny that there is a link between tobacco and lung cancer. The result of this approach is a loss of credibility for the tobacco companies from the top down – they are now less popular than politicians. This loss of credibility has coincided with litigation in both the UK and US; there is also an outstanding trial in Scotland that is still to come to court. Philip Morris has also changed its approach recently and has mounted something relating to a charm offensive and issued its own health warnings.

14. When comparing the respective situations with the food and tobacco industries, it should be noted that the health risks associated with the food industry are much less clear-cut. The fact that we *need* a food industry needs to be stressed but we do *not* need all of the food companies that exist. Being in the food business is a privilege and not a right. At a recent meeting with Coca Cola executives, the question was posed about whether Coca Cola products are actually needed.

Constructive Engagement

15. A lot of food companies are not prepared to accept that marketing is part of the problem and some even reject the idea that there is a problem.
16. Companies also need to take real action and not just spin. For example, Coca Cola should cease advertising to under 12s through Harry Potter – which, added Gerard Hastings, could backfire very badly. The Health Select Committee, as part of their Obesity inquiry, were encouraged to ask companies like Coca Cola what the Recommended Daily Allowance is for their products. Needless to say that the companies wriggled out of answering this one. In private meetings, the same executives have given very different views.
17. The FSA Review lays down a series of challenges for the food industry. The big question is if they will be met. The Review challenges:
- healthy and unhealthy foods – there is a need to categorise here
 - the use of marketing to encourage consumption of the latter and discourage consumption of the former
 - Clear labelling
 - Pricing
 - Loyalty schemes
 - Advertising
 - Celebrities
18. In principle, a good start has been made in attempting to turn around some of the problems that exist. A lot of work needs to be done in how different behaviour can be encouraged. Given that this whole issue is the biggest issue facing food companies in 50 years, there are a number of questions that need to be answered: (1) Will your organisation publicly accept that their marketing is part of the problem? (2) Will they take real action or just spine? (3) Is food going to be the new tobacco? (4) Does your organisation want to lead or follow?
19. **Lord Rea** thanked Gerard Hastings and invited **David Croft** to address the Forum.

David Croft

20. David began by thanking the Forum for inviting him to speak and explained that the Co-Op movement is now 160 years old and comprises around 50 retail societies and 400 stores. The group represented by David Croft is among the largest and takes responsibility for the product alongside corporate social responsibility. The Co-Operative movement was founded on a series of values and principles; what is important is how products are viewed and what the ethos is behind them. The movement brings the values up to date.

Nutrition and Obesity

21. There is a clear link between nutrition and obesity. There are 3 clear ways that a retailer can support the ethos: (1) the formulation of their own products (2) the marketing of those products – ie labelling and merchandising (3) having a role in the community - this is where the Co-op, which arose from the Co-operative movement, differs from the others.

22. In 1995, the Co-Op published a report on the national diet entitled, *The Plate of the Nation*. The document identified the balance of diet in relation to good health. The document found that 18% of the diet of youngsters is currently made up of fatty and sugary foods – 10% is the recommended amount. The HEA's Balance of Good Health Plate gives the percentage of fatty and sugary foods as 7%. Considering that these figures were from 1995, it shows just how long it has taken to get fat onto the agenda.

Product Formulation

23. The Co-op is progressively taking salt and fat out of products and all supermarkets now have their own healthy living ranges. If the salt and fat issue is taken out of the equation, what are the 'healthy living' criteria?
24. **Labelling** can be informative and educational. The position of the Co-Op with regard to labelling is that the consumer should have the information available to them when they are shopping. For example, when buying orange juice, a consumer should know whether the drink is genuine orange juice or whether it contains added colours etc. The people who work in marketing do not have to say what is in the product; the list of ingredients should answer all of the customer's questions and they should not have to rely on the small print. The Co-op pioneered the High / Medium / Low method of labelling certain nutritional content.
25. **Diet and Health** Some people do not know that sodium is salt. All Co-Op products carry details of salt content – this area is an example of where legislation does not act for what the consumer needs. It is important to have details of salt and fat content as well as the number of calories on the front of packets. People do not want to be preached at so information must be simple and easy to absorb.
26. **Fruit and Vegetables** Co-Op food stores are relatively small but it is still nonetheless important to sell fruit and vegetables in small stores. The company has also taken over some small stores that sold crisps and confectionery rather than vegetables and has, over twelve months, been putting fruit and vegetables back in the shops.

