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## Ethics in Selling Products to Children

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**Abstract:**

*Advertising to children and teens is a big business. Advertising to children works because children are so easy to influence, where the ethical issues begin. Children aren't mature enough to know advertisers are marketing to them. As we know the food preferences of children can be influenced by a commercial. Because like adults, young children do not have the capacity to fully understand the purpose of advertising. With much of the world still new to them, they want to try all of it. Therefore, when children see an ad for a new toy or food, they want to try it. A primary goal for children should be to develop a healthy relationship to food.*

**Keywords:** Advertising, Ethics, Selling products to children, Government's Role

### 1. Introduction

When we talk about selling products to children the only thing come to our mind is that they like those products which have free gifts with them. Generally the gifts include toys, tattoos, and stickers. Advertising to children works because children are so easy to influence. Children are not mature enough to know advertisers are marketing to them. At the very young age, they want to try each and every thing which they see nearby. Therefore, when children see an ad for a new toy or food, they want to try it. Advertisers are marketing their products to children through other media in addition to television. Which means advertisers are not only using television to advertise their products but they are also using different types of media whether it's a newspaper, banners, hoardings etc. Various forms of media include television, magazines, radio, newspapers and internet sites. It is everywhere from billboards, on buses and hot-air balloons, irrespective whether people like it or not. The advertisers have knowledge about how much children and teens now use the Internet and social media, and on the basis of this they reach out to them through banner ads on sites they frequently use.

Now Advertising is in a state where it is moving away from focus on products. Because at present more focus is there towards focus on customers. The companies are only concerned with how to increase the number of customers for their products and services but don't pay attention to the quality of the product which is being sold out in the market. Advertising helps the companies in the success of their offerings. As we know the food preferences of children can be influenced by a commercial. Because like adults, young children do not have the capacity to fully understand the purpose of advertising. Until the age of about eight, they don't even understand the selling concept and tend to believe what they see. A primary goal for children should be to develop a healthy relationship to food. Which should be look after by their parents. Because they have experience and knowledge so that they can make a judgement about the products before purchase.

The two major parties in any advertising campaign are advertising agencies and the media. As we know there are so many parties for advertising but not even a single one is doing its work ethically. So for the sake of customer, this behaviour of the companies should be look after by the government. As this is harmful for the society. While some countries have taken steps to ban all advertising to children, the U.S. takes the approach that parents bear most of the responsibility for monitoring their children's use of media and discussing proper choices with them. The federal law also prohibits the advertising which is unfair. Similarly, false or misleading advertising is not allowed under most state consumer protection statutes. If a young child cannot even understand the purpose of an advertisement, then marketing anything to that child is both unfair and deceptive. This problem is not restricted solely to the toy industry. In fact, the food, beverage, confectionary, and even financial, fashion and technology sectors are creating more and more marketing campaigns specifically targeted at children.

There are many problems associated with the products. Out of which some are discussed here. First is alcoholism, which is a big problem of our society, especially when it is in the hand of teenagers. Alcoholic parents, peer pressure, and media factor are the reasons why children participate in the consumption of alcohol. Out of all these factors, the media is the most influential factor and generally unregulated. We know that according to the law the alcohol companies can not advertise their products in the media like television but we still find the advertisement for these type of products. Because these companies are using surrogate advertising to advertise their products. These companies are targeting the teenagers because they know that if they can recruit children now, they can retain or secure them as future consumers. The advertisement portrays the fun of drinking but not the

dangers involved. A study funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) significantly shows that alcohol advertising does influence young drinkers. Secondly, tobacco advertisers use unethical methods to sell tobacco products. By aiming advertisement on children and minor will influence them toward a highly addictive and harmful product. Tobacco companies faces various restriction imposed by government. Tobacco companies have failed to live up to the ethical norms of the duty to do no harm. Critics have argued advertisement has influenced consumers to consume more of these products and the harmful impact would diminish by removing or cutting such advertisements.

## 2. Ways to Prevent Unethical Advertising to Kids

Media expert Jean Kilbourne argues in her book "Can't Buy My Love" that advertising can alter a person's self-esteem, goals and opinions. Unethical advertising can be damaging to kids because children are inherently vulnerable, companies have a special burden to avoid unethical marketing practices targeted toward kids. Kilbourne argues that one of the primary issues with advertising is that it supports traditional **gender roles**. Girls are taught that they should be submissive to boys and men, and boys are taught that violence is an important part of male identity. According to journalist Cordelia Fine in her book "Delusions of Gender", girls who don't play with blocks or trucks may not develop good spatial reasoning skills. Advertisers should try to show both boys and girls playing with trucks, cars, blocks and dolls rather than conveying the message that dolls are only for girls and trucks are only for boys.

