

# Hucksters in the classroom marketing essay



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The issue with corporations flooding the schools with advertised products is plain to see: they only have one objective in mind; to increase their company's revenue. By keeping their eye on the prize, the bottom line, they neglect to provide substantial, unbiased, commercial-free, and thought-provoking educational material.

According to Beauchamp, Bowie, and Arnold (2008), advertisers view children as profitable within three possible markets: as buyers themselves, as influencers of their parents' purchases, and as future adult consumers. Each year, elementary school children have an estimated \$15 billion of their own money, of which they spend an estimated \$11 billion on such products as toys, clothes, candy, and snacks and influence at least \$160 billion in parental purchases. Teenagers spend \$57 billion of their own money and \$36 billion of their family's money (Liebeck, 1994; "Captive kids: Commercial," 1995; Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2008). Industry sponsored materials have been used in US schools since the mid-twentieth century (Harty, 1979; Wartella, 1995)

Instead of public education being guided by a vision of social justice, free thought, and political equality, this has been replaced by a vision of the marketplace in which the values of spending and getting of material things outweigh intellectual enlightenment, and development of critical thinking.

Have you had any personal experience with industry-sponsored educational materials?

Regarding my personal experience with industry-sponsored educational materials; I have been exposed as a youth and now as a parent of school age

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children to prevalent advertisement laden, content biased industry-sponsored educational material.

I was taught the four-food groups curriculum as a child, which I have read was sponsored by the meat and dairy board (Page & Phipard, 1956). The material detailed a recommendation of daily intake consisting of even amounts of meat, dairy, bread, grain, and vegetables and fruits. Now, years later, and through the adoption of Swedens food pyramid in 1988 and through an aggressive re-education which provides that a healthy diet involves a food pyramid where grain is eaten more often than meat and dairy foods (US Department Of Agriculture, 2010).

As an adult with school age children I have seen corporate sponsored material in a variety of school material and varied school activities. My children have participated in several school-based sponsor-endorsed incentive programs such as the Pizza Huts “ Book-It!, General Mills “ Box Tops for Education”, and Campbells Soups “ Labels for Education” programs. Pizza Huts “ Book-It! Program provides children with a personal pan pizza as a reward for meeting their reading goals (Pizza Hut, 2010). General Mills “ Box Tops for Education” and Campbells Soups “ Labels for Education” programs encourage the purchase of corporate products by offering to provide schools with supplies in return for a specified number of cereal box tops or soup labels (General Mills, 2010; Campbells, 2010). Each of these Programs were fully endorsed, and encouraged by the school and the school board.

What moral issues, if any, are involved in the affiliation between education and commercial interests?

The moral issues involved in the affiliation between education and commercial interests are, freedom of choice, and privacy issues.

Although initially appearing innocuous, the "Book It!", "Box Tops for Education" or the "Labels for Education" programs dictate absence of free choice, and raise serious privacy issues in the participation. With respect to stated absence of free choice I am referring to the program requirements to purchase a particular product, many times more than normally, additionally if a child does not participate they are viewed as an outcast, a non-supporter of the school. Furthermore, with regard to the box tops or label programs, students must complete forms on each to earn credit towards the reward. This information consist of their families' name, address, school year, and other demographic data, and in return are able to get free goodies for their schools, such as new gym equipment, video equipment, and office equipment. These contests are sent home by the teacher through the student to encourage parents' participation as well.

Another area of concern involves exclusive contracts that require schools to stock only one vendor provided product or line of products. These contracts, primarily with Coke and Pepsi, provide cash incentives to the school to ensure exclusivity. Our school board had recently announced it would not renew its exclusivity contract with Coke, the parents joy was short lived as the board entered into another, with Pepsi, stocking their Vitamin drink line.

Does commercial intrusion into schools change the nature of education?

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The nature of education has changed with the intrusion of commercialism into the schools. Advertising directly in curriculum, textbooks, and school periodicals is an extremely dangerous form of in-school commercialism; it mixes educational content with marketing. With potentially off-centered and biased information being provided, thus planting a seed of misinformation. According to the Federal Communication Commission (2010) even on commercial television aimed at children, there are regulations separating content from advertising, but in classrooms around the U. S., no regulations exist.

