



# FOOD MARKETING AND LABELING

## LESSON PLAN

### Overview

*Estimated in-class lesson time: 115 minutes, excluding projects and presentations.*

#### 15 min **Introduction**

##### Primer

*Includes background reading, vocabulary builders and optional pre-class assignments.*

##### Brainstorm

*Student groups will brainstorm either (A) a marketing strategy for a new food product or (B) information they would want to know about their food.*

##### Lecture-discussion

*Covers essential questions and lesson overview.*

#### 75 min **Food Marketing**

##### Activity

*Students will assess their awareness of food brands.*

##### Lecture-discussion

*Covers marketing strategies, marketing to children and in schools, and the rationales for marketing.*

##### Debate

*Student groups will debate the merits of pouring rights contracts between soft drink manufacturers and school districts.*

#### 15 min **Food Labeling**

##### Lecture-discussion

*Covers various labels (USDA Organic, nutrition information, etc.), labels as marketing tools, and menu labeling.*

#### 10 min **Conclusion**

##### Reflection

*Covers some of the main ideas covered in this lesson. Students will revisit the essential questions.*

##### Project

*Student groups will design and evaluate either (A) a marketing campaign for a healthy food in their school or (B) a nutrition label.*

## Essential questions

Essential questions<sup>1</sup> point to the big ideas of a module. They can be discussed, written on the board and posed on essays and exams.

- To what degree are food choices made by individuals, versus made by others on their behalf?
- How do marketing and labeling affect food choices? How can they make food choices more or less informed?
- Why and how do food companies market their products?
- How should food marketing be regulated, if at all? Should food companies be allowed to market products to children and in schools?

## Learning objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe effects of marketing and labeling on food choice;
- Describe marketing strategies used by food manufacturers;
- Identify several common food labels and interpret their meanings;
- Identify food labels that double as marketing strategies, and discern their value in guiding healthy choices;
- Debate the merits of pouring rights contracts between soft drink manufacturers and school districts;
- Design and evaluate either a marketing campaign for a healthy food, or a nutrition label.

## Materials

- Vocabulary definitions
- Background reading
- Presentation slides
- Student handouts
- Copies of: Nestle, Marion. *Soft Drink "Pouring Rights": Marketing Empty Calories to Children*. 2000. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1308570/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1308570/)
- Copies of: O'Connor, Anahad. *Soda Bans in Schools Have Limited Impact*. 2011. The New York Times Well Blog. <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/soda-bans-in-schools-have-limited-benefit/>

## 15 min Introduction

### Primer

*Includes background reading, vocabulary builders and optional pre-class assignments.*

### Brainstorm

*Student groups will brainstorm either (A) a marketing strategy for a new food product or (B) information they would want to know about their food.*

### Lecture-discussion

*Covers essential questions and lesson overview.*

*Instructions to educators are written in italics; talking points to students are written in plain font. Talking points are not intended to be delivered verbatim—we expect educators will adapt them to best suit their audiences.*

## Primer

- Educators may wish to review the *background reading* as a primer for this lesson. It can also be made available to students as an optional reading assignment, or for reference purposes.
- Before beginning this lesson, we recommend students become familiar with the *vocabulary definitions* for this module. Refer to *vocabulary builders* for suggested activities.
- *Optional pre-class assignments:*
  - *Have students make note of three specific examples, based on their own observations, of how food manufacturers market products. Their findings will be relevant to the introductory brainstorm.*
  - *Have students research three different food labels, investigating the meaning, history and credibility of each. Their findings will be relevant to the introductory brainstorm and the lecture-discussion on food labels.*
  - *Have students read the report and article listed under Materials, above. These readings will be relevant to the pouring rights debate.*

