



## Marketing Unhealthy Food and Beverages to Youth via Mobile Devices

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### The Issue

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In recent years, the food and beverage industry has come under increased scrutiny for marketing unhealthy products to children. Through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), 16 companies have voluntarily pledged to promote only healthier dietary choices in advertising primarily directed to children under 12.<sup>1</sup> Companies' pledges were expanded in 2010 to include new and emerging digital and social media platforms, including mobile marketing.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, young people continue to be exposed to numerous forms of unhealthy food advertising on mobile devices. Many food and beverage companies are reaching young consumers via their cell phones, tablets, and iPod Touches through text messages, e-mails, social networks, and mobile apps. As mobile technology has advanced and become more integrated into children's and adolescents' lives, companies now can communicate directly with them wherever they are, at any time of the day, oftentimes without their parents' knowledge.

### The Facts

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#### *Use of Mobile Devices among Children and Adolescents*

Mobile devices such as cell phones, tablets and iPod Touches are becoming increasingly important in the lives of children and adolescents.

- ❖ **Children's use of mobile devices begins at a very young age, sometimes before they can read.** A recent study found that 37% of children 4-5 years old use a smartphone, iPod Touch, or tablet. That number increases to 47% among adolescents 12-14 years old.<sup>3</sup> Children access these mobile devices approximately five days a week, and an average session lasts just under one hour.<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ **Gaming is a popular activity among children using mobile devices.** Mobile devices to which children have access have an average of 12 apps. More than half (6.5) of those apps are games.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ **As children get older, their use of mobile devices grows.** In 2010, 75% of teens owned cell phones and 72% of teens sent text messages. Half of those teens sent at least 1,500 texts a month.<sup>6</sup> Forty-nine percent accessed the internet on their phones.<sup>7</sup> In addition, 46% of teens with mobile internet access visited social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in the past month.<sup>8</sup>

To tap into this growing opportunity to reach young consumers at any time, **company spending on mobile marketing continues to increase.** In 2011, companies spent \$1.7 million on mobile media. They are predicted to increase spending on mobile marketing another five-fold, to \$8.2 million in the next five years.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Mobile Marketing Strategies to Appeal to Children and Adolescents***

Marketing via mobile devices is new and rapidly changing. Therefore, data to quantify children's and adolescents' exposure to mobile marketing are limited. However, our research has identified numerous examples of food and beverage companies that use these new technologies in ways that appeal to children and adolescents.

- ❖ **Sugary drink companies have developed youth-oriented mobile apps.** We found 34 iPhone apps from soda and energy drink brands in 2010, including 10 promoting Coca-Cola Classic and 18 for the energy drink Red Bull. Most are creative and engaging. For example, Coca-Cola's *Magic Coke Bottle* and *Spin the Coke* apps allow users to play games using a virtual Coke bottle. *Spin the Coke* links with Facebook and lets users incorporate friends' profile photos. Red Bull's fast-paced game apps promote the companies' sports sponsorships and are popular among teens. For example, 41% of individuals who downloaded Red Bull's *Racing Challenge* app were 12-17 years old.<sup>10</sup>
- ❖ **Fast food companies also use mobile apps to attract youth.** Eight of the largest fast food restaurants offered iPhone applications with restaurant locators in 2010.<sup>11</sup> KFC featured an iPhone game in which users could customize their own "grill" (jewelry worn on the front teeth) on an animated mouth, and enter their own message. When held in front of the user's mouth and spoken into, the custom grill appeared to talk.<sup>12</sup> Newer apps from fast food restaurants provide quick response (QR) codes to access promotions or allow customers to pay with their mobile devices.
- ❖ **Food companies have developed apps with content to appeal to children.** For example, in Kellogg's *Apple Jacks* iPhone game app, "The race to the bowl is on! Play as Apple or CinnaMon as you race through the frozen Ice Kingdom, collecting tasty Apple Jacks cereal pieces for extra race points."<sup>13</sup> In Wrigley's *Candy Sports* app, players hit baseballs at a Skittles logo, kick footballs into a Starburst sign, and shoot free throws in a virtual basketball arena plastered with Life Savers Gummies banners. Although Kraft claims its *Dinner, Not Art* app is aimed at teens and young adults, the TV commercial for the app features two children.<sup>14</sup>
- ❖ **Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are now accessible on mobile devices, allowing companies to interact with young consumers wherever they are.** Food products are some of the most popular brands on Facebook. Coca-Cola surpassed 50 million Facebook "likes" in September, 2012, more than any other brand.<sup>15</sup> Starbucks leads in Facebook likes among restaurants at just over 32 million. Within a few months after its introduction, Kellogg's Krave became one of the most popular cereal Facebook pages with more than 300,000 likes.

Krave's page averaged 157,000 unique visitors each month – 24% of them were children 6-14 years old.<sup>16</sup> Unhealthy snack food brands also attract a large Facebook audience. For example, Oreo currently has nearly 28 million likes and Skittles has just over 23 million.<sup>17</sup>

- ❖ **Fast food and beverage companies, including Snapple, Sonic, Coke, Starbuck's and Domino's, use text messages to send promotions and regular brand reminders to individuals who sign up.** Snapple offers daily *Snapple Facts* to those who have signed up to receive text messages. For example, Snapple Real Fact #821 reads "It takes an interaction of 72 muscles to produce human speech."<sup>18</sup> Sonic uses text messages to promote its menu: "They are back & starting at \$1.99. SONICs creamy Cheesecake Bites w/ a crispy graham cracker crust & strawberry dipping sauce. See more @ <http://bit.ly/SqqAks>."<sup>19</sup>

### Recommendations for Protecting Children and Adolescents from Mobile Marketing

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- ❖ **CFBAI pledges must apply to all types of mobile marketing, including apps.** According to the CFBAI, "...apps downloaded by parents for their children don't qualify as child-directed advertising and should be free of any rules."<sup>20</sup> But it is not clear why video games, which are usually purchased by parents, are covered by industry pledges, while mobile apps that advertise unhealthy brands under the guise of gaming are not.
- ❖ **Mobile app ratings should be expanded to include commercial content and unhealthy eating messages.** Current ratings of mobile apps (e.g., through the Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB]) do not incorporate commercial content or promotion of junk food.<sup>21</sup> Descriptors alerting parents to this type of content will aid parents in identifying mobile apps that are appropriate for their children.
- ❖ **Mobile providers should offer more complete parental control options.** Options that allow parents to identify acceptable numbers for incoming calls, texts, and e-mails and to limit websites that can be accessed on their children's cell phones, would enable parents to protect their children and teens from marketing solicitations and other undesirable contacts, even when they're not at home.

*The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University is directed by Kelly D. Brownell, PhD, and seeks to improve the world's diet, prevent obesity, and reduce weight stigma by establishing creative connections between science and public policy. The Rudd Center conducts research to advance the science on food marketing to young people and identify opportunities to reduce marketing of unhealthy food to children and adolescents. This research is designed to address key gaps in the public health community's knowledge of the extent and effects of food marketing to youth and evaluate industry commitments to curb unhealthy food marketing targeted to children.*

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## ENDNOTES

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