In 1995, McGraw-Hill published the first edition of *Mathematics: Applications and Connections*, a math series for 6th-8th grade, which included logo advertising for companies such as Nike, Kellogg's, and McDonald's right in the story problem content of the book. Statements such as "Will is saving his allowance to buy a pair of Nike shoes that cost \$68.25. If Will earns \$3.25 per week, how many weeks will Will need to save?" asks one problem, accompanied by a full color illustration of the pair of shoes (Schrum, 2002). Through this process, students develop an association between shoes and Nike, and not conduct the due process of research into their next pair of shoes, thus begins the development and association of brand loyalty.

What values and beliefs does it instill in children?

With the commercial intrusion into schools, the values and beliefs within public education of political equality, social justice, intellectual enlightenment, and development of free thought are set aside, instead

values of spending and getting are being instilled; a materialistic value and belief, a desire and concern for the dollar is more than the desire for truth and knowledge.

As evidenced by Howe (1993), text books which were used in the 50's and 60's with partial funding provided by the tobacco industry, stated that “slavery was a useful and humane way to care for the needs of simple people who would be lost on their own in the complex American scene” Obviously, there was no truth to the statement.

A concern supported by a 1993 study by Bradley Greenberg and Jeffrey Brand suggested that Channel One encouraged the development of materialistic values. Greenberg and Brand found that children who watched Channel One were more likely than those who did not to agree with the statements “ money is everything,” “ a nice car is more important than school,” “ designer labels make a difference,” and “ wealthy people are happier than the poor” (Greenberg & Brand, 1993).

Do you think students have a “ moral right” to an education free of commercial indoctrination?

Webster's American English Dictionary (2009) defines education as the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another. Education encompasses teaching and learning specific skills, and also something less tangible but more profound: the imparting of knowledge, good judgment, development and refinement of critical thinking and wisdom.

In defining the “moral right”, according to Beauchamp, Bowie, and Arnold (2008), the various ethical principles provide the respective views; Kant’s principle regarding positive rights such as a person’s right to an education, whereas it imposes on society a duty to provide that person with an education. Utilitarian principle, in maximizing an individual’s contribution to society, therefore the individual has a right to an education thus becoming a productive contributor to society. Rights principle, the morally correct action is the one that you have a moral right to do, that does not infringe on the moral rights of others, and that furthers the moral rights of others. Distributive Justice principle, the morally correct action is the one that produces a fair distribution of benefits, such as knowledge, and costs, good and harm.

An education peppered with commercialism has consequences, within the perspective of the marketplace; children are seen as a means to an end, greater profit through early market cultivation. They are manipulated into thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that lead to the inevitable decision to consume something. There is no desire to inform, to educate, or to develop critical thinking; the desire is solely focused on product purchase

It is with such justification that without hesitation in my opinion, students do have a “moral right” to an education free of commercial indoctrination.

If you were a parent of school-age children, would you be concerned about their exposure to commercials and corporate propaganda?

As a parent of school-age children, I am concerned about their exposure to commercials and corporate propaganda. Understanding that schools need

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supplies of every sort, including pencils, desks, books, lunch trays, chalkboards, and computers. Schools determine what they need and accept bids or actively seek out vendors based on which one will provide the most value for the money available. This is a normal, and accepted business transaction.

But the issue arises with regard to marketing within the school; this is problematic for several reasons. While in school children are a captive audience whose immaturity and relative lack of power could be manipulated by advertisers to their advantage (Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2008). Furthermore, while our children are in school we as a society collectively encourages our children to believe and comply with what is asked of them, as it is assumed to be in their best interest, thus whatever defenses they may have against the manipulations of commercialism are likely to be lowered in a school setting.

If you were a member of a school board contemplating the use of either industry-sponsored materials or Channel One, what would you recommend?

If as a member of a school board, and were contemplating the use of either industry-sponsored materials or Channel One, the recommendation would be the third not mentioned option, neither. But, when considering public schools are facing an increasingly growing gap between the cost of educating students and the budgetary funds available to do so, a recommendation would be based on the lesser of two evils, which would be for Channel One.

In dismissing the option of industry-sponsored materials, the primary reason is in their tendency to provide a distorted picture of environmental, health

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and social issues. They present a corporate view as ? fact? and report the results of corporate-funded studies without saying who financed them. Although they may not include blatant mistruths or inaccuracies, they due often distort an issue through omission of relevant information, reliance on biased industry studies, and a misleading emphasis on particular aspects of an issue ((“ Captive kids: Commercial,” 1995; Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2008).

