

APPETITE FOR PROFIT

How The Food Industry Undermines
Our Health and How to Fight Back

Michele Simon

UNHEALTHY FOOD is available anywhere and at anytime in America. Grocery store aisles stock chips, soda, and ice cream. Fast-food chains are found on nearly every block and at just about every highway exit. Bookstores serve mocha lattes and extra large muffins. Children are getting their lunches from soda machines, vending machines, and snack bars. And for many Americans the corner liquor store or mini-mart where nourishment options range from Coke to Fritos, is the only place to buy food in their neighborhood. This ubiquitous availability of food is a very recent development in human history.

During the many thousands of years of human evolution, people struggled to scrape together enough food just to survive. In nature foods high in salt, sugar, and fat were also high in nutrients and calories, therefore humans evolved to seek out these flavors. Since food was scarce, people also evolved to store excess calories as fat. Humans are hardwired to prepare for famine. The survivors of hard times achieved longevity by storing fat efficiently, passing these genes on to their children.

Over the last century, the human diet has been radically altered. With the emergence of industrialization, transportation, and the commercialization of the food supply, the removal of nutrients from fatty, sugary, and salty foods through factory processing is common practice. The large quantities of animal products Americans eat today are very different from the lean meats early humans would occasionally find in nature.

Today's industrialized meat, eggs, and dairy products are artificially high in fat, hormones, and other additives. Manufacturers have made processed food artificially stimulating by isolating chemicals that cause pleasure reactions, creating new foods that don't exist in nature. A small number of multinational corporations focus on profits and new markets without consideration of public health, the environment, and the welfare of workers and farm animals.

For most Americans, nutrient-deficient, factory-made foods replace the natural food that humans by inherent nature are supposed to eat: mostly plant-based unprocessed foods such as whole grains, legumes, and fresh produce that are packed with the fiber and nutrients our bodies need.

The average American's daily caloric intake:

- ▶ 51 percent from processed foods (cereals, breads, crackers, chips, cookies, cakes, soft drinks, etc.)
- ▶ 42 percent from meat, eggs, or dairy.
- ▶ 7 percent from vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and seeds - foods the human body needs to prevent disease and are optimum for overall health.
- ▶ 24.5 percent overall increase (530 calories), between 1970 and 2000.

Early humans obtained 65 percent of their food energy from a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

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Soft drinks are the biggest source of calories, providing more than one-third of all refined sugars in the American diet. Over the past sixty years, soft drink production has increased tenfold; consumption has doubled since 1971. Soda provides the average teenage boy with about fifteen teaspoons of refined sugar per day and girls about ten teaspoons.

Most people lack access to affordable and sustainable alternatives to industrialized food.

- ▶ Many people are dependent on public transportation, making it difficult to get to large supermarkets or farmer's markets.
- ▶ Most grocery store chains do not sell a wide variety of natural whole grains.
- ▶ Most grocery store chain's fresh fruits or vegetables are often sterile, pesticide-laden, and nutritionally inferior.
- ▶ Produce in large chains is cultivated for extended shelf life, portability, and cosmetic uniformity, traits that benefit the seller, not the buyer.
- ▶ Large natural food retailers like Whole Foods are opening more stores, but the products at such high-end markets are unaffordable for most people.

Increasing health risks associated with poor diet include:

- ▶ Heart disease.
- ▶ Stroke.
- ▶ Type 2 diabetes.
- ▶ Cancer.
- ▶ Obesity.
- ▶ Malnutrition.
- ▶ Hypertension.

Cardiovascular disease is the highest cause of health related deaths in the U.S., killing more than 900,000 people in 2002. The total cost associated with such health problems is estimated at \$117 billion in 2000.

Sodas In Schools

With public schools so desperate for funding, districts are lured into signing exclusive contracts (also known as "pouring rights" deals) with major beverage companies, mainly Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. Often these deals are presented as being very lucrative to districts, with schools offered enticing incentives such as sports marquee or cash bonuses to sign. Soda companies present the deals as a charitable donation when in actuality the schools benefit far less than the companies do. Sometimes these contracts can lock a district in for many years with the same vendor and the same unhealthy options. Usually the amount of money a school district receives is dependent on soda sales, thus creating a conflict of interest between health and profit.

