

story of the week

Food giants serve up a €1.2bn dish to children

Getting pint-sized consumers hooked on a product when they are young can guarantee loyalty for a lifetime to the big brands, writes **Roisin Burke**

A NEW recipe for kiddie food marketing success that has a subversive genius to it is emerging. Take the food concerns that worry parents most, blend them with huge dollops of positive health, education and family-friendly associations and suddenly the concept of your offspring consuming sugary, trans-fat laden, high-salt food is much easier to swallow.

Children are a goldmine for food companies. Not only do these pint-sized sugar addicts wield extraordinary power over household food spend – children's marketing behemoth Disney says they influence 80 per cent of it – but their sponge-like absorption of ad messages means harvesting their souls, I mean their brand loyalty, early on can win them as lifetime consumers.

Small wonder then, that of the €7.5bn per annum spent on food marketing globally, €1.2bn directly targets the youth market. Circa €130m is spent on food and drink advertising in Ireland. Products high in fat, sugar, salt, or all three, make up 88 per cent of this.

The fly in the sherbet for the food conglomerates though, is that accessing this lucrative market of diminutive sugary food adorers is getting harder and harder.

With one in five Irish children overweight or obese and heading for a fat adulthood, type 2 diabetes, behavioural problems and more are a worry. State agencies, health advocacy groups and parents are increasingly calling for the censure of food marketing to children.

But it's not for nothing that

they invest billions of euro on research into consumer attitudes. They are way ahead of this game.

THE MAMMY FACTOR

The new focus is on parents. "It's quite interesting how things have changed even from a year ago," said Sheena Horgan, an ethical marketing specialist who worked with the British Conservative Party on their youth policies and is publishing a book, *Candy Coated Marketing*, this year. "It's much more about targeting the gatekeepers, the mums and dads now."

"Research showed that we needed to address the needs of purchaser mothers as well as their sons," food manufacturer Kepak told *Shelflife* magazine regarding its relaunch of Rustlers, its microwave snack range aimed at young boys and teens.

The first thing on the web pages of kiddie cereal favourites Coco-Pops and Frosties now is detail of vitamin and iron content, intended to reassure: there it is, Mum, everything you need to know. Both contain controversially high amounts of sugar – about one-third of their content – but still manage to feed parents a 'healthy-start-to-the-day' line.

School surveys by Irish health charity, Red Branch show Coco Pops is by far the most popular breakfast with kids. "The problem is it's very high in sugar," said Red Branch's David Egan. "Calcium and vitamins are added, but it's sharp practice in terms of

marketing to suggest it's healthy."

Cheese Strings, Kerry Group's runaway success snack brand, declares on its packaging that it is "all natural" and a great source of calcium, offsetting the fact that it also contains a hefty 24g of fat per 100g and three times the amount of salt a seven to 10-year-old needs. Their website (www.mrstrings.co.uk) runs a virtual world for kids to create characters.

"Labelling is a modern food marketing tool," said Ms Horgan. "The rise of 'nutritionals' i.e. products flaunting health claims, is testament to this. The claim is not necessarily false, but it can be misleading, implying a product is healthier than in reality it actually is."

POWER DRINKS

As fizzy drinks – with their sugar-loaded, teeth-corroding reputation – decline 4 per cent per year in consumption, the energy and power drink market is thriving.

Tens of thousands of euros are spent on associating such brands with sport, but their 'healthiness' is moot. Sponsorship spend across major sporting events reached €103m here last year.

