

Get Rid of Mascots? Fat Chance.

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last week I wrote about all of the mascots that companies used years ago to sell their products. I wrote about some of my favorites, such as Tony the Tiger, Charlie the Tuna, and especially Twinkie the Kid. There were dozens more I failed to mention, such as the Pillsbury Dough Boy, Mrs. Butterworth, Ronald McDonald, the Michelin Tire Man and Mr. Peanut.

These are all lovable characters that are part of my childhood memories. When I think of these mascots, I can't help but have pleasant associations with the products they represent. It turns out these companies' marketers knew what they were doing, as these cute mascots are extremely influential.

A study published in the Journal of Pediatrics last month revealed that obese children are more vulnerable to television ads for food, making them more likely to eat as a result.

Dr. Amanda S. Bruce, PhD, along with her associates in the Department of Psychology at the University of Missouri – Kansas City, conducted the study. The study consisted of 20 children between the ages of 10 and 14, 10 of which were at a healthy weight and 10 who were obese. The researchers scanned the children's brains with MRI machines while they were being shown 60 food logos and 60 non-food logos. Food logos included popular brands like Pepsi, Cap'n Crunch and Cheerios, while non-food logos included the CBS Eye and Mercedes.

In addition to measuring the children's brain activity while watching the ads, the researchers also surveyed the kids before and after the study to gauge their hunger and self-control levels. The research showed that the obese children had greater activity in the rewards and pleasure centers of the brain while watching the food logos as opposed to the non-food logos.

The healthy weight children also showed greater brain activity while watching the food logos, however, the activity occurred in their brains' self-control centers. The surveys of the healthy weight children after watching the logos also reflected greater self-control compared with the obese children. The researchers concluded that their findings support the theory that obese people may struggle with self-control because of the way their brains are wired.

The study further reports that companies spend more than \$10 billion annually on food and beverage advertisements aimed at kids, while 98% of those products advertised on TV are high in fat, sugar or sodium.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that more than one-third of all American children are overweight or obese, which could lead to serious health problems like high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.

As a result of the study, many suspect that Congress will contemplate forbidding companies to use colorful mascots that appeal to children to promote unhealthy food products.

If so, who will tell me my Frosted Flakes are great?