BRANDED: CORPORATIONS AND OUR SCHOOLS

“If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come.” --Mike Searles, former president of Kids-R-Us children’s clothing store, on marketing to kids

Competition in the corporate marketing arena is fierce. No news there. But as companies vie for brand recognition, brand loyalties, and market share, schools have emerged as lucrative marketing venues. Ongoing funding challenges faced by public schools have enabled marketers to jump in with “donations”—free or low-cost supplemental materials, equipment, and cash. What does this mean for our kids and schools?

The following excerpt, from a letter to principals of School District 11 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, from John Bushey, the district’s director of “school leadership,” demonstrates one effect of corporate influence in our schools. One year into an $8 million exclusive vending contract with Coca-Cola Corp., Bushey wrote:

Dear Principal: Here we are in year two of the great Coke contract….we must sell 70,000 cases of the product…. Here is how we can do it: Allow students to purchase and consume vended products throughout the day. If sodas are not allowed in classes, consider allowing the juices, teas and waters.

John Sheehan, vice president of the Douglas County, Colorado, school board, was the sole dissenter to a 10-year, $27.7 million deal struck between a three-school district consortium and Coca-Cola. Sheehan explains vividly the challenge of providing quality public education on a tight budget:

Electronic marketing such as Channel One, a daily, ad-bearing news program for grades 6-12 broadcast "free" to 40% of all schools contracting it as a mandatory part of the curriculum. The incentive to schools? Installation and unlimited use of the provided satellite dish, VCRs, and classroom TVs. Channel One Communications owns, maintains, and insures the equipment—and repossesses it if the school drops its contract. Two minutes of each daily 12-minute program contain commercials for products to demonstrate math and science problems, and advertisements saturate classroom magazines and television programs.

Methods Corporations Use to “Go To School”

Children encounter the corporatization of their schools in their cafeterias, their classrooms, their buses, and on their stadium scoreboards. Companies engage kids by distributing free product samples and coupons through their schools. Even learning itself is laced with commercialism: textbooks feature brand-name products to demonstrate math and science problems, and advertisements saturate classroom magazines and television programs.

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Resources
Alex Molnar, Giving Kids the Business (1996). Explores a range of commercialism issues.

The Center for Commercial-Free Public Education is the home of Unplug!, a campaign to rid schools of Channel One and much more on combating school commercialism: www commerciafree.org.

Cashing in On Kids, a report from the Center for Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE) is available online: www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/Archives/cashinginonkids.htm
tion. . .who cannot have their headsets on.” -- Channel One executive Joel Babbit on value for advertisers.

**Exclusive agreements** to sell or use products, primarily with companies like Pepsi and Coca-Cola. (Has your child asked for money for Friday’s Taco Bell lunch?) So-called “shoe schools” arise from athletic shoe agreements with corporations like Nike and Reebok—and add unintended stress on schools that compete for students in open-enrollment districts.

**Incentive programs** like General Mills’ Box Tops for Education, Pizza Hut’s Book It!, and Campbell’s Soups’ Labels for Education encourage school fund raisers to influence family purchases of specific brands or to frequent certain businesses. In-school fundraisers using items like magazines or candy turn kids into salespeople. Company sponsors gain an unpaid sales force and can inflate prices since the enterprise appears charitable. Increasingly, schools are engaging in the absurd practice of encouraging purchases from certain websites like schoolpop.com, robbing their community businesses and their own sales tax base—a key part of school funding in many districts! Another ethically questionable appeal urges parents to acquire and use credit cards that provide a kickback to schools, condoning consumerism and debt.

**Sponsored Educational Materials** SEMs are best described as public relations materials disguised to look like classroom activities and lesson plans a la the Chips Ahoy counting game in which kids calculate the number of chocolate chips in their cookies. Even more disturbing are nutrition lessons taught by McDonald’s and environmental issues discussed by the Shell and Chevron Corporations, all contained in widely distributed resources.

**Sponsorship** of programs and activities such as Canon’s National “Envirothon” high school competition and “Coke in Education Day.” Now, some high school regional and state athletic championship games--and even regions themselves--have corporate sponsors. Wells Fargo bank paid $12,000 for naming rights to an athletic conference in central Arizona.

**Contests** sponsored by companies like Brainstorm USA through schools to obtain demographic information on students and parents for marketing purposes. Companies are promised a potential market of over 14,000 teachers and two million students.

**Privatization** that shifts school or program management from public accountability to private, for-profit corporations whose accountability is to stockholders, such as Edison Schools, Inc. You have to wonder if teachers gain stock options after a year’s tenure, where their loyalties lie.

**Can We Rely on Teachers?**
While some argue that teachers can serve as gatekeepers against biased messages often found in sponsored materials, most teachers haven’t been taught how, may not see the need, or lack knowledge in the topic addressed. Similarly, claiming teachers can defuse advertising messages in sponsored materials and programs and salvage something worthwhile from them is like using textbooks containing gender or ethnic discrimination and claiming it’s a good way to teach about diversity. “The only genuinely educational use I can see for corporate propaganda in the classroom is to inoculate students against it, so that they will not swallow it uncritically without considering other sides of the question.” David Lunney, teacher, Greenville, NC.

**Why Target Kids at School?**
America’s kids represent a large and growing market. Elementary-aged children spend around $15 billion per year and influence another $160 billion of their parents’ spending. Teenagers have even greater economic clout, spending $57 billion personally and another $36 billion of their families’ money annually.

**Are Corporations Solving Financial Troubles?** Taxpayers fund classroom time that is being wasted on ads. A 1998 study by educator Alex Molnar and economist Max Sawicky indicated that taxpayers in the U.S. pay $1.8 billion per year for the class time--twelve minutes spent by students on the required nine out of ten school days--lost to Channel One. Channel One’s commercials alone cost taxpayers $300 million per year, and taxpayer cost for just the advertising time exceeds the equipment’s total value.

So what can we do about all this? See sidebar.

*By Jennifer Rockne, Assistant Director*