From 2003 to 2005, almost every state proposed legislation to address the sale of soda and junk food in public schools. Despite all the activity, results have been mixed. Many state policy makers have heard from nutrition advocates and are doing their best to respond. But only twenty-one states were successful in passing any bills during that period, and in at least ten instances, the bills were watered down, a result of political lobbying and compromise. In many other states, the bill as introduced was already weak due to corporate pressure.

State proposals to rid schools of unhealthy food and beverages has overwhelming public support, but in almost all states where bills fail or are weakened, trade associations and individual companies have a heavy hand in the lobbying. It is standard operating procedure for companies to join trade associations to lobby on the members' behalf to maximize efficiency and power. Another advantage is that trade groups can do the work without tarnishing the individual corporate image.

The following case study is one of many that illustrate lobbying tactics used by big industry. California's soda ban and politics by ultimatum:

1. California has been in the forefront of activity over school nutrition for years. The Los Angeles Unified School District (the nation's second largest) unanimously passed a policy that took effect in 2004 to no longer allow the sale of soda in schools, becoming the first in the nation to do so.
2. The nonprofit advocacy group California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) led the charge to pass this bill, sponsored by California state senator Deborah Ortiz, that would have banned soda sales in all public schools throughout the state, kindergarten through twelfth grade. CCPHA and others presented overwhelming scientific evidence of a growing public health menace caused by children drinking too much soda, much of which is consumed at school.
3. The soda industry mounted a strong opposition. According to Senator Ortiz, the industry front group Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF) hired two lobbying firms known for raising money for Republicans and moderate Democrats. Also, a nutritionist representing CCF testified against the bill, but did not disclose her affiliation and bias.
4. A combination of behind-the-scenes and up-front industry lobbying on the soda ban bill resulted in a proposed amendment that would allow high schools to be exempt, where most sodas in schools are sold. Such an exemption was never the intention of either the nutrition advocates or of Senator Ortiz, the people actually proposing the policy. What ensued was a legislative debate over whether high school students were old enough to make their own choices when it comes to drinking soda.
5. In the end, corporate lobbying forced an ultimatum. Either Ortiz's bill would die in its entirety, or it would survive. This meant banning sodas only for kindergarten through eighth grade. Ortiz took the compromise, but was very frustrated.

6. Some advocates were also troubled by the weakened legislation, including Jacqueline Domac, who helped get soda and junk food banned throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District. She states, "I find it quite interesting that we only care about kids until the eighth grade and suddenly in high school, their health is insignificant." She also points out, "It's during the high school years that kids form lifestyle habits. That's when a student decides between Coke and Pepsi, and that lasts for a lifetime."

Together, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, national and regional soft drink associations, the GMA and other business groups have undermined school nutrition policies with heavy-handed lobbying tactics all over the nation. Here are just a few of the many more examples of policies that were compromised or killed as a result of corporate pressure:

Arizona: In April 2005, Arizona passed a law that banned the sale of soft drinks and candy during the school day, but only for grades K-8. High schools were exempted as a compromise due to heavy industry lobbying. The provision that would have extended the ban to high schools was added and removed from the bill several times, and, ultimately, the soda lobby won.

Indiana: In June 2004, at the Summit on Obesity sponsored by *Time* magazine and ABC News, Tommy Thompson, then U.S. secretary of health and human services, claimed that Coca-Cola was a responsible company. In response, Charlie Brown, chairman of Indiana's Public Health Committee, asked why such a responsible corporate citizen would send a team of five lobbyists (including a regional vice president) to defeat his bill that would have reduced soda sales in schools by just 50 percent.

New Mexico: After a hard-fought battle in 2005 in the state legislature, pediatricians, school food directors and nutritionists gained approval to appoint an expert committee with the authority to establish nutrition standards for schools, with just one catch: the compromise legislation required the committee to include representatives of the beverage and food industry. At the first committee meeting, Danielle Greenburg, a doctor and obesity researcher, said that banning soft drinks in schools isn't the solution; rather, students need to be educated on how to balance what they eat. This doctor works for Pepsi.