Community Support

27. David Croft was previously involved in community nutrition in Glasgow and this had an extremely positive effect. It is important to recognise that you do not have to have salad all the time; you can have 'sexy food' as part of a balanced diet. The issue of 'food deserts' has been beneficial in expanding Co-Op food stores. A Co-Op loyalty card scheme has also been introduced – the Commons Health Select Committee has picked up on this as part of its Obesity inquiry as they are interested in how this can be used to push forward healthy eating.

Advertising

28. In July 2000, the Co-Op published a report, *Blackmail*, which looked into the ethics of modern food production and advertising. The survey found that 70% of food advertised on television that was targeted at children was for fatty and sugary foods. This does not break any code but the Co-Op feels that there is no need to advertise to children in this way. The Co-Op is a fair trade advocate and does not use high profile character

merchandising. The company applies the same labelling procedure to all products. The labelling also incorporates a High/Medium/Low system relating to the nutritional value of food. There is also the dilemma of drinks vending machines in schools which are sponsored by fizzy drinks companies. The problem here is that whilst the companies are promoting unhealthy drinks to children, the schools need the money.

Summary

29. There are three ways to engage people in the promotion of better food: product formulation; marketing; and loyalty card coupons. Firstly, the Co-Op promotes fruit and vegetables as part of its advertising. Secondly, 1/6 of Christmas coupons produced by the company are for fruit and vegetables. Finally, all of the problems require cross-industry help in order to be solved. For example, the reduction in salt in bread only happened when the industry worked together. The industry's approach has advanced a lot but a lot more can be achieved if everyone works together.

Question and Answer Session

30. Following the two presentations, Lord Rea invited questions from the audience. The first question was from **Patti Rundall**, Baby Milk Action, who said that there was a huge dilemma about constructive engagement. She said that companies give the impression that they are making positive changes but are not actually doing anything. This is a critical problem and she asked what the best way of dealing with this is. **Gerard Hastings** agreed that this is a big issue. In this sense, tobacco is a much easier problem as it is possible to have a blanket ban on tobacco products – the same approach cannot be taken with food. Part of the problem is that the food sector is more powerful than Government. The counter balance to these are NGOs and community groups but they need to have more power. The problem is how to increase their power. Another point worth mentioning is that if you want industry to improve, they need to be given criteria to work by. Sanctions are also needed if industry does not improve. A comparison can be drawn with the recent critical report into estate agents.
31. **Mary Whiting**, Freelance Food Writer, drew members' attention to a book she had written, *Dump the Junk*. The book contains 300 tips for parents on how to encourage their children to eat healthily.
32. **Annie Seeley**, Food Commission, asked David Croft about the impact of the Co-op's categorising system which labels foods according to how healthy they are. She also asked how long the system has been in place. **David Croft** said that the system has been in place for around 7/8 years and had received nothing but positive feedback. He added that the system helped people to maintain a balanced diet. **Lord Rea** said that sales would give a good idea of how effective the system had been and asked what changes there had been in the figures. David Croft said that sales had risen over the last 6/7 years and this had also included an increase in the sale of fruit and vegetables, including a move from canned to fresh fruit. **Gerard Hastings** added that this system would provide great information about what we buy and when we buy it and wondered whether it would be worth doing any research in this area.
33. **Michelle Smyth**, Consumers' Association, said that her organisation supported the work that Gerard Hastings had done. Referring to the advertising done by the Co-op, she asked about the company's in-store approach to advertising. **David Croft** said that the Co-op

had a policy of no confectionery at the checkout although this is not always possible in some of the smaller stores. With regard to 'aisle policy', the company is keen to promote the 5-a-day programme in a much stronger way and are reinforcing this through leaflets for consumers. The Co-op is now planning new recipe suggestions. Healthy eating does not have to be boring eating – its not only about eating salads. **Gerard Hastings** asked if manufacturers put the Co-op under any pressure about which products they sell. **David Croft** said that they do but the Co-op does try to find balance.