Advertisements that teach children that they are inferior if they don't have a specific product are unacceptable. Not all families can afford the products marketed to their children. So companies should try making products at several price points or advertising less expensive products. Emphasize that a product is fun rather than telling children it is necessary for them. Children whose parents can afford a product will buy it, and poorer children will not be left feeling inferior because they can't afford a specific product. Children of middle-class Indians take important decisions in the home, thereby contributing majority to house-hold budget contours; from buying goods and cars to cell-phones and grocery, and even insurance policies. Children under the age of thirteen are deciding which brands their parents should or should not buy. They are now not mute spectators in major purchase decisions. Even in items not directly concerning them they have strong preferences. Children are known to have strong tastes and preferences, and advertising surely has an impact on them. Government must put restriction on advertisements of unhealthy foods and beverages to children. Children should be made aware that most of the food categories advertised by marketers were not good for their health. Nonetheless, they will continue to consume it because most of this category food is highly addictive, thus, being highly dangerous health-wise.

Consumers at younger and younger ages, and a variety of influences and experiences shape their consumer habits. Now-a-days the packaged and processed food has increasingly become a high involvement product. Today's children have more power in decision-making within the family. "Pester Power" refers to children's ability to nag their parents into purchasing item they may not otherwise buy. Thus, children are playing a vital role in buying of any good or service in the market. The food marketers have adopted unethical strategies to promote their products to the customers, particularly children. Food safety concerns gain importance in light of recent rise in obesity levels especially among children. The marketing of "junk food" is done in such a way that it makes them attractive to young children although it provides very low nutrient content. The junk foods mainly include energy-dense fast foods like the puff pastries and burgers containing large quantity of margarine, mayonnaise, butter or cheese. Though these food products are claimed to be manufactured using the best technology under most hygienic standards by trained professionals, they generally tend to be High in Fats, Sugars and Salts contributing to an environment of more obese people with diet-related non-communicable diseases like the cardio-vascular diseases, osteoporosis, certain forms of cancer and high blood pressure. Today's marketing techniques are highly effective and encourage regular consumption of food with low nutritional content.

## 3. Literature Review

According to the American Psychological Association, children under the age of eight cannot understand that advertising is persuasive content. They don't have the critical thinking skills to evaluate advertising. Because of this vulnerability, the APA argues that advertising targeted to children under eight is unethical and potentially damaging. According to the American Academy of Paediatrics, the average child views about 3,000 advertisements a day online, on television, on billboards and in print media. It is impossible that children will remain unaffected by these ads, so advertisers have a burden to ensure that their ads are not harmful. Images that condone violence, excessive materialism and poor treatment of others should be avoided. Instead, focus should be on advertisements that convey useful information.

The American Academy of Paediatrics believes that the advertising directed at children and adolescents may promote choices that contribute to obesity, poor nutrition and cigarette and alcohol use. Cigarette smoking, in particular, may be influenced more by advertising than by having peers who smoke. According to the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, fast food television advertising to children ages 2 to 11 increased 34 percent from 2003 to 2009 and 39 percent for teens 12 to 17. Meanwhile, 84 percent of parents report taking their children to a fast food restaurant at least once a week.

Brilliantly marketed highly salty foods are being deliberately targeted for our children's lunchboxes. According to Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH) the promotion of extremely high salt foods targeted at school lunchboxes is an unethical marketing practice. According to consumer marketing reports the average lunchbox consists of savoury sandwiches, a processed snack product and drink. CASH surveyed 23 items used in children's lunchboxes. Over 80% used a combination of marketing techniques, including packaging, positioning, promotion and price, to enhance sales. The worst cases surveyed, using up to a combination of 10 marketing techniques on one product. Each used a combination of marketing techniques specifically aimed at children and busy parents. These included;

- In-pack promotions, including games and colouring in
- Health claims such as high in Calcium, equivalent to one glass of milk
- Convenient packaging, with 'ideal for lunches' or combination lunch packs
- TV advertisements specifically aimed at children,
- Vouchers for schools,
- Discounts such as buy 3 at the price of 2
- Multi-buy packs.

