Children, Adolescents, and Advertising

Committee on Communications

Advertising is a powerful force in American culture. It exists to sell products and services. In 1750 BC the Code of Hammurabi made it a crime, punishable by death, to sell anything to a child without first obtaining a power of attorney. In the 1990s, selling products to American children has become a standard business practice.

American children have viewed an estimated 360,000 advertisements on television before graduating from high school. Additional exposures include advertisements on the radio, in print media, on public transportation, and billboards. Commercials have even entered the classroom through programs like Channel One—video equipment packaged with current events programming that contains commercials.

The principal goal of commercial children’s television is to sell products to children, with food and toys being the two most frequently advertised product categories. Advertisers generally use two approaches to sell their products. The traditional method places commercials in programs that are attractive to children. These commercials promote products unrelated to the program being shown. The second approach, begun in 1982, features toy action figures as the main characters of a program. Because these programs are often developed by the marketing division of toy companies to market specific toys, they are frequently referred to as “program-length commercials.”

The Children’s Television Act of 1990 mandates that all broadcasters carry children’s educational or instructional programming as a condition for license renewal. One of the problems of the current law is that stations can cite public service announcements (PSAs) or short vignettes as evidence of compliance. These actions may fulfill the letter of the law; however, they do not fulfill its intent. In fact, good evidence exists that the Children’s Television Act of 1990 is being undercut already, even in the law’s first year of enactment. Because programming practices can be challenged only at the time of licensure renewal, local monitoring is essential. Local monitoring is the only way to ensure that stations are complying not only with the letter of the law, but also with the intent of the law, which is to create a better television programming environment for children.

EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN

There have been numerous studies documenting that young children under 8 years of age developmentally are unable to understand the intent of advertisements and, in fact, accept advertising claims as true. Indeed, the youngest viewers, up to age 8, cannot distinguish advertising from regular television programming. In addition, advertisers have become adept at circumventing rules and minimizing warnings. For example, the disclaimers “some assembly required” or “when eaten as part of a complete nutritional breakfast” are spoken rapidly by the announcer or shown in small print, and are not understood by most children.

Commercials broadcast during children’s programs also promote foods that may have an adverse influence on children’s health. Television viewing has been associated with obesity, the most prevalent nutritional disease among children in the United States. Food commercials that are broadcast during children’s programming often promote high-calorie foods which, when eaten too often, may contribute to the energy imbalance that promotes obesity.

The barrage of advertising for food and toys, especially on Saturday morning television, may also result in increased conflict between parents and their children. The American Academy of Pediatrics believes advertising directed toward children is inherently deceptive and exploits children under age 8 years of age.
EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING ON ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents are capable of understanding the nature of advertisements. However, many of the products advertised to adolescents are harmful to their health. Nearly 90% of high school seniors have tried alcohol and most tobacco abuse begins by age 16. In 1988 alone, teenagers spent $1.26 billion on cigarettes and smokeless tobacco. Approximately 2 million teenagers begin smoking cigarettes each year. Despite the ban on television advertising of cigarettes, the prominent display of logos, billboards, and banners in televised sports events makes cigarette advertising on American television more prominent than ever before.

In the United States, the increased per capita consumption of alcohol parallels expenditures on beer and wine advertising. In the mid-1970s the per capita consumption of alcohol in Sweden decreased by 20% after all beer and wine advertising was banned. In Japan, consumption of cigarettes has increased substantially since a massive cigarette advertising campaign was begun.

CIGARETTES

In the United States, tobacco consumption causes over 400,000 deaths per year and contributes to more than one of every six deaths. In 1988 alone, teenagers spent $1.26 billion on cigarettes and smokeless tobacco. Approximately 2 million teenagers begin smoking cigarettes each year. Despite the ban on television advertising of cigarettes, the prominent display of logos, billboards, and banners in televised sports events makes cigarette advertising on American television more prominent than ever before.

In two recent studies, one-third of 3-year-old children and nearly all children older than age 6 were able to recognize the Old Joe Camel logo. By age 6 the Camel logo is as familiar to children as Mickey Mouse.