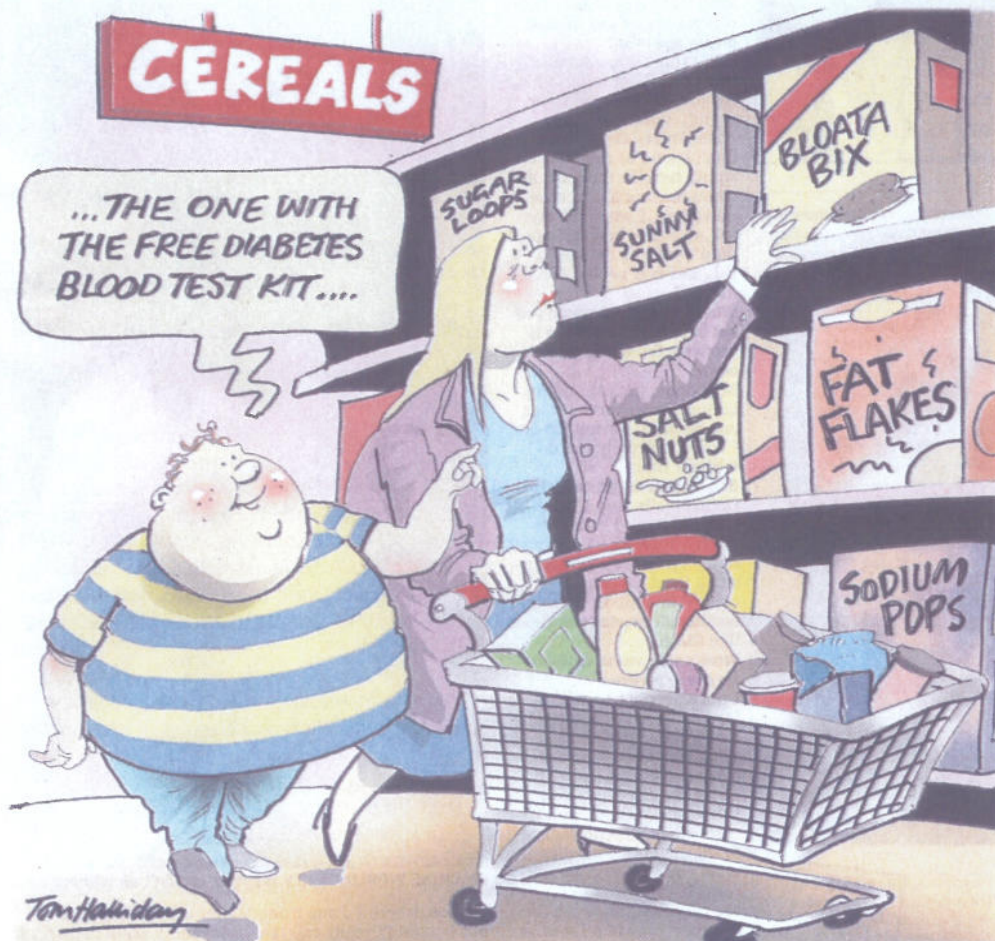
At the recent epic Leinster-Munster rugby match players slugged from Powerade branded bottles, re-enforcing that brand's Leinster schools rugby sponsorship nicely. Munster star Ronan O'Gara features in the current Lucozade Sports TV ads, while Brian O'Driscoll is Coca-Cola brand Powerade's 'ambassador'.

Lucozade Sport has partnered up with Coaching Ireland on sports nutrition and training workshops for schools, colleges and clubs.

Mr Egan, who is an exercise physiologist and has advised athletes on proper hydration, is dubious about the merits of sugar-loaded energy drinks.



105,000 Number of visitors so far to the Frubes Yoghurt kids page



"There are few circumstances where sports drinks would benefit; they're not actually necessary. It's about creating this perception of healthiness and performance. In reality, kids are spending 30 per cent of their time on their back-sides playing video games and drinking these things."

Unholy alliances with chocolate or soft drinks brands in children's sport abound, such as Kit Kat's sponsorship of Athletics Ireland schools track and field events. Ditto McDonald's Catch and Kick GAA programme and Coca-Cola schools rugby sponsorship.

YOUR CHILD COULD BE A BRAND AMBASSADOR

Mars, Skittles, and Tayto have all used the possibilities of digital marketing, which is outside the remit of pesky TV advertising regulation. Many confectionery sites offer virtu-

al buddies, free mobile downloads, advergaming, club memberships. Web community-based elements encourage children to involve their peers by competing to collect toys or ringtones, play an online game etc, effectively acting as little brand promoters.

The web is increasingly important for spreading the brand message. The internet is without borders, so if you Google something like Yoplait's yogurt snack Frubes (with 5.6g of sugar in each helping) you may end up on the UK website which it ran with Cartoon network.

