

Report from the research on food marketing actions addressed to children

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Introduction

The following report sums up findings of the research conducted by the Association of Polish Consumers, within Polmark European Project, co-financed by the European Commission.

Project Polmark (*Policies on Marketing Food and Beverages to Children*) was aimed at:

- assessment of factors influencing children's eating habits, in the context of growing obesity problem in this age group,
- assessment of the role of marketing practices, adopted by food producers and addressed to children,
- assessment, to what extent marketing practices addressed to children should be regulated and what form should such regulation take.

Universities, research institutes and consumer organisations from 11 European Union member states participated in the research coordinated by International Association for the Study of Obesity – IASO).

Within the research, over 160 stakeholders have been consulted; academic experts, representatives of consumer organisations and health protection organisations, parents associations, food producers, advertising industry, media and government agencies. In addition, a review of existing legal regulations, codes of conduct/good practices, government programmes etc, has been made.

Obesity and marketing addressed to children

In the 90's obesity problem was considered as relevant mostly to the American society. Soon however, this problem reached Europe as well, in European Union member states overweight and obesity levels among children and adults grow at disturbing rate.

Reasons for high obesity levels among European consumers can be divided into two main categories: bad nutrition habits (improper diet) and lack of physical activity ("sitting" way of life). Practices adopted by the food industry occurred to be a catalyst (and in opinion of many people even a creator) of unfavourable trends. It applies mainly to actions addressed to children and young people – a group of consumers especially prone to various advertisement messages.

In this context we can identify two areas of problems:

- a) ingredients of food products,
- b) intensity and character of marketing actions conducted by food producers.

In the first case it's about high fat and sugar content in products addressed to children: snacks, sweets, drinks, fast-food products. Specific term for such products: junk-food has even been adopted. What's interesting, excessive amounts of sugar and salt are typical not only to sweets and snacks, but also to products presented as healthy and beneficial for a diet, such as cereals/cornflakes. As research conducted by Consumers International (international federation of consumer organisations) showed, some of the cereals available on the market contain more salt, than potato chips and more sugar, than doughnuts.¹

At the same time such products are intensively promoted and advertised. The range of marketing tools used by food producers is very broad: beginning with games and toys attached to packages of food products, ending with sponsoring events, using celebrities and cartoon heroes in advertisements, product placement in movies and computer games. Possibilities in this field have been additionally increased by dynamic development of Internet - new websites under the auspices of food companies, with games, quizzes, mobile phone rings, etc. are created each day.

Marketing activities are aimed at increasing sale of products and their existence should not be questioned. It seems however that on the market which has a key impact on forming children's nutrition habits (and as a consequence also on their health) many actions conducted by food industry may be considered as irresponsible. Placing junk-food products on the lowest shelves in stores, at the level of child's eyesight, but under the level of parent's eyesight, is one of the examples. What can be treated as a sophisticated marketing technique becomes irresponsible ignoring the role of parents and attempt to directly reach young consumers' minds.

Food industry's policy in this area is especially important in the view of recent change of sales paradigm: more and more often, companies instead of responding to consumers needs, create artificial needs, looking only at the idea of profit maximization. In addition, financial resources of food industry are much bigger than those of non-government organisations and government agencies

¹ *Cereal Offences: A Wake-up Call on the Marketing of Unhealthy Food to Children, Consumers International, 2008*

promoting healthy nutrition habits. For example, in 2003 in the United Kingdom, total expenditure on food and restaurants advertising amounted to 734 million pounds. For comparison, in 2004 government expenditure on campaigns related to food and nutrition amounted to 7 million pounds.²

Growing obesity levels gave impulse to public debate on possible preventive measures. Potential solutions in this area can be divided into three groups:

- a) voluntary actions of individual food companies and branch organisations (associations of food producers),
- b) the so called self-regulation of food industry – usually in the form of codes of conduct, elaborated and executed by the food industry itself,
- c) legal regulation – restriction of marketing practices imposed by law, at the local or national level.

