

Sports sponsorship: promoting fitness, or an unhealthy diet?



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Together with a nutritious diet, regular physical activity is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. With worryingly high childhood obesity rates not only worldwide, but also here in Australia, encouraging children to take part in regular sport should be a positive step towards tackling this issue. Instead, we may be subjecting them to the influences of unhealthy food and drink marketing. Sponsorship by food and beverage companies is widespread within sport, right from elite level, down to (club level and) junior programs. Sponsor arrangements can provide good PR for these brands, as they can be seen as promoting physical activity. Research however, has found that children are particularly susceptible to these subtle marketing messages, which are influencing their desires for/perceptions of sponsors' unhealthy products.

Kids are a lucrative target market

Childhood obesity has risen to disconcertingly high rates, with almost one in five children globally and more than one in four school-aged children in Australia estimated to be overweight or obese. Obesity in childhood is more likely to track into adulthood, also increasing the risk for non-communicable diseases later in life and although there are several complex underlying causes, the World Health Organization has highlighted the contribution made by unhealthy food and drink. Children are a particularly lucrative target market for advertisers of these products: capturing this market while they are young can influence the products they ask parents for, as well as sway their own purchasing habits when older.^[1] A healthy diet and regular physical activity are promoted as the path to good health, however some sponsors of sport may be undermining our good intentions: kids are sent off to participate in sport to keep active, only to be met with logos for unhealthy food, sugary drinks and in some cases alcohol and gambling brands. Sponsorship of sport by unhealthy brands extends from elite level sport right down to club level, also infiltrating national and state junior sports programs. This results in a potential audience of millions of children who are especially susceptible to product endorsement, as they have a desire to emulate their sports heroes.

Who are the real winners of sponsorship?

Taken at face value, sponsors of local clubs and sports programs are supporting the community and promoting physical activity, while clubs and programs receive vital funding. This translates to positive PR for sponsors, particularly for those whose products are otherwise considered to be unhealthy. Research into television advertising suggests that young children are particularly vulnerable to targeted marketing, as they lack the ability to critically assess advertising messages. Sports sponsorship appears to have a similar

effect, influencing children's food and drink preferences and habits. Furthermore, by targeting potential customers while they are young, this can create regular consumers and life-long brand loyalty.^[2]

Research by Cancer Council NSW to analyse the extent and impact of unhealthy brands sponsoring children's sport found that almost 90% of food- and drink-related sponsors of junior sport development programs were brands promoting unhealthy products.

All of these sponsors had logo placement on program websites; additionally, around a third also had naming rights for the program. Branded participant packs and equipment were also provided to children by a similar number of sponsors. McDonalds was a particularly active sponsor, supporting three separate programs at the time of the study.^[1] At sports clubs, products and vouchers from food- and drink-related sponsors were more likely to be used, compared with non-food sponsors.^[3] When asked about their feelings towards their club's sponsors, 30% of children who had received vouchers responded that they liked the brand more after receiving the reward. Those aged 10-11 years were also more likely to describe their sponsors as "cool", said they thought about sponsors when purchasing food or drink or would like to return the favour by purchasing their products.^[2] Parents were also surveyed: around 50% confirmed that sponsorship influenced the products their children liked, requested and purchased.

Self-regulation isn't working

Although there have been some sponsorship changes since the research was completed, some agreements still remain: in particular McDonalds is still heavily involved, currently sponsoring Little Athletics in several states, Swimming Queensland, South Australia NFL, as well as providing equipment to several sports in Victoria through their Macca's On Your Team initiative. Sponsorship of sport is not encompassed under the regulations intended to protect children from exposure to unhealthy food advertising ^[1] and in any case, these largely voluntary and self-regulated codes are somewhat inadequate, prompting establishment of initiatives such as Parents' Voice and Junkbusters to hold companies accountable for breach of the regulations. As research has demonstrated the powerful effect that unhealthy food and drink sponsorship can have on children, it is vital that stronger regulations are implemented to protect them from exposure to this form of marketing.

References

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