



Stakeholder insights on the planning and development of an independent benchmark standard for responsible food marketing



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ABSTRACT

A mixed methods qualitative survey investigated stakeholder responses to the proposal to develop an independently defined, audited and certifiable set of benchmark standards for responsible food marketing. Its purpose was to inform the policy planning and development process.

A majority of respondents were supportive of the proposal. A majority also viewed the engagement and collaboration of a broad base of stakeholders in its planning and development as potentially beneficial. Positive responses were associated with views that policy controls can and should be extended to include all form of marketing, that obesity and non-communicable diseases prevention and control was a shared responsibility and an urgent policy priority and prior experience of independent standardisation as a policy lever for good practice.

Strong policy leadership, demonstrable utilisation of the evidence base in its development and deployment and a conceptually clear communications plan were identified as priority targets for future policy planning. Future research priorities include generating more evidence on the feasibility of developing an effective community of practice and theory of change, the strengths and limitations of these and developing an evidence-based step-wise communications strategy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The case for intervention

The 2011 United Nations General Assembly Political Declaration on non-communicable diseases prevention and control notes ‘the global burden and threat of non-communicable diseases constitutes one of the major challenges for development in the twenty-first century, which undermines social and economic development throughout the world, and threatens the achievement of internationally agreed development goals’ (UN, 2011, p. 1). The Declaration specifically highlights the need to: ‘promote the development and initiate the implementation as appropriate of cost-effective interventions . . . discouraging the production and marketing of foods that contribute to unhealthy diet . . .’ (UN, 2011, p. 1).

The evidence in support of the Declaration reference to marketing is compelling. Globally, 50–80% of total food and beverage marketing promotes energy dense food and drinks high

in fat, salt and sugar (hereinafter HFSS foods) (Cairns, Angus, Hastings, & Caraher, 2013; FTC, 2012; Kelly et al., 2010). Currently, a wide range of techniques are used to promote these foods and are found to be highly persuasive (Chandon & Wansink, 2011; Harris, Brownell et al., 2009). Promotional communications for example boost sales with messages intended to encourage impulse purchases, remind consumers of the hedonistic pleasures of consumption, and assuage guilt responses and concerns about health impact (ibid.). Similarly, messages and images on packaging and the placement of products in store are highly effective purchase promoting techniques (Cohen & Babey, 2012; Hawkes, 2010; Glanz, Bader, & Iyer, 2012). In-store marketing strategies such as end of aisle display and shelf signage have been found to increase purchase levels by up to 500% (Gustafson, Hankins, & Jilcott, 2012; Sorensen, 2009). Price-based incentives are particularly persuasive (Chandon & Wansink, 2012; Epstein et al., 2012; Kirchner, Fischer, & Holzl, 2010). Special offers and discounts for bulk purchasing for example increase planned as well as spontaneous purchasing of low perishability, ready to eat food and drinks such as snacks products and sweetened carbonated beverages (Ailawadi & Neslin, 1998; Neslin & van Heerde, 2009).

In addition to marketing techniques designed to prompt direct sales, indirect marketing methods are used to build long term

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demand. The impacts of sponsorship for example, may not generate measurable effects on sales volume but do increase awareness and favourable attitudes towards sponsors' brands, specific products and product categories (Carter, Edwards, Signal, & Hoek, 2012). Social media based campaigns may include purchase incentives but their most important effects on purchase and consumption behaviours are mediated through their effects on brand loyalty and its integration into routine social interactions as a result of peer to peer communications and endorsements (Montgomery & Chester, 2011).

The 'Big Five' most heavily promoted foods are confectionery, sugar-sweetened breakfast cereals, salty savoury snacks, sugar-sweetened drinks and 'fast foods' (Cairns, Angus, & Hastings, 2009; FTC, 2012). The ubiquitous and integrated nature of marketing techniques used to promote these and other HFSS foods has created a marketing system that focuses heavily on HFSS foods. The skewed focus leads to higher levels of purchase and consumption of these heavily promoted food categories, not just increases in sales of the specific brands being promoted (Chandon & Wansink, 2002; Chandon & Wansink, 2011; Neslin & van Heerde, 2009). As a consequence, the net contribution to the food environment of current food marketing practices is obesogenic. It is unresponsive of the public health goal to reduce consumption of HFSS foods and replace with less energy dense, micronutrient rich foods such as fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.

1.2. Innovation in responsible marketing policy development is an urgent imperative

The term 'responsible marketing' is frequently used to describe and denote the policy aim of shifting the marketing landscape away from its predominant focus on low nutrition to more healthful foods and drinks (Booth, 1989; WHO, 2010). For more than a decade, an array of public policy and private sector initiatives targeted to this aim have been introduced (Hawkes & Lobstein, 2011). Independent evaluations indicate their impact has been disappointing (Chambers, Freeman, Anderson, & MacGillivray, 2015; Elliott et al., 2014; Galbraith-Emami & Lobstein, 2013).