Food industry has introduced many changes in their marketing and sale practices addressed to children. For example, meals sold in Disney parks in USA contain by default fruit and vegetables, unless consumers clearly indicate they want fries and drinks. Similarly, McDonalds offer apples and milk as optional products in their meals.

There are also branch codes of conduct/codes of good practices in many countries and associations of food producers monitor and execute compliance of practices adopted by their members with obligations placed in those documents. However, according to many organisations dealing with food policy, as well as health and consumer protection, such solutions are ineffective and insufficient and food industry's declarations are not being put into practice.

In several countries legal regulations have been therefore introduced, for example ban on sale of sweets and carbonated drinks in schools (France), ban on broadcasting advertisements of HFSS food during programmes addressed to children (UK). Such measures are not common yet. European Commission in its White Paper on a Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity Related Health Issues stated that the approach based on voluntary actions of food industry, which is dominant in EU member states, should be maintained. Nevertheless, in 2010 European Commission will review activities in this area and specify possible new solutions.

Independently from European Commission's actions organisations dealing with health and consumer protection prepared recommendations for good marketing practices and call WTO for elaboration of international code, based on those recommendations.³

² Office of Communications (Ofcom), www.ofcom.org.uk

³ Recommendations for an International Code on Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children, Consumers International (CI), International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF), March 2008

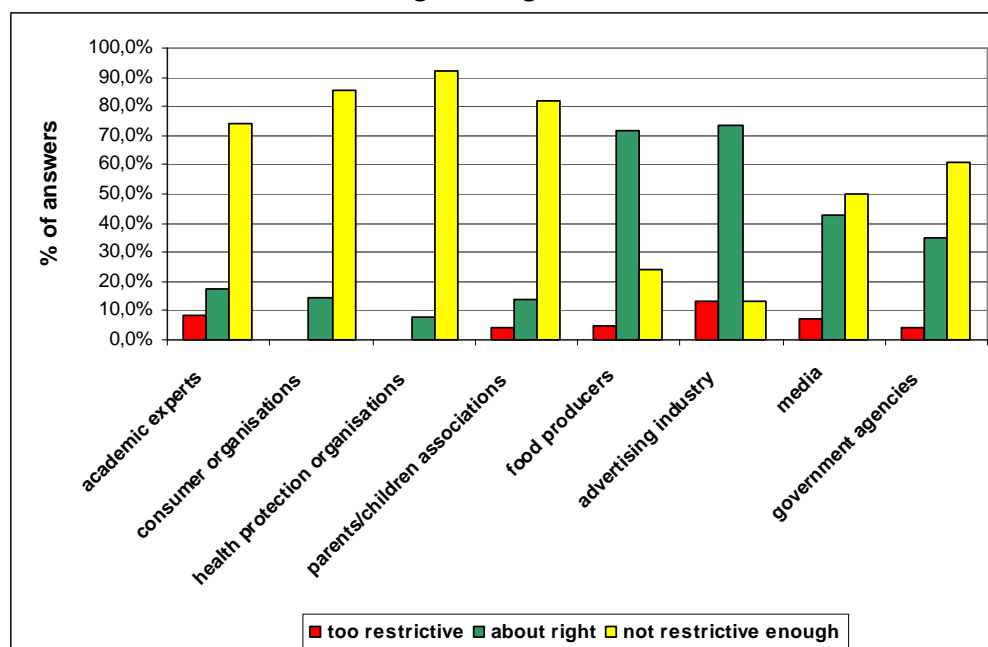
Research findings and conclusions – European Union

The research was based on consultations with groups of stakeholders in eleven EU member states: United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic and Cyprus. Over 160 stakeholders (academic experts, representatives of consumer organisations and health protection organisations, parents associations, food producers, advertising industry, media and government agencies) have been asked about their opinions on food marketing addressed to children and regulatory measures in this field.