## Brainstorm

- *Place students in groups of two or three. Assign each group to one of the following brainstorm activities.*
- *Brainstorm group A: Marketing strategy*
  - *Imagine you are in charge of a marketing campaign for a new food product.*
  - *Briefly imagine what your new product might be, and list some of the qualities that might appeal to consumers. The product might be a new type of breakfast cereal, a beverage with a new and usual flavor, or a packaged meal that has been made easier to prepare.*
  - *Brainstorm a list of all the activities you would recommend to increase sales of this product. Consider both short- and long-term strategies.*
  - *After groups have finished brainstorming, list their responses on the board, group them and label them with categories such as “advertising,” “raising brand awareness,” “product placement” and “building relationships with consumers.”*
  - *Pose these essential questions: Why and how do food companies market their products? How does food marketing affect food choices? How can marketing make food choices more or less informed?*

- *Brainstorm group B: Food labels*
  - Brainstorm a list of all the information you would ideally like to know about your food before buying it. If you're not particularly interested in knowing anything about your food, consider what information other consumers might want to know.
  - Generate a second list of all the information available about your food from labels on packaging. Also write down the name of each label.
  - For each label, indicate your level of trust in that label with a checkmark (trust), question mark (uncertain) or "x" (mistrust).
  - After groups have finished brainstorming, list their responses on the board, group them and label them with categories such as "nutrition information," "production practices," "animal welfare" and "food safety." Ask students for input on how to label groups of information.
  - Note any gaps between what students would like to know about their food and what information is available.
  - *Pose this essential question:* How do food labels affect food choices? How can labels make food choices more or less informed?

## Lecture-discussion



### Title slide

- Nutritionist Marion Nestle writes, "Advertising, new products, and larger portions all contribute to a food environment that promotes eating more, not less."<sup>2</sup>
- Americans suffer from an epidemic of diet-related illnesses that stem, in part, from overeating.<sup>3</sup>
- The amount of **calories** provided by the U.S. food supply,<sup>4</sup> as well as the amount consumed,<sup>5</sup> have both risen over recent decades. Most of this increase has been in the form of **refined grains, added fats** and **added sugars**.<sup>6</sup>
- What has led to these changes in American diets? There are many influences on what people eat, ranging from personal taste preferences to the cost and availability of food in a community (refer to *Diet and Influences on Food Choice* and *Food Environments*). This module focuses on the effects of **food marketing** and labeling on what people eat.
- In 1999, U.S. food companies spent an estimated \$33 billion on marketing.<sup>2</sup> In **food environments** saturated with enticing new products, captivating advertisements and increasing portion sizes, some nutritionists see it as no surprise that Americans struggle with moderation.<sup>2</sup>
- This raises questions of how much control people have over their food choices: To what degree are those choices driven by individual needs, versus driven by effective marketing campaigns? Children, in particular, may be particularly susceptible to the effects of marketing.<sup>7</sup>
- Food labels, such as nutrition information and **USDA Organic** labels, may help consumers make more informed purchases that align with their values and nutritional needs.
- Food labels can also be used as marketing tools, and may convey misleading information.



## Overview

- As part of this lesson, you will:
  - Explore the effects of food marketing and labeling on food choice, including the influence of brand awareness on your own choices;
  - Debate the merits of allowing soft drink manufacturers to sell their products exclusively in schools;
  - Design and evaluate your own marketing campaign for a healthy food;
  - Design and evaluate your own nutrition label.

### Essential questions

- To what degree are food choices made by individuals, versus made by others on their behalf?
- How do marketing and labeling affect food choices? How can they make food choices more or less informed?
- Why and how do food companies market their products?
- How should food marketing be regulated, if at all? Should food companies be allowed to market products to children and in schools?

## Essential questions

- These questions reflect the “big ideas” covered in this lesson.
- *Allow students time to read and reflect upon the essential questions.*
- *Briefly solicit students’ initial responses to the questions.*
- *If you intend to use essential questions on exams or essay questions, notify students now.*

## 75 min Food Marketing

### Activity

Students will assess their awareness of food brands.

### Lecture-discussion

Covers marketing strategies, marketing to children and in schools, and the rationales for marketing.

### Debate

Student groups will debate the merits of pouring rights contracts between soft drink manufacturers and school districts.