In the few territories where statutory controls have been implemented, regulations have failed to address the multi-faceted nature of marketing. For example, in the UK, where television advertising of HFSS foods is subject to statutory controls, activities such as point-of-sale and viral promotions for HFSS foods as well as sponsorship by brands producing HFSS food and drinks are subject only to non-binding guidance (Landon, 2013; NHF, 2011).

Reviews of food marketing policy have also noted that the recent and rapid rise in globally coordinated, digitally facilitated marketing are increasing the challenges for regional and national level policy controls to constrain the health adverse impacts of food marketing (Cairns, 2013; Hawkes, 2006; Hawkes, 2008). For example, in the UK, Malaysia, Australia and the Republic of Ireland where legislation on broadcast advertising has been enacted, controls are only applicable to programming and advertising originating from the country of jurisdiction. They have no remit over websites, entertainment programmes or advertising originating from countries outside their sovereign borders and available through the Internet (BAI, 2013; IASO, 2010).

Currently however, more responsible marketing policies are based on voluntary rather than statutory self-regulation (Hawkes & Lobstein, 2011). And independent evaluation finds their impact even weaker than for statutory controls (Galbraith-Emami & Lobstein, 2013; Kunkel, McKinley & Wright, 2009; Powell, Harris, & Fox, 2013).

Multiple reasons for the weak impacts of both voluntary and mandatory governance frameworks have been identified. They include the limited and inflexible scope of regulations,

inconsistencies in definitions of what constitutes responsible marketing practice; a lack of transparency in monitoring and evaluation, a lack of incentives to adopt more responsible practices and weak sanctions for non-compliance (Harris, Pomeranz et al., 2009; Sharma, Teret & Brownell, 2010).

The time lag between the evolution of new marketing methods and the design and implementation of policy designed to constrain these methods is also problematic to policy impact and effectiveness. For example, the facilitation of marketing promotions through digital technologies is currently undergoing a rapid expansion (Montgomery & Chester, 2011; NHF, 2011). This trend is significantly expanding marketing's reach and impact. The majority of prevailing policy frameworks however, were designed and implemented prior to the wide scale adoption and diffusion of digital marketing and are therefore not designed to address their effects (Chandon and Wansink, 2012; Hoy, Childers, & Morrison, 2012; Harris, Brownell et al., 2009; Thomas & Gostin, 2013).

In addition to inherent weaknesses in prevailing policy designs, market based barriers to policy effectiveness have also been identified. For example, consumers who express a preference for responsible marketing also report an inability to identify and/or apply information that could help them to exercise this preference (Harris, Brownell et al., 2009; Haws & Winterich, 2013; Sorensen, 2009). This inhibits consumer demand for responsible marketing in general as well as their willingness to pay additional costs to receive this benefit. A consequence of this is opportunities for responsible marketers to offset opportunity costs incurred by restricting their promotional marketing campaigns and appeals to healthful food categories only are severely limited. Supplier incentives to engage in responsible marketing are therefore also inhibited (Booth, 1989; Harris, Pomeranz et al., 2009). In economic terms, this can be understood as a case of market failure that may be resolvable through corrective intervention(s) (Butland et al., 2007; Sassi, 2010).

1.3. How and why standardisation may have the capacity to strengthen responsible marketing policy

Standardisation for the purposes of this paper refers to the development and application by an independent entity of a set of parameters and indicators for a credence attribute. A credence attribute is a product, process or organisational quality that external observers cannot readily confirm the presence or absence of. The underpinning rationale for policy-led standardisation is to encourage the development of a market for a credence attribute where (1) sector level, wide scale adoption offer significant public interest benefits but few commercial benefits in the short term and (2) lack of market information has been identified as a significant barrier to the development of such a market (Brunsson, Rasche & Seidl, 2012; Deaton, 2004). Responsible food marketing, ethical business practices and environmentally sustainable sourcing are all credence attributes.

Exactly what components and indicators of good practice are included in a standard are determined on a case by case basis and are typically adapted and refined over time. Components of a responsible marketing standard might include restricting sales prompting methods (such as price point of sale, price discounts and displays) and limiting awareness raising strategies (such as sponsorship) and methods (such as broadcast advertising during peak viewing hours for children and young people) to only non-HFSS foods.

The potential for standardisation to address some of the prevailing weaknesses of food marketing control policies has been noted in the literature (Bryden, Petticrew, Mays, Eastmur, & Knai, 2013; Golan, Kuchler, Mitchell, Greene, & Jessup, 2001; Sharma et al., 2010). This recognition is based on the evaluative evidence

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