[Opinion](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion)

**If advertising works, there's no way it doesn’t contribute to obesity**

By [Chris Baker](https://www.thedrum.com/users/cjpbakerhotmailcom)-04 August 2020 13:00pm

**If we truly believe advertising works in the way we claim it does, then there is no way it doesn’t contribute to obesity. That's the view of Chris Baker, executive strategy director at Kindred, who thinks we need to accept the 'junk food' ban with good grace and work with partners to address the problem head-on.**

The [advertising industry was up in arms this week](https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/07/27/advertising-trade-bodies-united-distaste-junk-food-tv-and-online-ad-ban). The government’s announcement of a ban on advertising for ‘unhealthy’ food as part of a new strategy to tackle obesity sent shockwaves through the industry. The IPA, ISBA and AA were quick to jump on the announcement, calling it a ‘slap in the face’ for the industry. They decried the lack of evidence and pointed to the government’s own data that showed a ban would mean a child’s calorie consumption would only drop by the equivalent of half a Smartie if the ban were enforced.

In their view, the ban is a totally pointless exercise that will cost a lot of jobs, threaten commercial broadcasting models and not make any difference at all to the problem of obesity…

But is it really? Given what we know about how advertising works, can we really say in good faith that millions of pounds spent promoting unhealthy food hasn’t contributed to the rise of obesity in this country and across the world? I, for one, feel very uneasy with the haste with which the industry bodies have tried to dismiss the new policy.

The same industry bodies mentioned above have been working hard to prove the effectiveness of advertising in driving business results so that it’s not the first thing cut from the budget when things get heated in the boardroom. Many of the biggest advertisers in the country sell ‘unhealthy’ food and continue to invest year after year. They do this because it works. Burger King, KFC and Cadbury’s have all made the shortlist in the 2020 IPA Effectiveness Awards, the industry benchmark for effective advertising.

So, advertising works to sell unhealthy food, but it doesn’t contribute to obesity? Hmmm… Given what we know about how advertising works I find this very hard to believe.

There are three key components of how advertising works that are worth highlighting:

**Advertising builds mental availability**

Advertising (TV in particular) works by increasing the mental availability of a brand. This means that we are more likely to notice, recognise or think of a brand when we’re in a buying situation, or in the case of fast food, when we’re hungry. The amount of money spent to keep these brands at the front of our mind is quite staggering.

The spending on junk food advertising in the UK is thirty times what the [government spends on advertising healthy eating.](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29021190/) Admirable campaigns like Change4Life or ITV’s [‘Eat them to defeat them’](https://www.thedrum.com/creative-works/project/adameveddb-itv-eat-them-defeat-them) should be applauded, but how can they be expected to make a real dent in the problem when they are so monumentally outgunned? In the US, [$8.7bn is spent each year](http://uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/TargetedMarketingReport2019.pdf) advertising fast food, sweets, sugary drinks and snacks.

Is it any surprise that obesity continues to rise?

**Advertising leverages our emotions**

Emotion is another powerful weapon in the advertiser’s armoury. The IPA has shown that campaigns with emotion at the heart are twice as effective at generating very large profit effects than rational campaigns. By creating emotional associations with the product, it forms memory pathways in our brain that contribute to mental availability. Simply put, when we think of a brand, we have an emotional reaction that we wouldn’t get when just thinking about a drink or a biscuit.

Coca-Cola has spent billions trying to tie its brand to ‘happiness’, both during the summer and through its highly successful Christmas campaigns featuring Santa and Polar Bears. Cadbury has spent years landing a feeling of ‘joy’, that it most successfully brought to life with the drumming gorilla and more recently a strategy based on generosity.

McDonald’s has an effective strategy that sees it borrow interest from successful kids’ movie franchises to encourage parents to buy their Happy Meals. The list goes on.

Creating emotional associations, often borrowed from elsewhere, is a tried and tested way of selling unhealthy products. Only time will tell whether campaigns featuring Santa or a drumming gorilla will come to be seen in the same light as the Marlboro Man and other tobacco advertising. The health impact of obesity is impossible to dispute, and it’s increasingly hard to separate the product from the campaign.

**It plays to our psychological weaknesses**

For the first time in our history, we’re more likely to die of conditions relating to over-eating than starvation. We are a product of the environment we live in and the vast majority of us live in an environment of food overabundance rather than food scarcity. Cheap and unhealthy food options are everywhere - with a [45% increase in the number of takeaways](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/news/fast-food-britain-the-number-of-takeaways-soars-across-the-nations-high-streets-10149755.html) in the UK since 1973 - and advertising helps to keep them front of mind.

Our psychology doesn’t exactly help things. In our past, one of the biggest threats to survival was running out of food and dying of starvation. In times when food was scarce, it made total sense to consume more calories than we needed when the opportunity arose. That next big meal might be a long time away. The hunt might be unsuccessful. The crops might fail. By overeating, we were able to store excess calories away as fatty storage that would see us through leaner times. For our ancestors, that spare tyre around the waist could make the difference between life and death. But in a time when we have access to far more food than we need, this causes problems.

This evolutionary ‘survival of the fattest’ meant that we passed on a major preference for fatty, sugary food. When we see food options like pizza, fried chicken and burgers it triggers a much stronger response in the reward centre of our brain than healthier options, which means we’ll be far more likely to choose them when we’re given the choice. Advertising ensures that these high-calorie options are always visible, and our psychology makes it almost impossible for us to resist.

**Time to step up**

Our human nature is playing a major part in the seemingly unstoppable rise of obesity, but we don’t help ourselves with the environment we have created. In the past, our propensity to eat more calories than needed was an ingenious feature designed to make sure we survived tough times. But in the world we live in today, with millions of dollars spent globally advertising junk food and sugary drinks, a fast food or take away outlet on every street corner and high-calorie options everywhere we look, it is now easier and cheaper than ever before to consume more and more calories than we could possibly need. Our evolution has become a serious Achilles Heel.

Industry bodies will continue to cite a lack of evidence for the changes in an effort to protect their members from losing revenue. I would argue that given what we know about how advertising works, the vulnerabilities of human nature and the successful track record of advertising campaigns in driving the sales of unhealthy food, the evidence is already there that this ban is a step we need to take. Clearly this will have an economic impact, and it comes at the worst possible time with an industry still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, but the cost to the sector is a fraction of the wider financial and emotional cost of dealing with obesity.

The ban won’t come into effect for two years. Rather than fight it tooth and nail, we should accept it with good grace, acknowledge the effectiveness of advertising as a commercial and behavioural tool, and work with partners to help improve the health of the nation.

Let’s be on the right side of history.

**Chris Baker is executive strategy director at Kindred as well as co-founder of Change Please and Serious Tissues.**

This article is about: [World](http://www.thedrum.com/location/world), [Food](http://www.thedrum.com/topics/food), [Media](http://www.thedrum.com/media), [Marketing](http://www.thedrum.com/marketing), [Media](http://www.thedrum.com/sector/media), [Brand](http://www.thedrum.com/brand)

[Original article](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2020/08/04/if-advertising-works-theres-no-way-it-doesn-t-contribute-obesity)