

Co-Co's AdverSmarts:

An Interactive Unit on Food Marketing on the Web

Background information for parents and teachers

While Canada has industry codes and guidelines that address television advertising directed towards children, there is growing concern about unregulated marketing practices on children's Internet sites. According to research by MediaSmarts, 94 per cent of Canadian kids' favourite websites include marketing materials.¹

A Kaiser Family Foundation study showed that five in six top food brands which target children use branded websites to market online, and the same food marketers also often buy ad space on children's websites.²

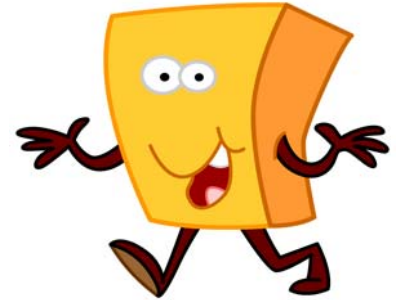
According to the U.S.-based Institute of Medicine, the food industry's marketing practices are not compatible with the recommended diet for children, helping to create an environment that could put their health at risk.³ Younger children are particularly vulnerable because until the age of eight they have difficulty distinguishing advertising from reality and are unlikely to understand that ads are designed to influence consumer choices.⁴

As parents and educators, we need to talk to children about advertising from an early age and encourage them to become active, not passive consumers of commercial messages. It is important kids understand that while commercial sites may be fun to visit, they exist to sell their products, to build brand recognition and loyalty and to collect data for marketing purposes.

In the *Co-Co's AdverSmarts* unit, kids meet Co-Co Crunch, a popular cereal who asks players to help build his website by selecting five features – or gimmicks - for the site. As the unit proceeds, Co-Co explains to players how advertising companies use gimmicks on websites to promote products and brands to kids. With each selection, Co-Co explains why the gimmick is an effective marketing tactic.

The unit explores the following marketing tactics:

1. *Theme and Setting* - Commercial sites for children seamlessly integrate the product or brand with a fantasy-based setting that mimics children's books and movies, making them feel more like entertainment than advertising. The setting is usually one that children can customize to their tastes, creating an environment they feel is "their space" without adult interference.



1 MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase II: Trends and Recommendations*, 2005.

2 Kaiser Family Foundation, *It's Child's Play: Advergaming and the Online Marketing of Food to Children*, 2006.

3 Institute of Medicine, *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?*, 2005.

4 Mary Story and Simone French, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*

5 *Food Advertising and Marketing Directed at Children and Adolescents in the US*, 2004.



2. *Slogans* – Marketers create catchy slogans such as "I can" or "Just do it." Slogans can also include "weasel words" - deceptive words or phrases that can be misleading: for example, "The taste of real..." or "The fruity smelling part of a nutritional meal."
3. *Characters* - Commercial websites often use appealing brand-related cartoon characters to attract children's attention and make them identify with the brand or product.
4. *Activities* – Unlike television or print advertising, the interactive aspects of the Internet allow marketers to add features that ensure kids will spend more time playing with the brand or product. These features include:
 - a) *Advergames* – games featuring the brand, product and spokescharacter.
 - b) *Create-your-own activities* – Allowing children to customize packaging or other branded materials encourages them to identify with the brand.
 - c) *Online videos* – videos are usually just commercials for the company's product which aren't subject to the same restrictions as children's TV advertising.
5. *Online Incentives, Freebies and Word of Mouth Tactics* – Sophisticated technologies make it easy for marketers to collect information from young people for marketing research and to target individual children with personalized advertising. Online marketers also use the technology to run viral ad campaigns, in which children themselves market the product to their friends.
 - a) *E-cards* – Many sites offer free e-cards so visitors can send branded images and messages to their friends.
 - b) *Memberships and clubs* – These features are used to encourage repeat visits to the website, promising more games and activities with future visits and full membership. They also give the impression of a "popular" online community and allow marketers to collect personal and consumer information through the registration process.
 - c) *Contests and sweepstakes* – Marketers create contests to generate excitement around a brand or product and to collect information from kids who enter the contest.

Suggestions for playing the unit

Co-Co's AdverSmarts includes audio with all of the text to accommodate different reading abilities. Younger children may still need assistance to navigate through the unit. Here are some suggestions before you start:

- Have an adult or student from a higher grade sit with a child while they go through the unit.
- Encourage your child to play the game more than once to discover different marketing gimmicks.
- Team up capable readers with less able readers to play the game together.
- Have pairs of children play the game and compare designs they create.
- Give children the chance to play again and create different playgrounds.
- Use a projector and navigate through the game with the whole class.



Extension activities for children

Reinforcing - After the activity, ask the children to print or present their Co-Co Crunch website and have them point out each gimmick. Ask them why kids would like these features on a website.

Connecting - Ask the children what their favourite websites are, and if any of them use any of the marketing tactics (setting, slogans, characters, activities, and incentives) explored in the unit. Ask them if it was for a food product, and if so, what type of food product was being advertised. Ask if it was advertising a snack food, junk food or a healthy food product. See if they can think of examples of branded characters, slogans, online activities or other incentives they have seen online, on television or in magazines.

Extending – Have the children draw a picture of a website promoting a healthy food product such as a website for carrots. Use the *Co-Co's AdverSmarts* interactive unit as a guide and design the website to educate and inform children about the benefits of healthy food choices.

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