The results show divergence between opinions of food and advertising industry and opinions of the rest of stakeholders. The divergence is observed in particular in the evaluation of impact of marketing actions on unhealthy food consumption. According to academic experts as well as government agencies and consumer organisations, advertising practices of companies undoubtedly increase general consumption of snacks, sweets and drinks among children. On the other hand many representatives of food industry claim that marketing activities influence only the choice of specific brand by the child and not the general level of food consumption.

Stakeholders have been asked about their evaluation of the restrictiveness level of regulations in their countries. The majority of stakeholders stated that current regulations are not restrictive enough, in the opinion of food and advertising industry current regulations are just about right and there is no need to broaden them.

Chart 1. Assessment of the existing food regulations



Majority of stakeholders supported introduction of statutory regulations as a preferred tool for controlling marketing practices. On the other hand advertising agencies' representatives were usually convinced that self-regulation is an effective measure. What's interesting is that food producers themselves have various opinions on that matter. Some of the industry representatives supported obligatory legal regulations, others preferred self-regulation or voluntary actions.

Chart 2. Preferred forms of regulation of marketing practices

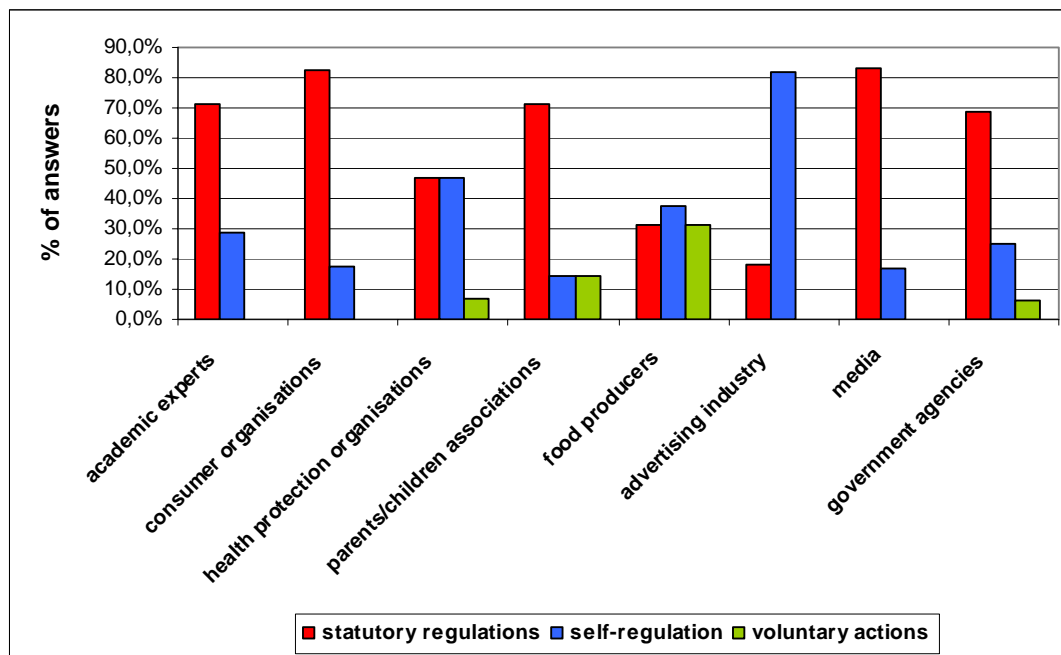
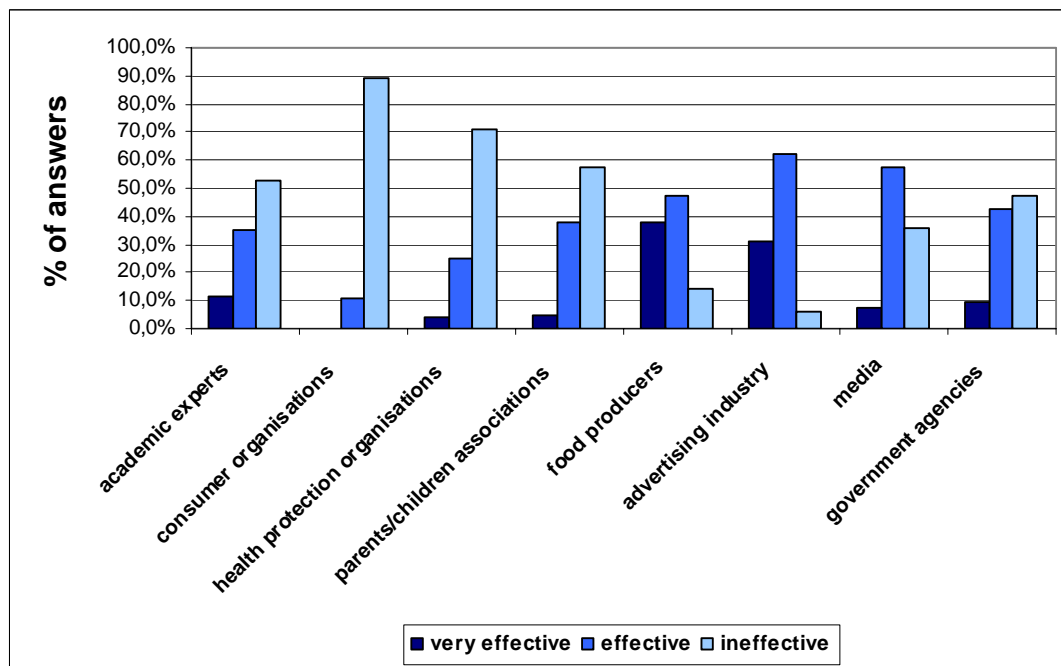