Washington, D.C.: In 2003, D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) embarked on an effort to improve the beverage options that were supplied by Coca-Cola. But the company engaged in a concerted campaign to stall the effort. Foot-dragging took the form of claiming to conduct feasibility studies and economic analyses as well as never returning phone calls or e-mails. Coca-Cola Enterprises sent a vice president to a meeting with DCPS to challenge the nutrition standards that advocates had put forward, complaining that the company had not been adequately consulted and would lose money.

While Coca-Cola and PepsiCo are trying to position themselves as “part of the solution” by providing schools with “free” educational materials on nutrition and exercise, behind the scenes, they are undermining school nutrition policy.

The soda industry is fond of evoking all-American values such as “freedom” and “choice.” Kari Bjorhus is Coca-Cola’s director of health and nutrition communications. She states that the company “offers a wide variety of beverage choices and it’s up to the school to decide which beverages they want to offer their students.” The company has a program it calls “Your Power to Choose,” which it created in response to the school debate, but then interferes with schools trying to make healthier choices.

The language of an exclusive soda contract with a school means that the soda company makes the decisions as to what products are sold and how much is sold. The very nature of an exclusive contract restricts choice because schools cannot bring in healthier beverages from other vendors without risking violating the contract.

The freedom of choice argument was made in the California battle over soda in high schools—that high school students should be able to make their own choices. But Michael Butler, legislative advocate for the California State PTA, says that’s not a valid argument. “I can understand students making healthy choices. But we don’t put cigarette vending machines in high schools to allow students to have a ‘choice,’” he said.

Many choices are made for high school students. The fact that they are required to attend school means that as a society, people are making decisions regarding their well-being that limit their choice because it is in their best interests. Allowing students to make healthier choices begins with giving them a healthy option.

The Role of Corporate Marketing

Food marketers spend around \$36 billion a year soliciting their products. Studies show that advertising influences people. Children continue to be a focal point in large companies, such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s marketing campaigns. The food industry understands the power of shaping the public health debate and hires highly trained Public Relations experts to coordinate media strategy and develop key talking points. Food lobbyist’s provide distraction, misdirection, or obfuscation whenever possible to avoid talking about corporate accountability.

The PR campaigns are designed to maintain profits by accomplishing two important goals:

- ▶ Demonstrate positive public images.
- ▶ Deflect the threat of government regulation and lawsuits.

Educational campaigns such as the government’s “5 a Day” program (which encourages people to eat five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day) are ineffective in

bringing about behavioral change. U.S. Government surveys show Americans consume far below this recommendation. Many people find it difficult to obtain these fresh healthy foods in their neighborhoods. And it is contradictory to teach children about good nutrition while continuing to serve soda, chips, and candy in schools.

Most public health experts now recognize the critical role of government and society at large in shaping food choices. Food companies are lobbying against any legislative efforts to improve the “food environment.” They know that as long as they keep the nation focused on education and individual choice, the present situation is in essence assured. Changing the way food is produced, sold, and marketed represents a genuine threat to the corporate bottom line.

Corporations often employ the following strategies:

- ▶ Form scientific front groups (organizations that claims to represent an agenda while serving third party interests; sponsorship is either hidden or rarely mentioned).
- ▶ Give money to health experts.
- ▶ Make incongruous arguments.
- ▶ Organize backroom political dealings.
- ▶ Criticize health advocates.
- ▶ Detract attention from the issues.

American’s food choices are influenced by a complex set of laws that involve political power. The federal government provides corn growers with massive subsidies, which results in the production of high fructose corn syrup, the inexpensive sweetener found in almost every processed food and a significant contributor to health problems. Corporate lobbying effects federal food policy decisions over nutritional science.

By pooling large sums of money to support third-party organizations, individual corporations gain greater lobbying power. The following is a list of trade associations and front groups engaged in various lobbying activities on behalf of the corporate food industry.

Grocery Manufacturers Association

The GMA’s 140 members consist of every major food manufacturer, accounting for combined annual sales of more than \$680 billion. GMA is on record as opposing virtually every state bill that would restrict the sale of junk food or soda in schools, in addition to other nutrition policies.

National Restaurant Association

The NRA's sixty thousand member companies represent more than 300,000 dining establishments. They strongly oppose providing nutritional information, and are determined to block access to the courtroom by consumers who might be harmed by eating its members' food.