34. **Jane Landon**, National Heart Forum, wondered if the idea of sanctions was going to be acted upon or simply more spin. Commitments are made and people then back down. Commitments need to be monitored and then the authorities need to come down on hard on ones that are broken. **Gerard Hastings** said that the Food Standards Agency does good work in this area but suggested that academics needed to get more involved. **David Croft** said that clear criteria needed to be drawn up with regard to labelling and this should not include things like '90% fat free' or 'with added vitamins'. There is a need to identify what is necessary and what is appropriate. **Gerard Hastings** drew attention to the approach adopted by commercial marketers who would manipulate all marketing levels.
35. **Charlie Powell**, Sustain, said that it had taken years to get the issue of the food advertising and its effects on the agenda. Three years ago, the common arguments were that there was nothing wrong with people's diets, the existence of obesity was questioned and was attributed to a lack of exercise. The whole situation was very confusing. It is now imperative that the food industry takes a responsible line - what happens in two years' time if things have not improved? **Gerard Hastings** acknowledged that this is an urgent problem and that action needs to be taken quickly. Manufacturers are doing themselves no favours by denying that there is a problem. If they continue to deny that there is a problem, they will be sidelined when the solutions are delivered.
36. **Sarah Freeman**, Freelance Writer, said that action needs to be taken not just against the big supermarket chains and food manufacturers but also take away outlets and cafes. She asked what the panel thought about legislation applying in this area. **Gerard Hastings** said that it is all about making informed choices – people need to know what they are purchasing at the point of sale. A representative of the British Retail Consortium said that McDonalds does provide nutritional information about its food in its restaurants.
37. **Alan Long**, VEGA Research, complained that the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is a useless body and has no weight. He also suggested putting forward some of the arguments to Don Curry's Food and Farming Commission. **Gerard Hastings** said that he found it alarming that the ASA has been around for so long and complained that the organisation only regulated individual advertisements and not the industry as a whole.
38. The next questioner asked about the general question of education and the industry's view of the power of the consumer. **Gerard Hastings** said that modern marketing is all about the power of the consumer. **David Croft** added that people not being able to talk was also a significant problem that needed to be tackled. Lord Rea also said that labelling needed to be informative and educational.
39. **Emma Hitch**, British Association of Nutritional Therapy, said that some schools had become heavily reliant on the money raised from vending machines selling sweets and fizzy drinks. She also asked how companies like Coca Cola would be forced to be more

responsible – consumers have a lot of power but companies have more. **Gerard Hastings** said that a lot would depend on whether it will be possible to make the healthy option, the profitable option.

40. **Lord Rea** thanked everyone for their contributions and explained that the next meeting of the Forum will be on **Tuesday, 4 May** when we will be looking at the issue of Autism and Allergies. The speakers at this meeting will be Professor Jonathan Brostoff from King's Medical School and Dr Michael Tettenborn, who is a paediatrician at Frimley NHS Hospital. Full details will be circulated to members in the next few weeks.

Appendix

Biographies of Speakers

Professor Gerard Hastings, University of Strathclyde

Gerard Hastings is the first UK Professor of Social Marketing and founder/director of two research centres at the University of Strathclyde: the Centre for Social Marketing (1993) and the Centre for Tobacco Control Research (1999). Gerard Hastings is also an adviser to the World Health Organisation and the American Medical Association and was an Acting Special Adviser to the Commons Health Select Committee during its inquiry into Obesity.

He recently headed up the team of researchers from Oxford, York and London City Universities, as well as Strathclyde, which conducted the first systematic literature review, on behalf of the Food Standards Agency, on food promotion to children. It examined the scientific literature from the last thirty years to determine: the extent and nature of food promotion to children; and the effect, if any, that this promotion has on their food knowledge, preferences and behaviour.

David Croft, Co-Operative Group

David Croft is a member of the Senior Management team within the Co-operative Group's Retail business.

David has responsibility for the development of the range of Co-op Brand products including all technical aspects of the supply chain from production through to the consumer. Ensuring the integrity and safety of Co-op Brand products is core to David's role. He also manages the programme of retail corporate marketing, including the delivery of the Retail businesses' social accountability. David has worked for the Co-op since the early 1990s and has a background in Environmental Health.

The Co-op is the UK's largest consumer-owned co-operative with a family of diverse businesses. With over 1,600 food stores throughout the UK, the Co-op has pioneered a number of Responsible Retailer initiatives.

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