Chart 3. Evaluation of the effectiveness of food industry's voluntary actions



Stakeholders have been also asked to assess the impact of various institutions and organisations on government policy towards marketing addressed to children and to assess the level of public trust towards specific institutions. Analysis of the way stakeholders assess their own ability to act in comparison with opinion of other stakeholders shows interesting results (charts 4 and 5). Food and advertising industry representatives claim that they have average impact on government actions, other stakeholders in turn consider this impact as much higher. Also consumer organisations, perceived by other stakeholders as relatively influential and powerful, assess their ability to act with less optimism.

On the other hand food producers and advertising agencies assess their level of public trust as medium. However, according to other stakeholders level of public trust towards food and advertising industry is much lower.

Chart 4. Average rating of the stakeholders' impact on government policy in the area of marketing addressed to children ("0" = very low impact, „10" = very high impact).

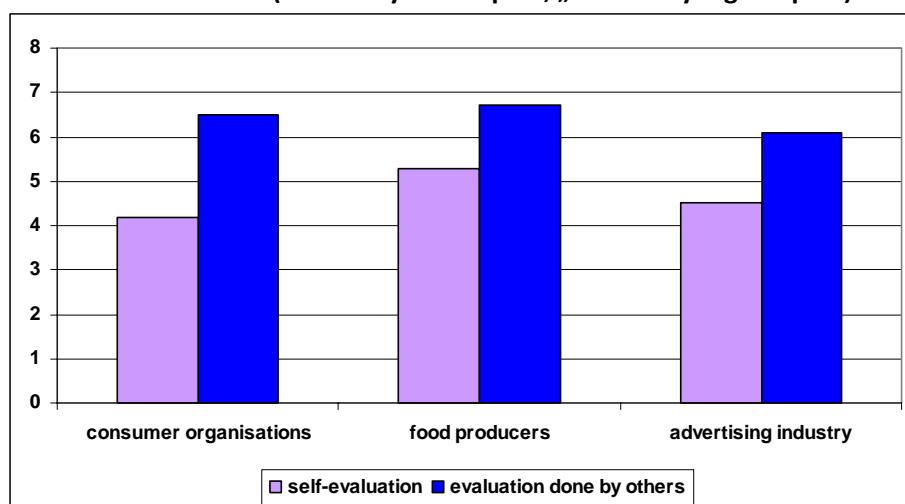
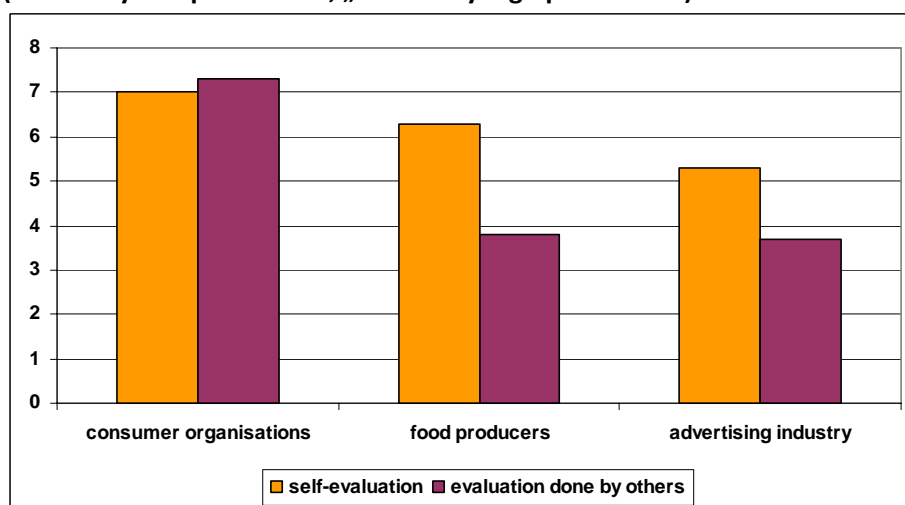