Center for Consumer Freedom

This organization is a lobbying front for the restaurant, food, beverage, and alcohol industries. The CCF consistently portrays nutrition-policy advocates as "food cops" and radicals.

The American Council for Fitness and Nutrition

The ACFN is supported by some of the largest food industry corporations including Coca-Cola and Kraft Foods, along with several trade associations such as the Association of National Advertisers, the GMA, and the NRA. In addition to lobbying for its member companies, the ACFN publishes industry-friendly articles in both the academic press and the general media, usually without revealing its corporate backing.

Corporate Profits vs. National Health

The most important guiding principle of every corporation is maximizing profits for shareholders. This imperative is clarified by Nobel Prize-winning economist and free market champion Milton Friedman, who asserts, "The only social responsibility of business is to make a profit." Friedman believes that, while corporate managers shouldn't completely ignore social concerns, managers are to act on them only when it would result in increased profits. Under a free enterprise system, corporations cannot place moral or ethical concerns ahead of profit maximization because doing so risks being driven out of business by competing firms that are not similarly plagued by social conscience. The food industry is an example of this model.

An important way in which corporations maintain high profits is by "externalizing costs." One accounting expert estimates that in 1995 alone U.S. corporations would have had to pay \$3.5 trillion if required to cover expenses that their business activities generated, such as health-care costs incurred as a result of work-related injuries, unsafe products, and pollution, a figure four times greater than the \$822 billion they earned in profits that year.

Industrial food manufacturing involves appropriating raw materials from nature and turning them into profitable commodities. Kellogg, for example, takes whole corn, removes almost all naturally occurring nutrients, adds sugar, salt, and chemical additives to maximize flavor, stability, and shelf life, and puts the ingredients through a complex manufacturing process to create Corn Pops.

Nearly every flour-based product on supermarket shelves goes through a similar process:

- ▶ Cereals
- ▶ Breads
- ▶ Crackers
- ▶ Chips
- ▶ Cookies
- ▶ Cakes, etc.

All major sources of excess calories and a serious threat to America's health.

Other food companies like McDonald's, and Coca-Cola also maximize profit by taking raw materials such as wheat, potatoes, salt, and sugar and process them with chemical additives. Companies make more money selling unhealthy food because truly healthy food doesn't come in a box. They simply cannot produce healthy food in a way that both maximizes profits and benefits public health.

Whole, unprocessed grains are rich in fiber and nutrients, and can contribute significantly to good health. Their regular consumption is associated with a decreased risk of heart disease and certain cancers. The federal government's updated 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans urges people to increase their daily intake of whole grains. The guidelines offer an explanation for why it is important to choose whole-grain foods such as brown rice over products made with highly processed white flour.

The government's advice is to eat more grains in their natural, unprocessed form, rather than those that come in relatively nutrient-deficient packaged products. Now, the dietary guidelines are a tool for marketing reformulated "whole grain" versions of the "classic" processed foods. The products that remain are nutritionally deficient despite the nominal addition of whole grains.

Mounting awareness that junk food consumption may be related to obesity and other diet-related public health problems packaged-food companies are discovering ways to position themselves as "part of the solution." Certain leading food companies, such as Kraft, McDonald's, and General Mills, have launched massive PR campaigns aimed at convincing policy makers and Americans that they are committed to making substantive changes that will redound to the benefit of the nation's health.

A major goal of the PR strategy is aimed at persuading legislators and concerned citizens that government oversight of the food industry is unnecessary and that "self-regulation" is the answer. In making their case for this approach, food makers contend that they can be trusted to regulate themselves and act as "responsible corporate citizens" respecting social and environmental interests without being governmentally mandated, even when it comes to controversial issues such as junk food marketing to children.

There are potential problems with the self-regulation model.

- ▶ Corporate conduct is voluntary, allowing for potential irresponsible business practice.
- ▶ Corporations may not be objective in determining optimum health standards when they employ their own expert advisory boards.
- ▶ Their privately administered public health policies are not subject to public debate and discussion.
- ▶ Food companies are free to devise their own nutritional guidelines, leaving consumers confused without any clear guidance from federal regulators on how to assess these claims.