## Activity



### Overview: Brand awareness

- How much do you think marketing affects your food choices? *Briefly solicit responses.*
- One of the ways that restaurants and food manufacturers market their products is by raising brand awareness, particularly among consumers of a young age.
- This approach is based on the theory that the younger the age at which brand awareness is established, the stronger the **brand loyalty** will be as a child grows.<sup>8</sup>
- This activity will test your levels of brand awareness.
- *Group students into teams of 3-5. To prepare for this activity, each team will assign someone to write down responses on a sheet of paper. Teams should write their names atop their response sheet.*



### Brand awareness (continued)

- *As soon as this slide is revealed, teams will have one minute to identify as many of the partially-depicted corporate logos as they are able.*
- *When time is up, collect the response sheet from each team.*



### Brand awareness (continued)

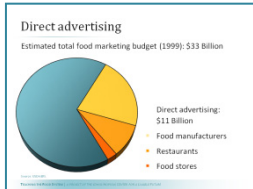
- *Tally correct responses and announce the winning team(s).*
- Were you surprised by how recognizable these brands are, even when you could only see a small part of each logo?
- What does this suggest about the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns?
- Just because someone is brand aware, does this necessarily mean they will buy more products of that brand? *Note the distinction between brand awareness and brand loyalty.*
- Are there any food brands to which you consider yourself loyal? Why?

## Lecture-discussion



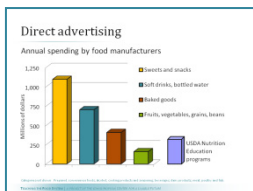
### Overview: Food Marketing

- All businesses, from small-scale farms to multi-national **food manufacturers**, depend on marketing to promote their products and build relationships with customers.
- Food marketing takes many forms, including advertising, raising brand awareness and paying stores for shelf space.



### Direct advertising (2 slides)

- In the United States, food manufacturers, restaurants and stores spend roughly \$11 billion annually on direct advertising, including television, magazine, radio and internet ads.<sup>9-11</sup>
- What types of foods do you most frequently see advertised? Why do you think these types of foods are heavily advertised, but not others?



### Direct advertising (continued, 2 slides)

- Most food advertisements promote products that Americans already consume in excess, such as convenience foods, candy, snacks and soft drinks.<sup>9</sup>
- In contrast, food manufacturers spent only 2 percent (\$159 million) of their direct advertising budget to promote sales of fruits, vegetables, grains and beans,<sup>9</sup> while the USDA spent only \$300 million annually on nutrition education.<sup>2</sup>
- The sales of a product increase with the visibility and repetition of the advertisements promoting it,<sup>2</sup> raising questions of how advertising efforts are affecting consumers' health.



### Added value

- Food companies focus their marketing efforts on products with **added value** (refer to *Food Processing*).<sup>2</sup> These are foods and beverages with marketable qualities that consumers pay extra for, such as convenience, added **dietary nutrients**, flavors, textures, colors and even unusual shapes, such as dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets.
- For example, the corn and corn sweeteners in a typical box of corn flakes are worth roughly four cents, while the box of cereal sells for over four dollars.<sup>12,13</sup> What has been added to raw corn that consumers are willing to pay so much more for?
- This is partly because the raw ingredients have been **processed** into a product that offers convenience (no preparation is required to eat it, other than pouring milk, added sweetness and flavor, and a a visually appealing box (perhaps featuring a cartoon character).
- Consider a pound of raw broccoli that sells for \$1.50. What value could you add to the broccoli in order to sell it for a higher price?



### Advertising fruits and vegetables

- Unlike the ingredients common in highly processed foods, little value can be added to most fruits and vegetables other than by freezing or cutting them. This is one reason why fruits and vegetables are less frequently advertised,<sup>1</sup> even though such campaigns can be effective.
- Following a televised advertising campaign in Canada, broccoli sales increased by eight percent, while consumers' perceptions of broccoli as a tasty and healthy food rose substantially. Curiously, the goal of the campaign was not to promote broccoli, but simply to demonstrate the effectiveness of television advertising.<sup>18</sup>



