

# NEWS & VIEWS

## The Letter P Is Brought To You By PEPSI

Advertisers are sharpening their focus on kids in school.

By Darlene White Natale

With 50 million U.S. children in grades K-12, it's easy to see why companies would love to crack the children's market. The push to market to youth is nothing new. I remember seeing cereal and candy commercials while I watched Captain Kangaroo. But today's advertisers are demanding an especially captive market: schools.

School districts tightening their budgets to hold the line on tax increases have given the corporations a foot in the door. Now businesses provide educational videos and posters — called sponsored educational materials, or SEMs — to teachers for free. And school districts can land prizes as small as a television or as large as a scoreboard, just for unleashing the corporate logo onto school grounds. But is the growing commercialization of our schools serving our kids — or serving them up?

### Chocolate, Chips and Nutrition

An educational video may cost \$100-200. An SEM video is free. So when a school has to decide how to teach our kids nutrition, "The Chocolate Dream Machine," Hershey's gratis video and handbook, looks mighty appetizing.

Mike Kinney, a public relations specialist for Hershey Foods, says his company sent a copy of their "The Chocolate Dream Machine" to every middle school in the country. Kinney says the video and workbook were created in response to the thousands of education related calls Hershey receives each year. When asked if selling chocolate is the primary purpose of the video, Kinney says, "That was not the ultimate goal." He points out that the project was not an advertising budget item, but came from the nutrition education budget.

The video mentions that chocolate should be eaten occasionally as part of a balanced diet. The Hershey teacher's guide then suggests activities for students. The objectives listed in the "Chocolate in a Balanced Diet" section include: "Describe the basics of a balanced diet based on the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. Describe chocolate's place in a well balanced diet. Make a favorite chocolate snack or dessert."

The video also includes educational sections on the manufacturing process, and some geography, math and marketing. Yet the prevalence of Hershey Kisses leaves no doubt about who produced this video.

Hershey isn't alone. The National Potato Board distributes "Count Your Chips," a video with a poster promoting "Snack Food Month." Domino's Pizza offers up a math SEM, which they say is designed "to help develop your students' mathematical, problem-solving and critical thinking skills." These lofty goals are to be achieved by playing with pizza stickers and dominos.

### On Their Wavelength

Each morning, Channel One is beamed to 770 middle and high schools in Pennsylvania. In exchange for 10 minutes of news and two minutes of ads broadcast each morning, the

schools receive a satellite dish, a TV for each classroom and two VCRs. Schools may use the equipment for their own projects. Mars Middle School students, for instance, produce their own news program, which is shown each morning following the Channel One broadcast.

Many other Pittsburgh area schools use Channel One, including Wilkinsburg, North Allegheny, Avonworth, Penn Hills and Mars. Channel One puts 20-something anchors and student reporters on the scene of breaking news and offers teaching guides and lesson plans. *Consumers Union* magazine reports that Channel One advertisers pay \$194,000 for 30 seconds of your kids' time. Many of the ads are for candy, chewing gum and soft drinks. The payoff could be huge: teenagers spend \$57 billion of their own money and another \$36 billion of their parents' money each year.

But many parents fear that schools are subjecting their children to undue ad pressure through the use of Channel One. Low-income students are particularly vulnerable targets. In Wilkinsburg, more than 85 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunches; yet ads on Channel One pester these kids to buy pricey Nike or Reebok shoes and sportswear.

Dr. James Henderson, the Dean of Education at Duquesne University, asserts the need for partnership between business and education. But he stresses the difference between "good corporate citizens, or are they just pandering for a buck." While Henderson was the superintendent of New Jersey school district, his school board rejected Channel One, contending that students would not receive enough clear positive messages to counter the advertising's negative effect.

Gloria Blackwell of the California State Parent Teacher Association calculates that the ad portion of the Channel One broadcast alone takes up the time equivalent to a school day each year. The cost of keeping the school open for that extra day, she notes, far exceeds the value of the leased equipment.

### Scoring Big

In Butler County, the small Mars School District boasts a modern scoreboard and a new electronic message board in front of the high school. The sign, jointly sponsored by Pepsi and the Mars National Bank, sports ads for both companies. In exchange, only Pepsi products are sold in the vending machines and at concession stands. Mars High School Principal John Coury estimates that Pepsi deals have saved the district around \$50,000.

Coca-Cola has a similar contract with North Allegheny worth at least six times as much as the Mars deal. Most schools now have scoreboards sponsored by a soft drink company. In 1994, Coke gave Mount

Lebanon money for a scoreboard in exchange for a seven-year control of all concessions and some vending machines.

Pittsburgh Public Schools accepted a scoreboard for South Stadium from Cameron Coca-Cola. "We didn't give Coca-Cola [exclusive] 'pour rights' for the scoreboard," says school district spokesperson Pat Crawford. Instead, Coca-Cola was allowed to attach their logo to the scoreboard for ten years.

Many parents are worried about schools risking the appearance of endorsing products by having their corporate logos on school property. There is the danger that impressionable children will see their trusted

virtually non-competitive, highly-receptive, captive environment - in school," reports *Consumers Union*.

Even many worthwhile projects smack of hucksterism. The Campbell's Soup label collection program is a seemingly innocuous example of the way educators are turned into salespeople. Teachers are targeted and told that the more labels children bring in, the more great "free" equipment the classroom receives. Children are urged to have their parents buy specific products so they will have better books and gym equipment.

Another campaign turns children into salespeople. The "Apples for Students" program urges kids to bring to school grocery

receipts, which are then redeemed for computers. The grocery store sells more groceries, the computer company moves more computers, and all the kids have to do is convince their parents where to shop. *Consumers Union* reports that Apple Computers also sponsors a "Proof of Drive" campaign in conjunction with Chevrolet. The object is for the school to collect as many test drive certificates as possible to redeem for computers.

Decisions to use these programs in the Pittsburgh Public Schools are made at each individual educational site.

Advertisers who reach into the schools capture kids at a time and a place where they can't avoid the messages. Kids can't leave the room for a snack during the ads as they do when watching TV at home. Thus the business of marketing to the schools has become so big, an industry of consultants has grown up around it. In the current issue of *Brandweek* magazine, there are ads for at least two seminars on marketing to kids. "Pick their brains ... because they pick your products," is the message used to grab sponsors for the Science Olympiad. You'll receive local, state and national attention, it promises, from "12- to 19-year-old high achievers."

Another marketing firm asks, "What do you say to a kid who has \$500 Billion to Spend?" Alcone Marketing explains that they've "helped many a blue-chip marketer find their way into the hearts and minds of the young." Then there's the most brazen pitch of all: "For creative ideas that'll make kids go crazy for your products, call the company who knows what kids want. ADPAC."

Advertising has become so pervasive in our culture that I hardly blinked when my third grader brought home an invitation to "Microsoft's Family Technology Night" at the school. Like most of the SEMs, news programs and equipment deals, it's free to taxpayers and schools. But what price our children's minds? ■

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educators as endorsing these items. Some wonder if we will soon be teaching our kids the alphabet with ads: The letter "N" is brought to you by Nike. The letter "O" by the most effective pimple reducer Oxy. The letter "P" is brought to you by Pepsi ...

### Good Morning, Mr. Sales Rep

The magazines aimed at middle and high school students are also a vehicle for advertisers. Scholastic, Inc. produces *Science World*, *Junior Scholastic*, *Choices*, *Scholastic Scope* and *Update* magazines. Scholastic's own promo piece says that it can "Present you with the largest single print advertising opportunity there is to reach teens ... in a