Many food corporations, trade associations, and industry front groups admit there is a problem, but state it is up to each individual person to make better choices at supermarkets and restaurants. They also claim it is each person's duty to make positive lifestyle changes, such as exercising more.

Those who advocate policy-based solutions do not believe that individual behavior is irrelevant. They suggest that government has an important role to play in helping people make better, more informed choices and lead healthier lives. The argument that people should assume personal responsibility for their food choices supposes that everyone has equal access to the information needed to make decisions intelligently.

In recent years more information has become available about the health consequences of eating the standard American diet, which consists largely of high-fat animal products and a wide assortment of highly processed, nutritionally deficient foods, but not everyone fully understands the food industry's role in contributing to this widespread health problem.

The Obesity Epidemic

In December 2001, the U.S. surgeon general released the "call to action" on obesity to the media, policy makers, and the general public. This report's statistics show that close to two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, making it the most visible marker of America's diet-related health problems. With rising rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, today's generation of children may be the first to have shorter lives than their parents. Obesity is also rising in developing countries as Western foods are increasingly marketed overseas.

Food companies, trade associations, and industry front groups often portray lack of exercise as the "true cause" of (and hence the solution to) the obesity epidemic. In responding to pressure to get soda out of schools, the American Beverage Association releases this slogan: "It's about the Couch, Not the Can."

The Grocery Manufacturers Association believes obesity is too complex to be reduced to a single "solution" (e.g., food), as their statement reflects: "Effective solutions to obesity

must take a comprehensive approach, incorporating sound nutrition, increased physical activity, consumer and parent education, and community support.”

The Center for Consumer Freedom has two seemingly contradictory positions:

- ▶ One - lack of exercise is the principal cause of obesity.
- ▶ Two - there is no obesity epidemic.

The high levels of obesity in the United States are attributable to both physical inactivity and unhealthy eating, and both must be addressed to help reduce obesity, heart disease, cancer, and other diseases. Most Americans are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity. Existing data and societal trends suggest that activity levels were already low by 1980, when obesity rates started to increase.

Major societal trends leading to decreased physical activity beginning before 1980:

- ▶ Moving to the suburbs.
- ▶ Shifting to an information economy.
- ▶ More desk jobs.
- ▶ Reliance on the car.
- ▶ The wide availability of labor-saving devices.

Americans are relying increasingly on restaurants to feed themselves and their families. People are eating out twice as much as they did in 1970. The National Restaurant Association (NRA) estimates that, on a typical day, more than four out of ten adults patronize restaurants.

Restaurant chains are refusing to provide even the most basic nutrition information to help people exercise more personal responsibility. Providing nutrition information would allow people to make informed choices. Two-thirds of Americans support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information, such as calories, on menus.

Eating out is associated with higher calorie intakes and higher body weights:

- ▶ Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant as compared to eating at home (770 vs. 420).
- ▶ Portion sizes at restaurants are often large, and for just a little more money, customers can upgrade to larger serving sizes.
- ▶ Adults and children get about one-third of their calories from restaurants and other food-service establishments.

Most of the added salt, sugar, and fat Americans consume is hidden either in processed foods or in restaurant meals.

- ▶ About 90 percent of salt intake comes from food processing, preparation, and flavoring.
- ▶ Only 10 percent is a natural element of the food itself. The few remaining hunter-gatherer cultures that do not have access to commercial salt show no signs of high blood pressure.

Nutrition labeling on packaged foods in supermarkets is effective in helping people to make healthier food choices.

- ▶ Americans rank nutrition second only to taste as the factor most frequently influencing food purchases.
- ▶ Three-fourths of adults report using food labels.
- ▶ People who read nutrition labels are more likely to have a diet lower in fat and cholesterol and higher in vitamin C.
- ▶ Packaged-food labeling has resulted in reformulation of existing products to improve their nutritional quality.
- ▶ Packaged-food labeling has resulted in the introduction of new, nutritionally improved (low-fat, low-sodium, etc.) products.
- ▶ The rise in obesity rates began before “Nutrition Facts” labels were required on packaged foods which have been required since 1994.