### New products

- Because most Americans already have access to a wide variety of food choices, food manufacturers may go to great lengths to promote sales.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2009, food manufacturers introduced nearly 20,000 new products to U.S. retail shelves,<sup>14</sup> an amount that has risen from fewer than 6,000 in the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup>
  - Some of these are **fortified** versions of existing products, others are low-fat, low-sugar or low-salt versions.<sup>2</sup>
  - Most are in the form of candy, gum, snacks, beverages and other highly processed foods.<sup>14</sup>
- These must compete against the 320,000 or so different items that are already sold in stores across the country.<sup>2</sup>
- Because store shelf space is limited, only the most successful products remain; the rest are pulled from stores.<sup>2</sup>
  - Can you think of some novel food products that were pulled from shelves?
  - The fierce competition for shelf space is one reason why food manufacturers invest heavily in marketing their products.
  - Many manufacturers pay **slotting fees**, for example, to place their products on the most visible areas of supermarket shelves, where consumers are more likely to notice them.<sup>2</sup>



### Marketing to children

- Marketing campaigns are carefully tailored to appeal to specific groups.<sup>2</sup>
- Children, in particular, make attractive customers: In 1997, American children spent close to \$8 billion of their own money on food and beverages.<sup>15</sup>
- In addition buying products themselves, in 1997, children influenced (through asking or "nagging") over \$100 billion of spending on foods and beverages by their parents.<sup>15</sup>
  - Most of these purchases were for carbonated beverages, candy and salty snacks.<sup>16</sup>
  - To put these values in context, total annual food and beverage sales in the U.S. approached \$900 billion.<sup>16</sup>





### Marketing to children (continued)

- Food companies spend an estimated \$10 billion annually marketing to youth in America.<sup>16</sup>
- By some estimates, the average young person in the U.S. views between 10,000 and 20,000 televised food advertisements each year (between 25 and 50 per day),<sup>7,17</sup> mostly for sweetened cereals, candy bars, soft drinks and other **nutrient-poor** foods.<sup>2,7,17</sup>
  - Does this estimate seem realistic? Why or why not?
  - *Challenge students to keep track of the number of food advertisements they see for a day.*
  - After viewing television advertisements for these products, children have been shown to request them more often, particularly if the advertisements were aired frequently.<sup>7</sup>



### Marketing to children (continued)

- Research has shown that children under 8 years of age do not understand that the purpose of commercials is to persuade people to buy products.<sup>7</sup>
- The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a government organization responsible for protecting consumers, ruled in the late 1970s that it was unfair and deceptive to advertise to children younger than six years, but a ban was never implemented.<sup>7</sup>
- What other marketing strategies are used to appeal to children?
  - A common strategy used by fast food companies is to offer toys based on popular movies.<sup>7</sup>



### Marketing healthy food to children

- Marketing can also be used to promote healthy eating behaviors.
- Advertisements for healthy foods have been shown to be effective among young children.<sup>7</sup>



## Marketing in schools

- Over recent decades, food and beverage marketing has also become prominent in schools.
- Brand name products like *Pizza Hut*, *Taco Bell*, *Snickers* and *Pepsi* are common in cafeterias and vending machines; their logos can even be found on some educational materials.<sup>2</sup>
- Though foods sold outside of the **National School Lunch Program** are often high in calories, fat and sugar,<sup>7,23,24</sup> sales of **competitive foods** can bring in much-needed money to schools with struggling budgets.<sup>19,20</sup>
- Company representatives have admitted that selling their products in schools is only marginally profitable, but they benefit from the opportunity to recruit lifelong **brand loyal** customers at a young age.<sup>20</sup>
- In the 1990s, soft drink companies began offering schools large payments in return for the rights to exclusively sell their products in vending machines and events.<sup>2</sup>
- As a result of these **pouring rights** contracts, students of those schools would be exposed to the same soft drink logo on everything from cups to sports uniforms.<sup>2</sup> For more on school food, refer to *Food Environments*.

