

Financing Food Justice



Obesity in youth remains a grave public health threat, in the U.S. and globally. According to a recent analysis by the Centers for Disease Control, teenagers' obesity rates increased in the last decade, and the rates for children remain more than double (and for adolescents, quadruple) what they were in 1980.

We know from studies that children are particularly susceptible to food marketing and that it has the power to shape youths' diets. ICCR members are asking food manufacturers, retailers and media, particularly social media companies with young audiences, to implement prudent policies that will restrict messaging and marketing that promotes junk food.

An increasing amount of marketing takes place online, so this is an important topic in ICCR's engagements. In its last analysis of food industry spending on advertising to children in 2012, the FTC found that while companies modestly decreased their spending on TV ads directed at youth, they spent a dramatic 50% more on digital advertising. But this increased spending figure doesn't nearly capture the importance of these new forms of promotion, because companies are not only purchasing ad space on websites but turning users of social media into brand ambassadors, multiplying consumer exposures when an online promotion goes viral on Facebook or Twitter.

Moreover, companies are increasingly using extensive data collected from consumers' online activities to target consumers with more personalized and immediate marketing than ever before. Of great concern is the on-line tracking of youth by social media companies who sell the data to food marketers so they can continuously refine their strategies against these young audiences. Kids under 13 have some protections under the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, but adolescents' online data is treated no differently than that of adults.

The business model of social media companies relies on offering marketers access to an unparalleled amount of personal data. The online surveillance of children and teens is disturbing to both parents and public health advocates, who worry about how the commercial use of this information will impact kids' health and well-being. It is an issue of children's rights, and it is also a source of reputational, regulatory, and financial risk for companies.

As shareholders, we are asking companies to uphold children's right to privacy – enshrined in Article 16 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are also asking for more responsible food marketing to youth, joining the Danish Institute/UNICEF, the Federal Trade Commission, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the World Health Organization, First Lady Michelle Obama, and others dedicated to safeguarding the rights and health of children.

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