

Policy Brief: Countermarketing Unhealthy Food: Lessons from Tobacco

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In the next decade, diseases related to diet are likely to overtake tobacco as the leading cause of premature death and preventable illness in New York City, the United States and globally.^[1] Why? One important factor is the relentless marketing by food companies — now estimated to be at least \$2 billion a year targeted at children alone.^[2] The overwhelming majority of ads are for ultra-processed foods high in fat, sugar, salt and empty calories.^[3] A recent meta-analysis concluded that acute exposure to food advertising increases food intake in children.^[4] These data make it clear that public health policy action must seek to reduce the high levels of exposure of our children to unhealthy food advertising.

Thirty years of research in tobacco control has shown that countermarketing has been effective in reducing tobacco use, especially among teenagers and young adults. In this policy brief, we describe some of the key elements of effective tobacco countermarketing campaigns, and examine the relevance of these evidence-based countermarketing practices to unhealthy food and beverages, which we define as processed products high in unhealthy fats, sugar, salt and empty calories.

Countermarketing(CM) campaigns use health communications strategies to reduce the demand for unhealthy products by exposing the motives of their producers and portraying their marketing activities as outside the boundaries of civilized corporate behavior. In a review of several recent syntheses of the literature on tobacco countermarketing,^{[5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12]} we identified eight common elements of anti-tobacco campaigns.^[13] Not every campaign included all eight elements but together these characteristics define CM and distinguish it from other approaches to tobacco communication.



Eight Key Elements of Tobacco Countermarketing Campaigns

Communicate the adverse health consequences of smoking. For more than 40 years, evaluations of tobacco control campaigns have shown that highlighting the health consequences of tobacco use can be effective.[\[14\]](#) While the core message of early programs in California and Florida were to expose tobacco industry deception and manipulation,[\[15\]](#) subsequent CM campaigns in tobacco, notably the nationwide *truth* campaign, clearly communicated the health consequences of smoking within an anti-industry context.



The Marlboro man mourns his horse killed by second hand smoke

Publicize industry manipulation of consumers. Messages that highlight deceptive or predatory tobacco industry practices are central to the tobacco CM campaigns that reduced smoking intentions and behaviors.[\[16\]](#) By exposing tobacco industry practices such as denial that tobacco is addictive, distortion or obfuscation of scientific findings on the harms of tobacco, and targeted marketing to youth and other vulnerable populations, countermarketers challenged the veracity and credibility of the industry.



This early truth billboard features a tobacco executive wearing a bikini. [Credit](#)

Appeal to negative emotions. Campaigns seeking to spark emotions such as outrage and resistance to manipulation have been successful components of CM tobacco campaigns, especially those focusing on teens. [\[17\]](#) Truth magazine ads showing stitched mouths, eyes and ears of youth convey the message that tobacco companies seek to prevent young people from seeing, hearing and telling the truth about industry marketing practices.



This truth ad encouraged young people to speak the truth about the tobacco industry. [Credit](#)



A truth campaign ad showing a Marlboro man with mules carrying body bags.

Disparage actual popular brands.

