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Shawn Davis
Pacific University

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Would You Like Virtual Fries with That?: The New Frontier of Online Food Marketing

By Shawn Davis, Ph.D.
Pacific University – School of Professional Psychology

Introduction

Let me begin with a confession. I'm finishing this article with an ever-growing stack of game pieces for an online diversion currently being pushed by a national fast-food chain. Yes, you know the one I'm talking about [1]. During my search for the ever-elusive Boardwalk piece (You're out there somewhere!), I catch myself wondering how I've been so easily convinced to put my waistline at risk one value meal dollar at a time. Sadly, it's not just those individuals advertising their products who are to blame, it's human nature and our adherence to the fundamentals of basic learning theory that help make online marketing so effective.

Why Does it Work So Well?

Advertising itself, of course, isn't new. We are bombarded on a minute-by-minute basis with advertising of all forms. For years, television and radio broadcasters have sold advertising space for economic support, and the time devoted to advertising during a given hour or broadcasting has steadily increased [2]. This form of advertising, however, is different from that encountered online in a number of ways, with each distinction tapping into human characteristics that serve to make them more effective.

First, there has traditionally been a clear difference between entertainment content and advertising in a given broadcast. Though this is changing with increased product placement within the entertainment portion itself [3], for now there remains a distinction. As such, we are able to shift our attentional focus away from the advertising without missing out on the desired entertainment content. Advertising is often
contained in online content without this clear demarcation (e.g., popup advertisements, resulting links in online searches, and embedded hyperlinks), and thus we aren't provided a cue to moderate our attention. As a result, we provide online advertising the same level of attentional focus that we utilize when dealing with desired web content. This is product placement at its best. Though we might view this form of advertising as a momentary annoyance, by devoting our attention to the advertised product we have actively engaged in a fundamental cognitive step toward remembering the information contained within the advertisement and have increased the potential for changes in future behavior.

A second way that online advertising has effectively tapped into human cognitive processing is in the use of online games to promote food. The increase in attentional focus that we find when dealing with online static advertisements is multiplied when the user is an active participant in a game either devoted to use of a given food product or laden with references to the product. This active participation leads to a "deeper" level of information processing that has been found to have a substantial influence on our future behavior. According to Craik and Lockhart and their levels-of-processing approach, deep (i.e., meaningful) processing of information leads to retention that is more permanent than shallow (i.e., sensory) forms of processing [4] [5]. This is particularly influential when the user is positioned as a central character within the game itself. In an application of the levels-of-processing approach, Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker found that information that is deemed personal in nature will be more easily recalled via the self-reference effect [6]. As an explanation for the self-reference effect, Bellezza suggests that the "self" is a rich structure of internal cues to which new information can readily be associated [7] [8]. Therefore, by actively engaging with such online advertising in a personal way we open ourselves to the messages embedded within the game itself.

This level of personal investment is further strengthened in situations where the play of such online games holds the potential for tangible gain for the user. The use of online games that offer the possibility for the
user to win food products as well as monetary prizes are especially effective in encouraging continued food purchases as they place a value on the product reflective of possible financial gain. The product itself now has an increased and tangible value.

The fact that an individual often must purchase a food product for their chance to participate in the online game places a higher level of importance on the outcome of the game itself. This encourages the participant to seek out future play when the outcome is negative because they now have made an investment for which they need to recoup their loss. In fact, situations in which reward is only provided to the game participant after a non-continuous number of plays have been found to be among the most effective methods of encouraging future behavior. According to B. F. Skinner, preeminent psychologist and founder of the theory of operant conditioning, a variable ratio schedule of reinforcement (as is established in such online game play) is an extremely powerful method of encouraging future behavior in that it is relatively easy to establish, yet it is very resistant to extinction [9]. In essence, the game player knows that it is their behaviors (i.e., food purchase and online participation) that establish the possibility for reward and that losses that they encounter can only be overcome with continued behavior. As with any other form of gambling behavior, the game player associates winning with their own behavior and easily develops feelings that "they are due" or "next time for sure" when they lose.

This feeling of investment takes on a different form in a third distinction between online and traditional forms of advertising. Online surveys and viral forms of marketing in which an individual's social network is targeted also encourage a level of investment that serves to enhance personal identification with a food product, thus increasing the likelihood of future purchasing behavior. Many individuals actively participate in online surveys for food products even in the absence of external reward for doing so. The individual, however, is rewarded nonetheless in that they have been given the opportunity to share something of himself or herself with another "individual". This internal
reward is often more effective than use of external or tangible rewards. In survey situations, the individual willingly explores their attitudes or beliefs in relation to a given food product, thus associating the product to the "self". Even though information gained from the survey participant is undoubtedly valuable for future marketing, the simple act of survey participation is an immediate form of marketing within itself.

In a viral marketing situation, wherein the individual either provides contact information for another or forwards information regarding a product to another person, the individual has positioned himself or herself as either implicitly or explicitly endorsing the product. Negative psychological outcomes (e.g., anxiety) can result from situations wherein an individual's external behavior (product endorsement) doesn't match his/her internal beliefs. To reduce the cognitive dissonance between attitude and behavior, an individual is likely to engage in a change that resolves this conflict [10]. If the individual has already engaged in an external endorsing behavior (product endorsement), the most likely outcome is to develop increasingly positive attitudes toward the product. Needless to say, this is a win in terms of marketing effectiveness.

**Targeting Children**

Of particular concern is the rising rate of websites and techniques that food advertisers use to target children. In a recent investigation, it was found that 85 percent of the leading food brands that advertise to children on TV also have an Internet presence with content geared at children [11]. The 4,000 sites included in the study received 12.2 million visits from children between the ages of 2 and 11 during the second quarter of 2005 alone. To better protect children from often exploitative marketing techniques, a number of groups around the world are working together to encourage greater regulation of marketing of food products to children online [12]. Until then, the best thing a parent can do is to closely monitor their children's online activities. Not only is this good practice in general, it provides an opportunity for parents to discuss with their children the nature and content of any online advertising that they
come into contact with. Both the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood [13] and Commonsense Media [14] suggests tips for parents and a number of questions that a parent can ask when talking to their children about food advertising.

**Conclusions**

Online marketing of food products isn't going away anytime soon. In fact, it would be safe to say that we will see even more creative methods of online advertising develop in conjunction with better ways to track our online behaviors (cookies aren't just for milk!). As our Internet experience becomes increasingly tied to our individual interests and activities, website developers have an audience that is much more receptive than we have seen for any previous form of advertising. Knowledge, however, remains the best line of defense; knowledge of human learning and behavior as well as how our human nature can be used against us. As a final thought, I encourage you to eat your broccoli, take a walk, brush your teeth, and be aware of the power in the messages that we encounter in our online activities.

**Endnotes**