## Debate

- Imagine your school district is considering whether to sign a pouring rights contract with a soft drink company (if your school district has already signed a pouring rights contract, imagine they are considering whether to renew the contract).
- *Break the class into groups of 3-5 students. Assign one group to the role of the school board. Additional groups should be split between PTA members who are for and against the contract.*
  - The first group represents members of the district school board, who have called forth the PTA to debate the merits of signing the pouring rights contract.
  - The second group(s) represents members of your school's Parent Teachers Association (PTA) arguing in favor of pouring rights contracts with the school district. The PTA has significant influence over what decisions are made regarding policies within schools.
  - The third group(s) represents members of the PTA arguing against pouring rights contracts.
- *Provide each group with one copy of their respective handouts. Ask a volunteer to read the background information aloud.*
- *If students haven't already read them, provide each student with a copy of the readings (see Materials, above).*
- *Students will follow the instructions on their handouts. They will require at least 15 minutes to prepare for the debate. They may use the internet, if available, to research additional information.*
- *When students are ready, have the mock school board members moderate the debate, as per the instructions on their handout.*
- *Conclude the activity with this essential question: How should food marketing be regulated, if at all? Should food companies be allowed to market products to children and in schools?*

## 15 min Food Labeling

### Lecture-discussion

Covers various labels (USDA Organic, nutrition information, etc.), labels as marketing tools, and menu labeling.

- Briefly revisit the list of food labels generated during the introductory brainstorm.
- If students completed the optional pre-class assignment, have volunteers present some of their findings.
- Revisit the essential question, How do food labels affect food choices? How can they make food choices more or less informed?



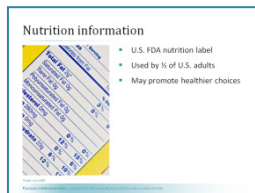
### Overview: Food labeling

- Food labels, when not misleading, can educate consumers about the origins of their food, the practices used to produce it, or its nutritional content.
- The information on labels may help consumers assess the health, environmental and social outcomes of their purchases, empowering them to “vote with their forks”—or make informed purchasing choices that more closely align with their values.
  - For example, labels have proven effective in promoting organic farming practices and more stable livelihoods for some farmers.<sup>21</sup>



### Production practices

- Some labels convey information about production practices.
  - For example, **USDA Organic** certification generally requires that no petroleum-based **fertilizers**, synthetic **pesticides**, sewage sludge or genetic engineering are used in growing food or food ingredients.<sup>22</sup>
  - Fair trade labels may help provide farmers with fair prices, ensure safe working conditions or prohibit child labor.
  - Animal welfare labels may protect livestock against certain physical and emotional harms, and may require that animals are able to perform natural behaviors, such as roaming freely on **pasture** in the company of their own kind.
- These are voluntary labels; businesses generally use them to educate consumers and to promote the unique qualities of their products.



### Nutrition information

- Other labels inform consumers about the nutritional content of foods and beverages.
- The most prominent of these is the nutrition information label that appears on the back of food and beverage packages. The label, now required by the **U.S. FDA**, was launched in 1994 in the hope that it would help curb diet-related disease by helping consumers make healthier choices.<sup>23</sup>
- A recent study estimates that slightly over half of U.S. adults read nutrition labels, and those that do generally make healthier food choices.<sup>23</sup>
- Some organizations have proposed changes to nutrition labels that might make them clearer and easier to interpret.<sup>23,24</sup> Together with promotional campaigns, this could expand the number of consumers who read the label.<sup>23</sup>
- Even with these improvements, however, nutrition labels alone are not enough to solve the **obesity** crisis.<sup>23</sup>



### Misconceptions of labels (2 slides)

- While some labels are closely regulated by the government, require a rigorous certification process or both, others are not regulated, regulated poorly, open to many interpretations, or have little or no significant meaning. These labels may mislead consumers.
- How do you interpret these two labels?
  - Contrary to what some consumers might expect, the “natural” label has no implications for nutritional value or production practices, including the use of **transgenic organisms**, antibiotics and added hormones (refer to *Food Animal Production*);<sup>25</sup>
  - The “free range” label on eggs does not require birds to have been raised outdoors;<sup>26</sup>
- Until recently, even the USDA Organic label had only vague regulations on animal health and welfare.<sup>27</sup>
- Partly for these reasons, some consumers prefer to purchase their food directly from farmers they know and trust (refer to *Food Distribution and Transport*).