The liking for salty foods is a learned taste preference set in childhood and so encouraging children to eat high levels of salt, which increases the risk of developing stroke and heart disease later in life. High salt intakes have also linked to osteoporosis, stomach cancer, asthma and kidney disease.

"The systematic targeting of children by the food industry who wish to habituate children to highly salted processed foods is immoral, parents need to be more aware of these tactics and make sure that their children eat more healthy foods with far less salt." Said Professor McGregor, Chairman of CASH.

CASH calls for a reduction in the amount of salt in processed foods and for food manufacturers to conduct themselves in a more socially responsible manner. Marketing practices that enable food producers to sustain longer-term growth should not be at the expense of our children's health.

#### 4. Objectives of the Study

- To find out the various ethical issues in selling products to children.
- To understand why ethics are important in selling products to children.
- To evaluate the government's rules in selling products to children.

#### 5. Research Methodology

This section deals with the methodological steps adopted in the present study. Secondary source of information have been used in this study. Previous studies have been reviewed in order to develop a conceptual framework underlying ethics in selling products to children. Articles published in leading journals, economic dailies, business magazines, newspapers, books, committee reports worldwide including India, empirical studies published in the professional and academic journals and websites have been consulted for developing the theoretical framework for the study. The aim of this article encompasses a description of the "ethics in selling products to the children" construct from a theoretical perspective.

#### 6. Findings

Selling unhealthy products to children is big problem faced by the parents in the present world. Excessive screen time is linked to problems ranging from unhealthy eating, sleep disturbance, and poor school performance. Child obesity is a growing problem in today's society. The results of all this aggressive marketing of fast food, soft drinks and candy to children is a Country of Over-Weight Children. If the younger generation ate unhealthy food, they were likely to be unhealthy adults, & would be a big burden on the society.

#### 7. Challenges to Unethical Food Marketing

According to Welsh Report (2006), the "Food Quality" strategy is underpinned by three ethical principles:

##### 7.1. Well-being

- Food should be safe and nutritious, contributing to public health and reducing the burden of diet-related ill-health.
- Food production and consumption should contribute to social and community cohesion and to the health and well-being of the environment and farm animals.

##### 7.2. Justice

- Food should be accessible and affordable to all.
- Food should be traded fairly, respecting the needs and rights of all people involved in the process of getting food from farm to fork.

##### 7.3. Accountability

- The whole food chain should be transparent to public scrutiny and answerable to all people who depend on it.
- Food should be accurately and honestly labelled, in line with national and international food safety regulations, enabling citizens to make choices.

#### 8. Role of Government

The Government must do something in this regard. State governments are charged with the responsibility of implementing the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954 and the PFA Rules, 1955, a Central legislation that lays down minimum quality norms for various food products. But enforcement of this law is absolutely lax. The State administrations' excuses include inadequate trained manpower to detect law-breakers. The potent combination of unethical businessmen and pliant food inspectors means compromised consumer welfare. Now the Government should tightened the screws on the adulterators. State governments must shed their apathy and bring defaulters to book by enforcing the food law ruthlessly. The deficiencies in the

food quality standards that the industry has pointed out should be addressed immediately. The Edible Oil Packaging (Regulation) Order, 1998 should be implemented, to start with, for refined oils and vanaspati. The edible oil import policy and tariff structure should be reviewed so as to remove anomalies. The industry and trade associations must evolve a code of conduct for their constituents and follow self-imposed discipline.

In the past few years, several initiatives have been taken by successive Governments. They have the three tier quasi-judicial machinery; we have the Central, State and District Consumer Protection Councils; they have also set up a Consumer Welfare Fund for encouraging voluntary consumer organizations and NGOs to strengthen consumer movement in the country, especially in the rural and backward areas. They have also the National Consumer Helpline, a toll free facility, initiated in March 2005, to deal with problems related to defective products, deficiency in services and unfair trade practices, benefiting the consumers. But the question is, how many people are aware of the existence of these safeguards and legal initiatives and how many are able to actually take advantage of them? This is where an effective awareness campaign assumes importance.

### **9. Conclusion**

It is impossible to completely shield children from marketing messages. The Government has also helped by implementing few regulations that will ensure that unethical targeting is stopped. It may be concluded that the parents should aware with the unethical marketing practices in children's food to protect their kids. And they should guide their kids about the health benefits of each product.

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