Stop Tempting Kids with Toys

Neither McDonald’s Corporation nor its Happy Meals existed when I was a kid, so I can’t say how I would have been affected by their marketing. But I assure you that millions of children have been captivated by McDonald’s not-so-clever gimmick of using toys to get them to pester their parents to head for the Golden Arches.

The company’s strategy is doubly insidious when its commercials encourage youngsters to “collect the whole series.” In the 1990s, McDonald’s wowed 101 little dog toys (plus one of Cruella De Vil) in front of kids when it used the movie “101 Dalmatians” to lure customers to its stores.

What makes McDonald’s version of “Toys for Tots” triply bad is that the chain’s food isn’t exactly what you’d call healthful. Happy Meals are too high in calories and sodium, the buns don’t contain a speck of whole wheat flour, and, if the meal includes a soft drink, it delivers two days’ worth of sugar.

Using toys to sell Happy Meals has been extraordinarily successful. In 2003 sales of Happy Meals amounted to $3.4 billion and made up about 20 percent of McDonald’s overall sales, according to The Associated Press. Toys based on Shrek, Barbie, Batman, and countless other pop-culture characters played a big role in that success.

Junk-food companies love to sanctimoniously opine about parental responsibility. And I agree that parents should tell Jenny and Johnny, “We’re eating at home tonight.” But few parents want to be saying “no” each time a TV ad unleashes a new wave of “pester power.”

Roy Bergold, who was McDonald’s advertising head for 29 years, apparently agrees. “Parents should totally control their kids. Yeah, right,” he told QSR Magazine in June. Bergold cited a survey showing that “the average kid asks his parent for something nine times before the parent gives in....What’s a mother to do under this assault?”

Many parents are fed up with companies’ manipulating their children. That’s why in April, Santa Clara County, California, banned the inclusion of toys with unhealthy restaurant meals. Then in June, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (the nonprofit publisher of Nutrition Action) told McDonald’s that it would file a lawsuit unless the company dropped the toy gimmick or was willing to negotiate.

We contended that under state consumer-protection laws it’s unfair and deceptive to dangle toys in front of kids to get them to nag their parents to go to McDonald’s.

Insiders are remarkably frank when they talk about toys. “Happy Meals proved that you could actually ‘brand’ a meal and make children harass their parents for it,” says consumer-marketing guru Adam Hanft. “We knew that we needed the toy to make it work,” says Joe Johnston, who was on the advertising-agency team in the early 1970s that invented the McDonald’s Fun Meal, which later added a toy and became the Happy Meal.

McDonald’s says that it is “proud of our long heritage of responsible communication with our customers, especially children....” And the Happy Meals Web site assures parents that “You want the very best for your kids, and so do we.”

That’s malarkey. McDonald’s wants your money—and it will manipulate your kids any which way to get it. Unless the company changes its ways, we’ll be filing a lawsuit.

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