The site featured kids' video games such as frubey freefall and frubefreestyie as well as various prizes. When it closed last Tuesday, it had attracted

over 105,000 visitors. Glanbia produces Yoplait in Ireland. Unilever's HB ice cream has plenty of Irish webcontent for kids. Their website loveicecream.com will lead you onto a competition (now closed) to make boats out of lollipop sticks in order to win a trip to Sweden. There are also games and plenty of downloads.



Cadbury Ireland has a stack of kids' games on its website, including one about making chocolate bars and one where you can make a cream egg dance. There are also plenty of competitions — but you have to hand over valuable marketing information first.

Food giant Nestle's Irish web page is somewhat limited,

with most of the good stuff run through British sites. The Smarties website has a kids' quiz and ideas for parties.

Some of the Irish operations have reined in web content in recent months. McDonald's Ireland has removed its advergence web content and Kellogg's has taken down its K-play webpages where kids engaged with branded characters.

Dr Margaret-Anne Lawlor, lecturer in marketing at DIT, points to research by Hibernian Aviva showing that while they rely on parents for most food and drink purchases, children spend a growing amount of their own pocket money on music downloads and games.

Nintendo and Playstation games often have fast food product placements built in and brand recognition among gamers is high, so it's no wonder the Rustlers' brand plans

close links with the video gaming industry as part its relaunch.

Both McDonald's and Burger King put well over €0.5m into licensed toy tie-ins with kids' movies in Ireland last year, gaining uplift in sales lasting for up to six weeks either side of a film release.

Disney is ending its 10-year multi-million dollar film tie-in agreement with McDonald's as part of its healthy image drive, but there are plenty of other takers — the current Happy Meal offer is a 'create your own monster' toy from DreamWorks film, *Monster vs Alien*.

Use of licensed characters has a similar effect, from Scooby-do baked beans to Harry Potter confectionery. Consumer watchdog Which? recently slated the use of cartoon characters in the marketing of "less healthy" cereals to children.

Food brands' own characters, such as the grrrrreat Tony the Tiger, Moo the Dairylea Cow, Ronald McDonald etc have been proven to powerfully engage children.

THE FAMILY RECIPE

Nothing says wholesome like family TV (in spite of the incest/arson/murder themed stories of the soaps). 'Family viewing' sponsorship gets food companies around the thorny issue of junk food marketing to children, because it's not aimed at the child directly, but still reaches them more stealthily.

For instance, *Saturday Night Takeaway* is sponsored by KFC, *Coronation Street* by Cadbury and *Britain's Got Talent* by Sprite.

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS

Though banned on Irish terrestrial TV, exposure is ubiquitous thanks to digital and satellite. Duffy's Diet Coke song and images are everywhere.

"Celebrity endorsement is never a good idea, it is tapping into the naivety and vulnerability of children," said Ms Horgan.

A couple of months back Mr T, the face and growly voice of Snicker's 'get some nuts' TV campaign visited Ireland and gave interviews on the building of self-esteem in young men that is apparently behind this campaign to sell a chocolate bar.

"It's certainly having an effect on kids — he's hugely popular, and they repeat his catch phrase, building brand awareness," observed Mr Egan. "Frankly, it's nonsense. If you really want to do responsible marketing, stop marketing junk food."

Ultimately the food industry has the most powerful marketing tool of all: sheer financial clout. It has a global marketing spend war chest of €500 for every €1 the health lobby has. So long as it keeps pumping this sort of economical muscle, it will hold the trump card in controlling messages children receive about food.

Best and worst of snack marketing ploys

DISNEY characters like Spongebob Square Pants are appearing on packets of carrots, raisins or healthy snacks. Dr Lawlor highlights Disney's most winning healthy gimmick yet: US tween heart-throb Zac Efron's face being printed on... wait for it... avocados.

In any supermarket you'll see the Barbie and

Manchester United branded cakes on the very bottom shelves, as are most child-targeted products.

"The product placement is very deliberately 1.5 to 2 feet off the ground," Mr Egan notes.

British health lobby group CFC has revealed that some Cow & Gate and other top baby foods had sugar and trans fat content equivalent to chocolate

biscuits and burgers.

Children's food habits are closely monitored. Glanbia landed itself in hot water in 2006 by commissioning the DIT to test its food products on children and Kellogg's has commissioned market research interviews with kids. While few will admit it, most food companies carry out some kind of child-related market testing.



SPONGEBOB: Soaking it up