Chart 5. Average rating of the level of public trust towards specific institutions ("0" = very low public trust, „10" = very high public trust).



Research findings and conclusions - Poland

Obesity is a growing problem among both children and adults in developed countries and Poland is no exception. According to studies made by National Food and Nutrition Institute⁴ (www.izz.waw.pl) overweight and obesity is observed among 13% of boys and 12% of girls. These levels are not as high as in case of adults, nevertheless it's a worrying situation which requires preventive measures.

Just like in other countries, growing obesity levels among both children and adults in Poland are a consequence of bad nutrition habits and lack of physical activity. It seems however that food industry's marketing practices addressed to children are not seen as an important problem in the context of combating obesity and are not a subject to severe criticism, as in United Kingdom or USA. There are several reasons for that.

1. The scale of the problem has not been so far identified and analyzed. There are no studies in Poland analyzing the structure of advertisements, in particular the number of products with high sugar and fat content, being advertised in various media channels.

For the same reason is it difficult to assess the scale of food marketing practices in Polish schools (billboards, sponsoring of various events by food industry, promotional materials addressed to pupils etc.). No studies have been made on the impact of media advertising on the level of overweight and obesity among children.

Polish stakeholders participating in the research point out however, that there is a link between marketing of fatty and sugary foods and beverages and children's obesity rates (by putting pressure on parents, increasing the demand for unhealthy products and generally by creating unhealthy life-style). All interviewed experts considered TV advertising as a medium having the biggest impact on children's behavior.

It's worth emphasizing however that the scale and diversity of food industry's marketing practices in Poland is not (yet?) as large as in Western European countries and in USA.

2. The experts interviewed within Polmark project declared that they are raising the issue of food marketing during lectures, conferences and other events. However their organizations don't have a position on this issue in the form of an official document. It may mean that food marketing addressed to children is not perceived as a "hot" political and social issue at the moment. It also reflects the lack of regulatory initiatives, to which such an official position could respond.

3. No regulatory measures have been implemented. In Poland any legal restrictions in this area have general character. No legal actions aimed at regulation of time and method of food ads' broadcasting have been made so far.