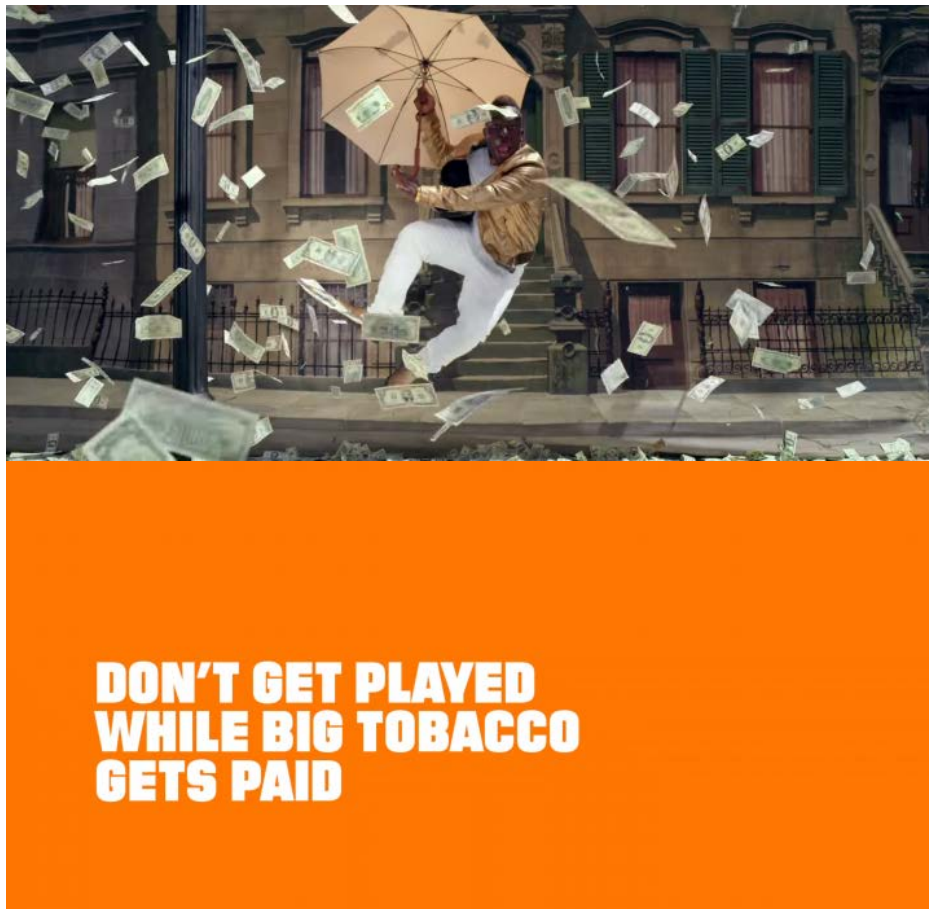


Tailor campaigns for specific populations. Substantial empirical evidence indicates that tailoring campaigns by race and ethnicity^[18] and peer group^[19] can be effective in reaching various segments of the market. The Commune campaign, which reduced smoking among young adult “hipsters” in San Diego, is an example of successful tailoring to reach one segment.^[20]



T-shirts designed by Commune Project for “young hipsters” [Credit](#)

Criticize industry targeting of vulnerable populations. Some tobacco CM campaigns highlight marketing that targets vulnerable populations such as children, Latinos, Blacks or immigrants. For African-American and other groups, the appeal to protect their community against racially targeted ads has often proved successful at mobilizing opposition to tobacco marketing.^[21]



A *truth* ad tailored for African-American youth [Credit](#)

Establish a distinct CM campaign brand. Some CM campaigns include design elements such as a logo which differentiates the brand from its competitors.[\[22\]](#) The *truth* campaign featured a clear and deliberate strategy to market its antismoking anti-industry message as a brand with a logo and specific color schemes.[\[23\]](#) These brand images also symbolized the differences between countermarketers and Big Tobacco companies.



The truth logo

Engage users in all phases of campaign. Another key lesson from tobacco countermarketing is the value of engaging those the campaign hopes to reach in all phases of a campaign. Young people can be credible communicators with their peers and family. Often they are more effective than adults in reaching their own peer group. Three stages of engagement have been widely used: 1) meaningful input on campaign design, 2) peers as spokespeople for the campaign, and 3) interactive peer participation in message delivery. However, the *truth* and Commune campaigns went beyond merely showcasing youth and young adults in their campaigns; they engaged their audience throughout campaign development and execution. [\[24\]\[25\]](#)



A youth representing the truth campaign demonstrates outside corporate tobacco headquarters

To what extent have food countermarketing campaigns incorporated these elements?

To answer that question, we identified nine food CM campaigns that have a presence on the Web and we reviewed their materials and websites. We analyzed some of the ways these organizations are using CM to reduce consumption of unhealthy food. We also explored the extent to which they included the lessons from tobacco CM in their campaigns. The campaigns we identified are listed in the box below.

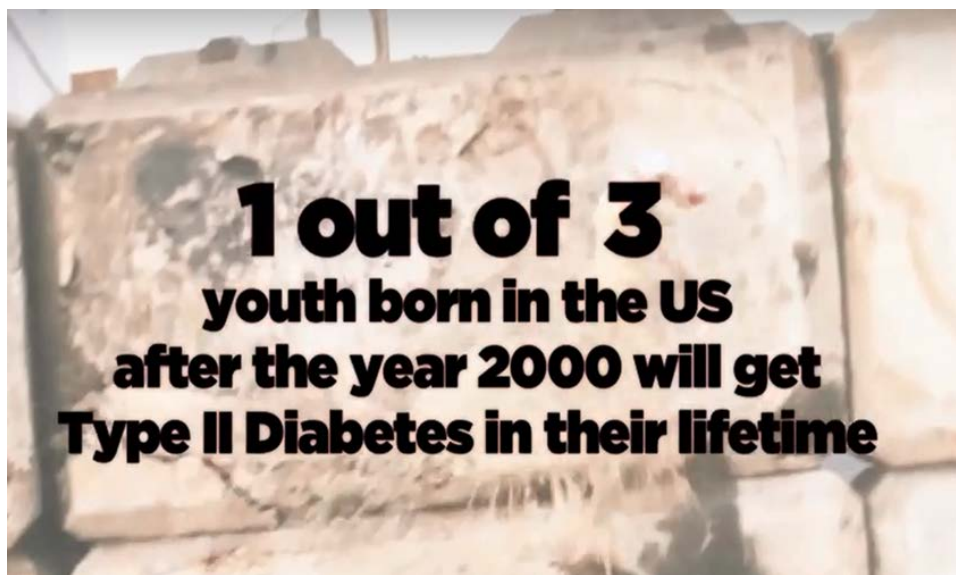
Some Examples of Food Countermarketing Projects		
Campaign Name and Link	Sponsoring Organization	Description
The Bigger Picture	University of California San Francisco Center for Vulnerable Populations at San Francisco General Hospital and collaboration with Youth Speaks, a non-profit San Francisco based organization	Mixed media campaign that educates youth on social and environmental factors contributing to type 2 diabetes and encourages consumption behavior change. Short films call attention to industry profits from unhealthy products.
Change the Tune	Center for Science in the Public Interest	Music video with an adapted Coca-Cola jingle that counters Coca-Cola's "Soda is Happiness" message. The video calls attention to consumption behavior change.
Dunk the Junk	Founded by pediatrician Kevin Strong (Maine)	A multimedia campaign drawing on popular culture introduces the slogan "Defeat Soda Tron", the evil soda monster, and encourages youth to rebel against unhealthy foods and beverages.
Junk Busters	Cancer Council NSW (Australia)	Multimedia campaign educates parents to take action against unhealthy food marketing that targets children. The overarching goal is increased regulation of unhealthy food marketing.
Kick the Can	California Center for Public Health Advocacy	Website provides information on national campaigns that advocate for reduction of sugar sweetened beverage consumption and counter beverage industry tactics.
Kidz Bite Back	Dewey & Associates in collaboration with public schools. (Tampa Bay, FL.)	Designs youth-led countermarketing campaigns with "brand appeal" that emphasizes consumption behavior change.
Open Truth	Shape Up San Francisco	Multimedia campaign exposes soda industry marketing tactics aimed toward youth and communities of color. Open Truth promotes change of consumption behavior and industry marketing policy.

