

## Food fight over marketing to kids misses key ingredient

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In a country where cartoon characters tempt children to eat the wrong foods, where kids don't get enough exercise and parents don't say "no" often enough, it's little wonder that one-third of children are overweight or obese.

To counter the trend, the federal government is working on new, voluntary guidelines to push manufacturers to make and market more nutritious food to kids. Which, not surprisingly, has spurred a Washington food fight. Democrats and health advocates love the guidelines. Industry and Republicans who see them as Big Government meddling want them killed. Much of the battle has missed the more basic question: Could guidelines of some kind help? And if not, what would?

Food makers profit the same way any other successful business does: by figuring out what customers want and giving it to them. There's not much secret about what people like in food: sugar, salt and fat, which have an addictive quality. The more of them people eat, the more they want. There's plenty of science behind this, but the familiar Lay's potato chips slogan pretty much tells the story: "Betcha can't eat just one." It might as well be an industry motto. What business is going to pass up something that makes people buy more of its products, particularly if a competitor will satisfy the craving instead? Not many, so foods are crammed with salt, sugar and fat.

That's a free market at work. But its byproduct is obesity.

Only when consumers signal that they want something healthier will the industry change food content. And in fits and starts, that has begun to happen. It's one reason trans fats have all but disappeared from grocery shelves. And why McDonald's now offers apple slices as an option in Happy Meals.

Trans fats didn't just disappear because companies woke up one day and said, "Let's do something healthy." As their artery-clogging properties were publicized, the Food and Drug Administration ordered manufacturers to reveal on their labels how much trans fat was in their products. Rather than disclose that trans fat, by then a public pariah, was in their products, the manufacturers dumped it.

That, too, is a free market at work, one with informed customers.

Now the administration's proposed guidelines -- designed to reduce fat, sugar and salt, while increasing healthy nutrients in food marketed to kids -- appear to be having a similar effect before they've even been finalized. In July, 15 of the nation's largest food makers plus Burger King and McDonald's came out with their own standards to reduce unhealthy ingredients and make kids' food more nutritious.

And you know what? The industry standards aren't bad.

About a third of the foods now marketed to children wouldn't make the grade. The companies promised either to reformulate them or stop marketing them to children by the end of 2013. This is a huge leap forward. As David Vladeck, of the Federal Trade Commission, told lawmakers last week, the voluntary standards are "very close" to where the government guidelines are likely to end up.

To protect against less responsible competitors, the companies could develop a logo on their more nutritious choices so parents can easily identify what's good -- and not good -- for children to eat.

Like smoking, overeating is an ingrained part of American culture that will take years to change. But the guidelines and the industry's response are a healthy step along that path. Politicians and bureaucrats can turn their attention to other matters, and parents can look forward to a little help in the grocery aisles and fast-food lines.

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