The existing pieces of legislation related to advertisement addressed to children are, as follows:

* The Act of 23rd August 2007 on counteracting unfair market practices (Art. 9):

'In all circumstances, the following aggressive commercial practices shall be regarded as unfair commercial practices:

(...) including in an advertisement a direct exhortation to children to buy advertised products or persuade their parents or other adults to buy advertised products for them'

⁴ Szponar L., Sekuła W., Rychlik E. i wsp.: Studies on the individual food consumption in households, IZZ, Warsaw 2003

* The Broadcasting Act of 29th December 1992 (Art. 16b):

'(...) It shall be prohibited to broadcast advertising which:

- 1) directly exhort minors to purchase products or services,
- 2) encourage minors to exert pressure upon their parents or other persons to persuade them to purchase the products or services being advertised,
- 3) exploit the trust minors place in parents, teachers or other persons,
- 4) unreasonably show minors in dangerous situations,
- 5) is of a subliminal nature.'

The majority of interviewed experts claimed that food advertising regulations in Poland are about average in comparison with other countries and that this area is not controlled enough. However they had various opinions on what form should such regulation take.

In case of TV advertising majority of experts opted in favour of statutory regulations, whereas in case of product placement in movies, school football shirts with fast food branding, free games on cereal packages and products placed at the checkouts of supermarkets, majority of experts opted rather for voluntary regulation and industry's self-regulation.

Self-regulation of marketing practices is supported by the food industry itself (see Annex 1). In 2003 an Advertisement Council was established in Poland. It's formed of associations of food producers, advertising agencies and media. The code of Advertising Ethics, elaborated by the Advertisement Council, is a main self-regulatory tool in Poland. Like most of those kind of documents, it has a general character and describes obligations related to advertising as such, without any specific section on food advertising (see Annex 2).

Interviewed experts generally agreed that food industry's voluntary initiatives can be effective and can bring positive results on the matter, they should however be accompanied with other initiatives and the problem should by no means be solved only by self-regulation.

4. There have been several programmes aimed at combating obesity in Poland, the most recent one is "National Programme for the Prevention of Overweight, Obesity and Chronic Non-infectious Diseases through Improvement of Nutrition and Physical Activity for the years 2007-2011", elaborated in 2007.

This is a comprehensive strategic document which describes main challenges and general ways to address them, as well as specific actions to be done in the incoming future. However it does not address the issue of food marketing at all.

General objectives of the Programme are:

- wide-spread education of the society – reducing the level of overweight and obesity mainly through proper nutrition and physical activity,
- reducing the incidence and mortality rate from chronic non-infectious diseases,
- reducing the health expenditure related to medical treatment of chronic non-infectious diseases, as well as reducing the economic consequences of disability and premature deaths.

Specific objectives of the Programme are:

- improvement of nutrition and physical activity among children and young people in schools,
- implementation of proper nutrition rules and dietary advice in hospitals and clinics,
- facilitating conscious choice of food products through education of the society, in particular on the food labeling and nutrition and health claims,
- cooperation with food industry for the production of healthy food,

- constantly spreading the knowledge about the role of nutrition and physical activity in the prevention of chronic non-infectious diseases,
- lifelong training and raising the skills of professionals dealing with human health (doctors, nurses, dieticians),
- elaboration and implementation of dietary advice system for clinics and hospitals,
- enabling children and young people to participate in after-class sport and recreation activities,
- implementation of nutrition standards in hospitals in order to improve the effectiveness of medical treatment and reducing its costs,
- elaboration and implementation of the advice system on the improvement of physical activity of patients in hospitals, in order to improve the effectiveness of medical treatment.

5. It seems that possible pressure on the government's policies to include food marketing issues could be made the most effectively by the government itself (Ministry of Health or government food agency), media and national consumer organisations. Experts interviewed pointed out on those institutions as having the biggest influence on the government's policies on the present issue of marketing to children and at the same time enjoying the highest level of public trust.

However media seem not to be interested in the issue. Marketing of food addressed to children is raised in few press articles and texts placed on the Internet, usually in the form of short notes describing current activities in this area, mostly in the UK and USA. National consumer organisations on the other hand, face strong budget limitations, which force them to allocate resources to their priority issues, and food marketing to children is not one of them.

