

Easily Influenced

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To celebrate the release of 'Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith', there was a huge food advertising campaign promoting the film. Not surprising, I bought several boxes of Star Wars pop tarts, fruit snacks, cereal and waffles. I also bought Pepsi products with soda cans featuring characters from the movie.

This type of marketing, where companies use popular TV and movie character tie-ins to promote their food and drink products to children (and immature adults), was the subject of a recent study conducted by the Federal Trade Commission. The study began in response to the nation's growing concern over escalating childhood obesity. As part of the study, the FTC required companies to turn over confidential financial data.

In a report released by the FTC last week, this study revealed that the nation's largest food and beverage companies spent about \$1.6 billion in 2006 marketing their products – most of which were unhealthy, such as carbonated drinks – to children and adolescents. Of this \$1.6 billion, \$492 million was spent on soda marketing, \$294 was spent by restaurants, and \$237 million was spent marketing cereals.

The report also disclosed that these companies spent their advertising dollars across all segments of the media, often tying them together. For example, TV ads were linked to packaging and displays in stores, then the package contained a code the child could enter online to participate in games or contests with prizes. According to the report, more than two-thirds of the 44 companies that participated in the study used the Internet to market their wares.

In the report, the FTC made several recommendations for companies marketing to kids:

- Media and entertainment companies should limit the licensing of characters to healthier foods and drinks.
- Schools should adopt meaningful nutrition standards for the foods that are sold there, and companies should cease all in-school promotion of products that don't meet such standards.
- Companies should educate children about the importance of healthy eating and exercise, especially among minority populations that are disproportionately affected by childhood obesity.

Who knows, maybe I would eat better if there were Darth Vader broccoli.