### Front of package labels

- Nutrition and health claims have become commonplace on the front of food and beverage packages.
- Since the 1970s, laws regulating **front-of-package labels** have been gradually eased, allowing manufacturers to tout claims like “increases immunity,” “heart healthy” and “anti-oxidant rich.”<sup>28</sup>
- Because these labels help to boost sales of a product, food manufacturers have fought hard to lift regulations against them.<sup>28</sup>

- While not all front of package labels are misleading, nutritionists have expressed many concerns about them.
  - Many front-of-package claims cannot be verified.<sup>28</sup>
  - The claims also draw attention to certain narrow aspects of a food, such as “low in sodium” or “fortified with nutrients,” distracting consumers from the fact that those foods may be otherwise unhealthy.<sup>28</sup>
  - Kellogg’s has received repeated criticism for making controversial health claims about the health benefits of its breakfast cereals, including claims of boosting children’s immune systems (*pictured*).<sup>30,31</sup>
  - Ironically, a recent study found that roughly half of the products featuring front-of-package nutrition claims were high in saturated fat, salt and/or sugar.<sup>29</sup>
- Current regulations on front-of-package labels are not rigorous enough to prevent this type of misinformation.<sup>28</sup>



### Menu labeling

- Some **public health** advocates have turned to putting nutritional labels on restaurant menus as a way to curb the obesity epidemic.<sup>32,33</sup>
  - Meals offered by full-service restaurants and fast-food establishments are often high in calories and fat, and come in large portion sizes.<sup>34</sup>
  - Consumers may be unaware of—or underestimate—the amount of calories, fat and salt in meals eaten away from home,<sup>34</sup> and eating out more frequently has been associated with weight gain and obesity.<sup>34</sup>
  - In 2006, American households spent nearly half of their food budgets on meals and snacks prepared away from home (at restaurants, hotels, schools and other places), up from 30 percent in 1965.<sup>35</sup>
- For these and other reasons, menu labeling is intended to help consumers make healthier choices<sup>32,33</sup> (*for more information on restaurants, refer to Food Environments*).



### Menu labeling (2 slides, continued)

- In July 2008, New York City became the first city in the United States to require menu labeling in restaurants, with mixed results.
- An initial study found that the labels made no significant overall difference in the amounts of calories consumed by New Yorkers.<sup>32</sup>
- Why do you think the labels weren’t effective? What would you do to improve them?



### Menu labeling (2 slides, continued)

- Results from a later study suggest that calorie labels do reduce how much consumers eat, provided the calorie amounts are given in the context of total recommended daily intake (i.e. a 2,000 calorie diet).<sup>33</sup>
- How many of these snacks/meals could you eat before you reached your daily recommended caloric intake?

## 10 min Conclusion

### Reflection

*Covers some of the main ideas covered in this lesson. Students will revisit the essential questions.*

### Project

*Student groups will design and evaluate either (A) a marketing campaign for a healthy food in their school or (B) a nutrition label.*

- *The estimated time for this section does not account for projects and presentations.*

## Reflection

- Public health advocates have proposed a number of changes to the way foods are marketed and labeled, with the intent of helping Americans make healthier and more informed food choices.
- These proposals include laws that:
  - Require menu labeling;
  - Prohibit misleading claims in advertising and on labels;
  - Restrict the marketing of nutrient-poor foods—particularly to children and in schools.<sup>1,6,22</sup>
- Some representatives of food companies have opposed these measures, arguing that diets are a matter of personal responsibility, and that attempts to influence food choice by way of federal regulations impinge upon individual liberties and the free market.<sup>33</sup>
- It is worth noting that food companies themselves often have a strong influence, through lobbying, in the federal government.<sup>1</sup>
- Regardless of one's views on the role of government in influencing food choices, there is little debate over the value in educating consumers with the skills to critically interpret food marketing and food labels.
- *Revisit the essential questions. To demonstrate what they have learned, have students respond to these questions in journal entries, exams or a class discussion.*

## Project

- *In groups, students will pursue one of the two projects described in their handouts.*
- *Students may need several class periods to complete their projects, including time outside of the classroom.*
- *Have each group present their results.*

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