Marketing to Children

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has jurisdiction over broadcasting and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is responsible for monitoring advertising. In 1978, the FTC attempted to stop junk food marketing to kids with its infamous “Kid-Vid” initiative. Tracy Westen, then deputy director of the FTC’s Bureau of Consumer Protection (under Chairman Michael Pertschuk) was in charge of the unsuccessful proposal.

At the time, the main health concern was dental cavities and the long-term impact of diets high in sugar. The chief objective was advertising aimed at very young children, up to age six, who couldn’t understand what ads were. The FTC proposal included banning all TV ads to young children and banning ads for highly sugary products aimed at older kids. They believed that even older kids lack the ability to understand serious long-term health consequences.

Westen says that while the agency concluded that young kids were deceived by TV advertising, the difficulty was in drafting a workable remedy, because kids and adults watch TV together. Three years later, the FTC terminated the effort without taking any

action. The advertising industry raised \$16 million to lobby against the rule making, an amount equal to one-quarter of the FTC's budget at the time.

The Federal Trade Commission encounters:

- ▶ Being called a “national nanny” in a Washington Post editorial.
- ▶ Congress stripping the commission of part of its jurisdiction over marketing aimed at children.
- ▶ A loss of authority that persists to this day.
- ▶ The passage of a congressional bill allowing the House and Senate to veto any rule making by the agency (legislation that was later overturned by the Supreme Court).
- ▶ President Ronald Reagan's appointment of Republican James Miller as FTC chair (Miller was committed to ending the commission's rule-making authority).
- ▶ A federal court disqualifies FTC chairman Michael Pertschuk for being biased. Although he was later reinstated on First Amendment grounds, the chairman ultimately recused himself from the proceedings under political pressure.

Corporations Change the Topic to Exercise

In November 2005, PepsiCo opened a playground in a Washington, D.C. preschool, the first of thirteen planned sites. Brock Leach, PepsiCo's chief innovation officer, explains that funding playgrounds is “all about moving more, helping kids move more.” The equipment bears the company's “Smart Spot” logo, which is also placed on food packaging. They claim it is to help consumers make healthier food choices among PepsiCo's products (including choices such as Diet Pepsi and Baked Lays). The cost of the playground was about \$850,000. The company's revenues in 2005 equaled more than \$32 billion.

McDonald's is also encouraging kids to get fit. In January 2005, McDonald's Chief Creative Officer Marlena Peleo-Lazar tells a government panel concerned with food marketing to children that Ronald McDonald has transformed from “chief happiness officer” into an “ambassador for an active, balanced lifestyle” and is visiting elementary schools to promote exercise with his new image of wearing sporty attire. Reuters news service says, “The reincarnated Ronald is part of McDonald's aggressive effort to deflect widespread media criticism of its food as unhealthy and fattening.”

Food companies and their lobbyists promote education along with exercise as key components of the personal responsibility solution, stating individuals need to be better educated, so that they can make dietary decisions that are right for them based on their personal energy needs and health concerns. Corporations are increasingly providing health education materials to schools.

Soda companies are focusing on schools with “get healthy” messages. In the fall of 2005, Coca-Cola spends \$4 million on an educational program called “Live It!” developed for 8,500 public middle schools. The week-long program features videos in which cyclist Lance Armstrong and other famous sports figures encourage children to be active.

Coke's lesson plan, which reached approximately two million students nationwide, contains some nutritional tips, but makes no mention of beverage consumption.

Also around the same time, soda maker PepsiCo provides its package of "forward-thinking" educational materials. Pepsi's "Balance First" fitness program was initially developed for around three million elementary school students, but made it to all of the nation's 15,000 middle schools.

Compared to other social issues, such as the environment, only a few national advocacy organizations work on nutrition. Such groups include:

- ▶ The Center for Science in the Public Interest.
- ▶ The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.
- ▶ Commercial Alert.

Those who seek to improve school food believe that schools should be a safe haven from corporate messages to get kids to eat the wrong foods. Across the nation, parents, teachers, health professionals, and others are taking action. Some groups concerned with more than just childhood obesity, such as the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and Commercial Alert, are calling for the complete removal of vending machines and all forms of marketing to children in schools.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest's 2003 report, "Pestering Parents: How Food Companies Market Obesity to Children," discloses strategies the corporate food industry uses to market to kids.