ANNEX 1

Polish Federation of Food Industry (PFPŻ) comments on the EC Green Paper ‘Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases’ (excerpt):

“Are voluntary codes (“self-regulation”) an adequate tool for limiting the advertising and marketing of energy-dense and micronutrient-poor foods? What would be the alternatives to be considered if self-regulation fails?”

PFPŻ believes that artificial regulations discriminating against some product groups will not be effective as far as combating nutrition-related diseases. Actions should be based on one hand on pro-social approach of food companies and their role in creating trends on the type of food products. Food companies can produce only goods accepted by consumer, however many companies bear significant costs related to research and introduction of new, improved (more in line with nutrition guidelines) recipes and products. Food industry can not however produce food which is not acceptable by consumer because of its improper features (flavor, smell, consistency). In order to support companies’ actions in this area, a long term social education strategy seems to be necessary, which will enable to introduce new types of products on the market.

How can effectiveness in self-regulation be defined, implemented and monitored? Which measures should be taken towards ensuring that the credulity and lacking media literacy of vulnerable consumers are not exploited by advertising, marketing and promotion activities?

The industry has already taken actions aimed at implementing uniform standards in the area of advertising and marketing (including products addressed to children). An Advertising Council has been established – its task is to monitor advertisers, paying special attention to adoption of rules specified in the Code of Advertising Ethics, which is industry’s form of self-regulation.”

ANNEX 2

Polish Code of Advertising Ethics (excerpt):

III. ADVERTISEMENTS ADDRESSED TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Art. 22

The value of products advertised should not be presented in a way, which may lead children to an inaccurate evaluation of their real value by the use of expressions and words such as 'only' or 'very little'. An advertisement should not suggest that the product is easily accessible to all family budgets.

Art. 23

Advertisements should not without reason, justifiable on educational or social grounds, contain any statement that may cause a disregard for health, safety or environmental safety. This applies in particular to advertisements addressed to, or presenting children and young people.

Art. 24

Advertisements should not exploit the credulity of children or the lack of experience of young people.

Art. 25

Advertisements addressed to children and young people should not be framed so as to cause the threat to the mental, moral or physical development of children or young people. In particular, should not expose violence accompanying the law violation or lack of respect towards prevailing social principles.

Art. 26

Advertisements should not suggest that possession or use of a product alone will give the child physical, social or psychological advantages over other or that nonpossession of the product would have the opposite effect. Advertisements should not undermine the authority, responsibility, judgement or tastes of parents.

Art. 27

Special care should be taken to ensure that advertisements do not mislead children as to the true size, value, nature, durability and performance of the advertised product.

- a) If extra items are needed to use it (e.g., batteries) or to achieve the result shown or described (e.g., paint) this should be made clear.
- b) A product which is part of a series should be clearly indicated as well as the method of acquiring the series.
- c) Advertisement should not diminish the skills required to use the item. Where results of product use are shown or described, the advertisement should represent what is reasonably attainable by the average child in the age range for which the product is intended.

Art. 28

Advertisements should be so framed as not to directly encourage children or young people to persuade others to purchase the advertised item.

Art. 29

Sponsorship addressed to or likely to influence children and young people should not be framed so as to take advantage of their youth or lack of experience. Furthermore, such sponsorship should not be framed so as to harm children or young people mentally or morally, nor to strain their sense of loyalty vis-à-vis their parents or guardians.

Art. 30

Sellers and operators offering products to children should:

- a) clearly identify material intended only for children;
- b) encourage young children to obtain their parent's and/or guardian's permission before providing children with information;
- c) provide information to parents and/or guardians about ways to protect their children's privacy.

Art. 31

Sales promotions directed to children should not take advantage of their credulity and lack of experience. Sales promotions may not harm children or young people mentally or morally, nor strain their sense of loyalty vis-à-vis their parents or guardians.

Art. 32

Provisions included in art. 22-31 apply also to advertisements, which are not directly addressed to children, however due to the form, place and method of presentation of such advertisements children are their recipients as well. The provisions apply in particular to TV advertisements being broadcasted before/after children programmes, advertisements being shown in cinemas, before children movies and outdoor advertising.