

General Mills defends cereal ads aimed at children

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tlee@startribune.com

A top executive at General Mills Inc. on Thursday defended the company's right to market cereals such as Cocoa Puffs and Lucky Charms to children and questioned a perceived link between TV advertising and childhood obesity. Testifying before the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth in Washington, D.C., General Mills Executive Vice President Ken Powell said the company uses advertising to communicate both taste and nutrition information to kids and parents. Advertising "can be done well and responsibly to adults and children," Powell said.

"Like all consumer industries, we compete on consumer-driven innovation and then by communicating to consumers benefits from our innovation," Powell said. "Advertising is a crucial part of delivering innovation to our consumers." Healthy breakfast ? Bw Powell's remarks were part of a broader effort by the food industry to head off growing pressure by consumer activists, nutrition experts and some in Congress who want the Federal Trade Commission to regulate ads aimed at kids. Critics say food makers such as General Mills, Kraft Inc. and PepsiCo Inc. are at least partly to blame for child obesity because they market unhealthy products to kids. Susan Okie, a contributing editor to the New England Journal of Medicine and author of "Fed up! Winning the War Against Childhood Obesity," says such marketing reinforces bad eating habits in the minds of children that will carry into adulthood. She believes the government should take a stronger role in policing the industry.

Food companies "are taking this very seriously," said Kenneth Hein, a senior editor at Brandweek, an industry publication. "They know [the threat] is real, and they are reacting to it. It's not something that is going to go away." The stakes are high for the food industry, which prefers a system of self-regulation to police its advertising standards, experts say. Kids' cereals such as Trix and Cinnamon Toast Crunch make up nearly 40 percent of General Mills' Big G cereal division, which generated \$7.6 billion in U.S. retail sales in fiscal 2004. For the first nine months of last year, the company spent about \$196 million on cereal advertising, according to a research report by Prudential Securities. Earlier this month, Kraft created a stir within the industry when it said it no longer would advertise brands such as Kool-Aid, Oreo and Chips Ahoy cookies to children ages 6 to 11. Some experts predict other companies soon will follow.

At the same time, Kraft, General Mills, Kellogg Co. and several advertising trade groups recently formed a lobbying group to fight government regulation of their ad practices. The Institute of Medicine is conducting an extensive study on how food marketing affects young children. In his remarks, Powell described a two-pronged strategy. First, he attacked the notion that TV advertising causes obesity, noting obesity rates vary widely by state. "We also would emphasize that

advertising is aired very uniformly across our country, and yet the U.S. obesity rate for adults varies quite dramatically," he said. Then he argued that cereals are among some of the most healthful foods a child can eat.

"Finally, breakfast cereals combine taste, nutrition and convenience with great value, and that's why it's eaten in 99 percent of American households," Powell said. "And frequent cereal consumption is associated with healthier body weights for all ages. Any way you look at it, cereal is a great food. And we advertise to help consumers understand its benefits."