- ▶ Studies document that a high percentage of advertisements for children featuring candy, fast foods, and snacks increases consumption of these products.
- ▶ Each year children see forty thousand television commercials, most of which are for unhealthy foods.

Marketing to children has changed drastically over the last few years. For example, "advergaming" product promotion in video games has become a permanent part of the marketing inventory. Every major food company now uses this device, which is attractive to marketers given that the average amount of time a kid spends on a gaming website (twenty-six minutes) far exceeds the duration of a standard television commercial.

Alarmed by this trend, advocacy groups negotiated a compromise in late 2005 with broadcasters and the FCC. The agreement is aimed at protecting children from "interactive television", an emerging technology that promises, among other things, to give children the ability to order a pizza while watching TV.

Questions regarding the scientific connection between junk food marketing and children's health were resolved in late 2005 when the government advisory committee, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), released a report. The five hundred-

paged document, the collective effort of sixteen experts (including several from the food industry) assesses the influence of food advertising directed at kids.

Reviewing hundreds of studies, the Institute of Medicine finds that such marketing:

- ▶ Promotes preferences for high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages.
- ▶ Encourages children to request and consume these products.

While the committee says that no direct causal link has been established, it concludes that “the statistical association between ad viewing and obesity is strong” and that “even a small influence would amount to a substantial impact when spread across the entire population.” Ellen Wartella, a member of the IOM committee (and advisor to Kraft Foods) acknowledges: “We can’t anymore argue whether food advertising is related to children’s diets. It is.”

Positive Change

Social and political movements questioning the current food system desire to create more holistic alternatives to the present food system, and provide all people with access to healthy, locally grown food. They believe in order to make a fundamental shift as a society, there must be changes in the way people produce, transport, market, and sell food both in this country and around the world and create viable policies and institutions to support such changes.

Alternatives to the current food system include:

- ▶ Sustainable agriculture.
- ▶ Community food security.
- ▶ Food justice.
- ▶ “Buy local” campaigns.

Sustainable agriculture advocates do not see McDonald’s salads as the answer. They promote alternative food systems based on organic and sustainable farming practices designed to preserve the ecology.

Sustainable agriculture efforts include:

- ▶ Farmers’ markets.
- ▶ Community-supported agriculture (buying shares in a local farm).
- ▶ Community gardens.
- ▶ Independent stores and co-ops.

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One such program is called “farm-to-school,” through which local farmers supply school lunch programs with fresh, healthful produce. There are hundreds of alternative movements throughout the country, and their numbers are growing.

Suggestions on how to get ideas out into the public:

- ▶ **The media:** Write op-ed articles and letters to the editor of local newspapers about the problems related to the current food system.
- ▶ **Newsletters:** Run a feature story on nutrition policy and the corporate control of the food supply.
- ▶ **Conferences:** “Obesity” conferences are becoming more popular. Attend a meeting, request that the organizers broaden the agenda from the usual individual behavior-change model to the public health problems created by an industrial food system and alternatives to it (e.g., farmers’ markets and community-based agriculture).
- ▶ **Workplace:** Host lunchtime discussions with colleagues about the effects of the present food system on diet and health. Discuss alternatives.
- ▶ **Houses of worship/community centers:** Host talks at local churches or social groups about community-based challenges to healthy eating.

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Resources for Positive Change:

Nutrition and Children's Advocacy

www.commercialexploitation.org

www.informedeating.org

www.cspinet.org

www.choiceusa.net

www.foodsecurity.org

www.foodstudies.org

www.farmtoschool.org

www.noharm.org

www.parentsagainstjunkfood.org

www.phaionline.org

www.organicconsumers.org

www.smallplanetinstitute.org

State Groups

www.publichealthadvocacy.org

www.thefoodproject.org

www.nojunkfood.org

www.peoplesgrocery.org

www.agribusinessaccountability.org

www.restaurant.org

Tracking Legislation and Lobbying

www.prwatch.org

www.sourcewatch.org

www.publicintegrity.org

www.opensecrets.org

www.ConsumerDeception.com

www.corporations.org

www.foiadvocates.com

www.followthemoney.org

www.ReclaimDemocracy.org

If you like this summary, you'll definitely want to order the complete book *Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back*.

