

Food Marketers Greenwash Junk Food

Companies Tout Link to Health and Environmental Movements

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Food and beverage companies are feeling increasing pressure from public health advocates and government to change their products and practices. Desperate to cast a healthy glow around themselves and their products, company brands from “McDonald’s to Coca-Cola to Mars are launching and marketing new product lines with health-oriented messages and purpose.”¹ Some of this marketing uses the color green to evoke the idea of good health. Green is a handy shortcut for “good” or “better for you” since the color has come to mean “good for the earth.” Now, food companies are using the color in their marketing—sometimes to signal that their products are healthier, and sometimes to indicate they are using earth-friendly practices.

In this *Framing Brief* we explain how food and beverage companies are borrowing the symbolism of the environmental movement to cast a favorable green light on themselves and their products.

FOOD MARKETING GOES GREEN

April 22, 1970 marked the first Earth Day in the US, and that same year political Green parties began forming around the world to put environmental and social justice concerns front and center in politics. Today, the color green is used in advertising to signify not only earth-friendly politics but also to represent earth-friendly products and manufacturing processes.

Almost from the beginning of the environmental movement in the 1970s, certain companies have used the color green to associate themselves and their products with being environmentally-friendly, even when their actions are not. According to corporate watchdog CorpWatch, as early as 1969 public utilities spent eight times more on advertising about being green (i.e., good to the environment) than they spent on the anti-pollution research they were trumpeting in the ads.²

This tactic is known as *greenwashing*—disseminating disinformation to appear environmentally responsible. As *New York Times*

On February 25, 2008 *Advertising Age*
featured food companies’ push toward green marketing.



reporter Kim Severson put it, “Buy a greenwashed product and you’re buying a specific set of healthy environmental and socially correct values.”³ In this way, the companies can seem to make it easier for consumers to do right in the world just by making a certain purchase.

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Sometimes food companies use green on their packaging to suggest health in the nutritional qualities of a product; but sometimes healthy is about fewer toxins in agriculture, or the health of the environment in general. The confusion can benefit food and beverage companies because if consumers equate green with either their own health or with the health of the environment, they are likely to extend that favorable association to the product and to the company. And they do. *Advertising Age* reported that 78% of people surveyed in nine countries “like to buy brands that have an eco-conscience” and a survey released in January 2008 showed that half of Americans polled “consider at least one sustainability factor” when they decide what to purchase and where to shop.⁴

The positive associations with green as good for the environment blend with positive associations with green as nutritious or good for health. “In addition to their own wellness,” reports the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “more consumers are also looking to take care of the Earth.”⁵ Consumers may choose a green product for either reason, and either way the company benefits.

PROMOTING GREEN PRODUCTS

How do companies show they are green? Two examples come from Kraft and PepsiCo. Here, both companies have created green symbols for their food packaging to alert customers that the product with the green seal is healthier than other products offered by that same company. The green seal gives consumers a green light to indulge in that “healthier” food.



Kraft (left) and PepsiCo (right) created these seals to show customers which of their products are healthier.

Green strategies mean not only being sure the green products are widely available where other foods are available, but also that they are placed in aisles and stores associated with health, such as stores like Whole Foods or the natural foods aisle in the grocery store. Jim Holbrook, CEO of EMAK Worldwide, a marketing company, advises companies to use promotions, packaging, and placement in stores to signal health by “using such things as recycled paper,” avoiding overpackaging, and placing the products in “the upscale nutrition sections of chain stores.”⁶ “It’s only a matter of time,” Holbrook tells *Adweek*, “until healthy living products seem more interesting and innovative than the alternative.”

In addition to using the green packaging cues so that products look healthy, Holbrook says companies should use other techniques for making the consumer aware of the company’s dedication to health. General Mill’s Cheerios, for example, is “empowering children to be the advocates for healthy living in the family” with an ad that shows a young child helping keep his father’s heart healthy by hiding Cheerios in his “father’s briefcase, car and pock-ets.”⁷

Along with the color green, food companies are using pictures of farmers, animals, vegetables, and crops on their packages to evoke organic, family farms—even when the products are from large multinational corporations. “Consumers can buy classic Lay’s in the shiny yellow bag,” reports the *New York Times*, “or Natural Lay’s, with a thicker cut, expeller-pressed oil and sea salt. The package has a brown harvest graphic design, old-timey typefaces and a matte bag.” But of course the “natural chips” have the same number of calories and grams of fat, notes the *Times*.⁸

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FROM GREENWASHING TO NUTRIWASHING

When companies use green to tout better health or nutrition, author Michele Simon calls it *nutriwashing*.⁹ Simon notes that PepsiCo's *Smart Spot* and Kraft's *Sensible Solution* are green so consumers will think they are purchasing health foods. Simon points out that Kraft is using its seal to deflect attention away from critics of its marketing. As she told *PR Watch*, "They've slapped their seal on products specifically aimed at children because they've taken a lot of heat for marketing to kids. So now, Fruity Pebbles cereal, that wonderful health food, is now a *Sensible Solution*, so moms can feel good about buying that product. Similarly, many of their Lunchables products, awfully processed foods, are also labeled *Sensible Solutions*."¹⁰

Nutritionists are concerned that food industry efforts to create "healthier" offerings may be more about publicity than establishing healthy eating environments. As nutrition expert Lisa Young, PhD, tells the *New York Times*, "A single portion of junk food is better than a large portion of junk food, but it's not better than an apple, a peach or a vegetable."¹¹

It appears food and beverage companies are trying to maintain their profit margins by capitalizing on the strong public concern for the natural environment and personal health associated with all things green. According to Caren Wilcox, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, the companies are enjoying "the halo effect":¹² the green symbols on their products cast a favorable glow over the companies which might help protect their bottom line by keeping their products popular and government regulators at bay.¹³

Will the public see through the greenwashing tactics? One marketing expert predicted that food com-

panies' fascination with green marketing would last about five years. After that, she told the *New York Times*, "food consumers will push companies for even more information about environmental impact, labor practices, and community involvement, and mass market consumers will start reading labels instead of just searching out easy identifiers."¹⁴

Right now, public health advocates could argue that food companies are benefiting from green associations before they've made adequate changes in their products and practices. For these advocates, the green label will be deserved only after food companies have transformed how they grow, process, package, distribute, and market their products so they sustain the Earth and human health.

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