In a 1995 the US Consumers Union provided a report entitled Captive Kids, in it they analyzed 111 different sets of school materials sponsored by commercial enterprises, trade organizations and corporate backed nonprofit organizations. It found that nearly 80 per cent of the sponsored school materials it analyzed ? contained biased or incomplete information, promoting a viewpoint that favors consumption of the sponsor? s product or service or a position that favors the company or its economic agenda.? The Consumers Union concluded that sponsored classroom material containing ? biased, self-serving and promotional information? posed a ? significant and growing threat to the integrity of education in America.” (Consumers Union, 1995)

Whereas in selecting Channel One at the lesser of the two it should be noted that in recommending Channel One the schools would then have to contend with the Chris Whittle huckster dilemma: accept a couple of minutes of commercials in a 15-minute television broadcast of news broadcasts and features and get a windfall of high-tech equipment, or reject the intrusion of the commercials and lose the equipment. (Lewis, 1994; Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2008). According to Beauchamp, Bowie, and Arnold (2008),

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introduction of Channel One in 1990, an in-school television news and advertising program, required schools to provide a guarantee that students will watch the show in return for loaned televisions and a VCR. About 12,000 schools decided that the equipment was worth the price of the little ads. The task of watching advertisements was now a part of the students' educational day.

Do you think industry in general and Channel One in particular are intentionally using teachers and students as a means to profit?

Industry in general and Channel One in particular are intentionally using teachers and students as a means to profit. Traditionally there have always been links between business and education in this country (Harty, 1979), but now it has become a normal and perceived as necessary everyday occurrence. With American school children spending 20 percent of their time in school, advertisers have been eager to pursue school-based marketing in many forms (Aidman, 1995).

For advertisers, when it comes to schools, "It doesn't get any better. These people have not bought cars. They have not chosen the kind of toothpaste they will use. This audience is Valhalla. It's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow." (Twitchell, 1997)

With regard to Capital One, although providing a 12-minute daily news show for students in grades 6 through 12, also included are two minutes of age-appropriate advertisements for products. The commercials are not regulated by the school, therefore Primedia, the company who runs Channel One, can sell ad space to the highest bidder. Additionally Capital One requires schools

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to guarantee that about 90 percent of the student population is viewing 90 percent of the program time. It is with this contractual guarantee that Channel One can charge its advertisers some of the highest rates in the industry. (Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2008). Providing a strong indicator of their intentional use of teachers and students as a means to a profit.

Or do they have a genuine concern for the education process?

I fail to see where industry or Capital One has demonstrated a genuine concern for the education process. The concern displayed is focused in the development of a market place, early development of brand loyalty, making a profit and obtaining demographic data for targeted marketing efforts.

A prime example of a lack of concern for the education process by industry is provided in an industry-sponsored instructional aid, an energy cube. The energy cube, according to the Captive Kids Report by Consumer Union, (1995) is used to instruct children that fossil fuel poses few environmental problems and that alternative energy is far too costly and cannot be attained. All of which goes against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This shouldn't be what children are learning today, this is a distorted and blatantly incorrect. But children are not afforded another perspective and therefore are put at a disadvantage. The energy cube is provided by Exxon.

On the other hand, if teachers and students benefit from these educational materials or from viewing Channel One, is there an ground for concern?

There should still be a concern even if teachers and students do benefit from these educational materials or from viewing Channel One. While teachers

often welcome the free educational materials such as multimedia kits, videos, software, books, posters, reproducible activity sheets and other teaching aides. The truth is for a majority of these programs, they provide incomplete and biased information as well as outright promotions for a company or its product, and therefore the harm outweighs the benefit.

In-school commercialism is at its worst, when it masquerades as educational materials or programs and offers half-truths or misstatements that favor the sponsor of the materials. To further support the argument for continued concern and apprehension of sponsored educational materials, the following examples according to Consumers Union 1995 Captive Kids study demonstrate the distorted views provided by industry. Young children learning about nutrition through materials provided by M&M Mars, prominently featuring chocolate as part of a healthy daily diet; An Exxon video that teaches students that the Valdez spill was not such a bad event, and the cleanup that followed was an exemplary case of disaster management (“Captive kids: Commercial,” 1995).

After reading this article I have a new perspective on companies that assist public schools by providing learning materials. Their goal is not to educate our youth but to instill a product in their minds, cultivate a future buyer, and develop brand loyalty. This is being accepted due to the public schools are so underfunded they willing to take anything offered. But in doing so, this places our children in an environment not conducive to open thought, development of critical thinking, or transference of unbiased knowledge.