

Beverage companies still target kids with marketing for unhealthy, sugary drinks

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Soft drinks. Image credit: Wikipedia.

Beverage companies spent \$866 million to advertise unhealthy drinks in 2013, and children and teens remained key target audiences for that advertising, according to a new report released today by the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity. The report, Sugary Drink FACTS 2014, highlights some progress regarding beverage marketing to young people, but also shows that companies still have a long way to go to improve their marketing practices and the nutritional quality of their products to support young people's health.

"Despite promises by major beverage companies to be part of the solution in addressing childhood obesity, our report shows that companies continue to market their unhealthy products directly to [children](#) and teens," said Jennifer Harris, Yale Rudd Center's director of marketing initiatives and lead author of the report. "They have also rapidly expanded marketing in social and mobile media that are popular with young people, but much more difficult for parents to monitor."

The report, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, updates a 2011 report on the same topic. Researchers examined changes in the nutritional content of sugar-sweetened drinks including sodas, energy drinks, fruit drinks, flavored waters, sports drinks, and iced teas, as

well as zero-calorie energy drinks and shots. They also analyzed marketing tactics for 22 companies that advertised these products, including changes in advertising to children and teens on TV, the Internet, and newer media like mobile apps and social media. Researchers also examined changes in the nutrition and marketing of diet beverages, 100% juice, and water.

Harris presented the findings on Nov. 19 at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association in New Orleans.

Key Findings:

Since 2010, marketing to youth on TV and dedicated youth websites has gone down. Companies also are providing more nutrition information.

- Children ages 6-11 viewed 39% fewer TV ads for sugary drinks in 2013 than in 2010; teens ages 12-19 viewed 30% fewer ads.
- Sugary drink advertising on youth websites declined by 72%.
- Coca-Cola Co., Dr Pepper Snapple Group, and PepsiCo now provide calories-per-serving on the front of most packages, and they enhanced nutrition information on their websites.

Sugary drinks for children can have excessive amounts of sugar and artificial sweeteners, despite parents' concerns about serving them to children.

- A typical 8-ounce children's drink contains 60 calories and 16 grams of sugar—more sugar than recommended for most children to consume in an entire day.
- One-third of children's drinks contain artificial sweeteners. Their packages contain more than four nutrition-related claims and often feature messages about reduced-sugar and no artificial colors or

flavors, but only careful reading of the ingredient lists reveals the artificial sweeteners.

But not all companies are improving, and advertising is still overwhelmingly for unhealthy drinks.

- PepsiCo increased TV advertising for sugary drinks to preschoolers, children, and teens by 39%, 25%, and 10%, respectively.
- Red Bull increased TV advertising to youth by 59%.
- Out of all advertising dollars, beverage companies continued to spend four times as much to advertise sugar-sweetened beverages as they spend on 100% juice and plain water; just 4% of their advertising spending was devoted to water.
- One out of three TV ads for sugary drinks viewed by teens and one out of four such ads viewed by preschoolers and children promoted energy drinks.

Companies actively market on social media and via mobile apps, popular with youth.

- Coca-Cola, Red Bull, and Pepsi were the top-three drink brands in Facebook likes, Twitter followers, and YouTube views. Two other energy drink brands—Monster Energy and Rockstar—ranked among the most active brands on social media.
- Child-friendly mobile advergaming apps include Fanta Fruit Slam, Fanta Fun Tap, Snapple Spiny Lobsters in Snaplantis, Mtn Dew Baja or Bust, Lipton Cool Cubes, and Sierra Mist Must Haves
- Five-hour Energy had the most-viewed YouTube video with 46 million views, while Red Bull's channel featured 4,200 different videos.

Beverage companies continue to target black and Latino youths, who have higher rates of obesity than white youths.

- Black children and teens saw more than twice as many sugary drink ads on TV as their white peers.

- Spanish-language TV advertising for sugary drinks and energy shots increased by 44%.

"Self-regulation doesn't seem to be working because companies can't afford to stop marketing to youth when their competitors don't," said Marlene Schwartz, director of the Yale Rudd Center. "This is why government regulation may be needed to level the playing field."

The authors recommend that:

- Companies stop marketing [sugary drinks](#) and [energy drinks](#) to children and [teens](#), and develop children's drinks with less than 40 calories per serving and no artificial sweeteners.
- Parents should ignore all the marketing claims on drink packages and check ingredient lists on packages of children's drinks for added sugar, artificial sweeteners, and juice content.
- Policy makers require transparent product labeling, including calories, added sugar, and artificial sweetener content on the front of all packaging.

More information: The full report, a four page summary, and tools for consumers and researchers are available at sugarydrinkfacts.org.

Provided by Yale University

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