Advertising for Camel cigarettes was more effective among children and adolescents than among adults. Camel’s share of the illegal children’s cigarette market represents sales of $476 million per year—one-third of all cigarette sales to minors.

BEER AND WINE

Alcoholic beverages represent a major health risk to American youth. In 1991, 14,727 young people who were 16 to 20 years of age died in alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes. In addition, alcohol is involved in more than one-fourth of teenage suicides and homicides, which are the second and third leading cause of deaths for that age group. Nonetheless, American children view nearly 2,000 beer and wine commercials per year on television. Alcohol advertising specifically targets young people by showing the supposed advantages of drinking—more friends, greater prestige, more fun, and greater sex appeal—and suggesting that without alcoholic beverages teens cannot have fun or be popular.

There is compelling public health interest in protecting children and adolescents against both cigarette and alcohol advertising. Counter-advertising aimed at alcoholic beverages or cigarettes is effective but rarely seen, especially when compared with ads against marijuana and cocaine.

RESPONSIBLE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Billions of dollars are being spent to encourage children and adolescents to buy products that are not healthy for them, with American advertising messages often including inappropriate sexual innuendo in an attempt to sell their products. Conversely, PSAs for abstinence and birth control products—which could prevent unwanted teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases including acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), remain largely forbidden by national network television. The 1985 Guttmacher report found that the United States has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the Western world due, in part, to inadequate access to birth control products, inappropriate depictions of sexuality in American media, and inadequate sex education. Guidelines for appropriate sexual content in advertising messages exist and should be followed.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

One conclusion might be to ban advertising directed at children under age 8 and recommend that all advertising directed toward adolescents should promote health. However, the viewing audience cannot be accurately sequestered by age, and a ban would also infringe on the rights of free speech directed at older children. Therefore, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following:

1. All toy-based programs (as defined by the FCC), since they truly represent commercials for products, should be regulated by the FCC.
2. There should be stricter enforcement of existing regulations that define the nature and content of educational programs. Strict and heavy fines should be imposed when such violations are proved.
3. There should be stricter limitations on the amount of advertising permitted on children’s television (eg, no more than 5 to 6 commercial minutes per hour on weekday or weekend programming). This would decrease the current limits by approximately 50%.
4. There should be increased funding of the Children’s Television Endowment Fund. Funds should be used to underwrite the production of high-quality, educational programming for children. This programming could be broadcast on either current public broadcasting systems or a new commercial-free public station for children. This fund should be augmented by a new 10% surcharge on advertisers who target children and adolescents.
5. There should be a ban on all tobacco and alcohol advertising in all media. This ban should include all “passive” advertising in sponsored sports events (ie, banners, logos, etc).
6. PSAs dealing with AIDS should emphasize the use of condoms as well as benefits of abstinence for adolescents. Broadcast of advertising for con-
dorns and other birth control products should also be increased through commercial channels targeted to adolescents and young adults, including cable.

7. “Anti-drug” PSAs should receive more prominent airing during prime time hours. Drug-related counter-advertising should target cigarettes and alcohol, in addition to marijuana and cocaine.

8. Funding should be increased to continue the study of the effects of television and other media on behaviors of children and adolescents.

9. Parents must educate children to be responsible and informed consumers. A variety of resources should be developed to help parents teach children that commercials are designed to sell products. These resources should be made available to parents through schools, libraries, and pediatricians’ offices. School-based curricula that teach children and adolescents media literacy should be developed and disseminated.

10. Parents, interested groups, committees of the Academy (nationally and locally), and pediatricians should monitor local television broadcasts to ensure adherence to existing limits on commercial time. There must be stronger support for strict FCC monitoring of local television stations’ adherence to the Children’s Television Act of 1990.

COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, 1993 TO 1994
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REFERENCES

ERRATUM


Under the heading entitled Beer and Wine on page 296, the statistic should have read "In 1993, 3137 young people who were 16 to 24 years of age died in alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes."

Also, on page 297, Reference 19 should be changed to the following:
Children, Adolescents, and Advertising
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Pediatrics 1995;95;295

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/95/2/295

An erratum has been published regarding this article. Please see the attached page for:
http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/95/5/708.full.pdf