

Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings

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Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings
Groups Argue Over Federal or Industry Limits on Food Ads Aimed at Kids

By Caroline E. Mayer
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The food fight is on -- again.

Yesterday, consumer activists and food manufacturers traded rhetorical barbs in the ongoing debate over whether government regulation or stricter voluntary industry standards are needed to address concerns about the marketing of food to children.

Nickelodeon said some of its popular characters will appear on vegetable packages. (Nickelodeon)

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A consumer group called on the government to require warning labels on sugar-laden soft drinks, claiming they are the biggest source of calories in the American diet.

Major food manufacturers countered that it is up to the industry to tighten its voluntary advertising rules to address health concerns. The Grocery Manufacturers Association said companies should not be allowed to pay television producers to strategically place their products in shows aimed at children.

Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings

Meanwhile, Nickelodeon, the nation's top children's television channel, said some of its most popular characters — SpongeBob SquarePants, Dora the Explora and Blue from "Blue's Clues" — will soon start appearing on packages of carrots and spinach and on milk cartons with the goal of enticing kids to eat healthful food.

The varying perspectives on how to address childhood obesity and unhealthy eating habits came the day before a two-day workshop, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Trade Commission, which will explore the effectiveness of the television industry's self-regulation efforts.

The government-chartered Institute of Medicine called last year for such a panel and urged the industry to develop strict advertising guidelines, after noting that the incidence of obesity has more than doubled in children since 1970.

The institute said food and beverage advertisers spend \$10 billion to \$12 billion a year to reach children. Although advertising has not been linked directly to obesity, it added, "it is evident that advertising increases food-purchase requests by children to parents, has an impact on children's product and brand preferences and affects their consumption behavior."

FTC Chairman Deborah Platt Majoras has made it clear that the workshop will not lead to new government rules. She told a group of lawyers this spring that "this is not the first step toward new government regulations to ban or restrict children's food advertising and marketing." However, she called on the food industry to "be a positive force" in encouraging more healthful eating habits among children.

Some consumer activists say the government needs to step in. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, which has aggressively sought stricter food labels and standards, yesterday asked the Food and Drug Administration to require health warnings on soft drinks. "Drinking too much non-diet soda may contribute to weight gain," was one suggestion. "Drink fewer non-diet soft drinks to help prevent tooth decay" was another.

"We recognize that such messages won't immediately solve the obesity problem — but they would be a useful reminder to both adults and kids to drink less," said the group's executive director, Michael F. Jacobson. The average 13- to 18-year-old boy drinks two 12-ounce cans of soda a day; the average teenage girl, 1 1/3 cans, Jacobson said.

The proposed warnings were attacked even before they were announced. The Center for Consumer Freedom — a nonprofit group funded by restaurant chains — ran full-page ads in some national newspapers yesterday. "CSPI bases its policy suggestions on the premise that people cannot make good food and beverage decisions without government

Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings

intervention in the form of bans, taxes, lawsuits and restrictions," the ad said.

The American Beverage Association said current nutrition labels provide consumers with the information they need. Besides, it noted, soft-drink consumption has declined since 1998. According to Beverage Digest, a trade publication, average per-capita consumption dropped from 576 12-ounce cans a year in 1998 to 558 cans in 2004. The main reason for the drop, said editor John Sicher, is the "phenomenal growth of bottled water."

"Requiring warning labels on food that is perfectly safe is a waste of everyone's time," said Richard Martin, a spokesman for the grocery manufacturers.

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Instead, the association, whose members sell \$530 billion of food and drink products annually, called for stricter voluntary rules governing ads aimed at children. In a preview of comments it plans to make at the workshop, the group said it will ask advertisers to substantially boost funding and staff for an industry group to review those ads.

Currently, the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) regularly reviews such ads, based on guidelines developed by the industry. It has an annual budget of \$650,000 and a staff of six -- too small, its critics say, to adequately police the billions of dollars in kids promotions.

Critics say the review unit has no enforcement tools and does not monitor new trends, such as promoting products to kids through online games.

The grocery association said CARU's guidelines should be clear that they apply to online games, computer games and video games. Similarly, the guidelines should be tightened to make sure licensed characters such as Scooby-Doo or Mickey Mouse are used appropriately to promote foods, although the group did not elaborate.

Susan Linn, a Harvard psychologist who is also a founder of the

Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, said, "These proposals may sound good, but they won't address the fundamental issue: By relying only on voluntary self-regulation we have turned our children over to an industry that generates profits by selling them junk food."

CARU director Elizabeth L. Lascoutx said her group is studying how to regulate online games. She said the manufacturers' suggestions "are for the most part things we already do, like prescreening ads. We've been doing that for the last 15 years."

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 - Next by Date: ***Allegations of fake research reach new highs in United States***
 - Previous by thread: ***got milk?***
 - Next by thread: ***Re: Debate Pops Open Over Soda Warnings***
 - Index(es):
 - ◆ ***Date***
 - ◆ ***Thread***