The Real Bears	Center for Science in the Public Interest	Animated health satire of Coca-Cola's polar bears that reveals long-term health consequences of drinking soda. Theme song "Sugar" is performed by popular artists Jason Mraz and MC Flow.
We're Not Buying It	Prevention Institute	Multimedia campaign that reveals deceptive marketing to children, exposes industry counter claims; and provides facts with intentions of changing consumption behavior and policy.

At least some of the groups used each of the eight common elements from the tobacco CM campaigns.

Communicate the adverse health consequences of unhealthy food

By the time *truth* launched its CM campaign, most Americans knew about the harmful effects of tobacco. However, some research suggests many Americans, including young people, may be less knowledgeable about the harmful health consequences of unhealthy food.[\[26\]](#)[\[27\]](#)[\[28\]](#) This finding warrants including information on how products like sugary beverages and fast foods harm health, as shown in the images below from food CM videos.



From Open Truth [Credit](#)



An image from We're Not Buying it: Stop junk food marketing to kids. [Credit](#)

Publicize industry manipulation of consumers

CM gains much of its impact from anger and outrage toward the unethical practices of big corporations. Many of the groups using this approach in food take on the best known brands—Coca Cola, Pepsi, McDonalds, and Kellogg's, for example. Corporate Accountability International seeks to force McDonald's to "retire" Ronald, who in their view, embodies an unethical business practice of convincing children to pester their parents to buy them unhealthy food. In *Change the Tune*, the Center for Science in the Public Interest shows a patient with diabetes, a family member and a doctor singing the Coke song "I'd like to teach the world to sing...", juxtaposing the happy fantasy of Coke with the reality of a global epidemic of diabetes, exacerbated by Coke's success in achieving its goal of putting Coca Cola in "arms' reach" of every person on Earth.



Corporate Accountability International, [Credit](#)



Center for Science in the Public Interests' *Change the Tune* [Credit](#)

Appeal to negative emotions

In contrast to “Open Happiness”, “I’m Lovin’ It”, or “Have it Your Way”, the feel good emotions unhealthy food advertisers communicate, countermarketers seek to elicit negative emotions—anger, outrage, or resistance. The Prevention Institute uses the slogan “We’re Not Buying It” as a reaction to food industry lobbying against limits on advertising to children while Center for Science in the Public Interest shows obese polar bears(used in many Coca Cola ads) waddling away from a Coke machine that urges them to “Be Happy Please.”

We're Not Buying It



What “foods” do big food companies think are good for kids as young as two to eat? Popsicles and Cocoa Puffs made the list, and food companies are using major lobbying muscle—spending over \$37 million dollars in 2011—to keep them there. In DC, a coalition of food companies snuck language into the house appropriations bill to sideline federal recommendations that would have promoted healthy foods for kids, instead of those loaded with sugar, salt and fat.

From We're Not Buying It by the Prevention Institute [Credit](#)



From The Real Bears by Center for Science in the Public Interest. [Credit.](#)

Disparage popular brands

Tobacco countermarketers worked to sever the emotional bonds that big tobacco companies sought to develop with their customers to make them loyal sources of revenue. The brand was a symbol of those bonds so changing what consumers feel and think when they see the brand may set the stage for behavior change. To counter these associations, *The Bigger Picture* designed a fact book on diabetes for its participants, using Coca Cola branding on the cover.



The Bigger Picture uses hip hop music to educate young African American and Latino people about diabetes. [Credit](#)

Tailor campaigns for specific populations.

Marketers know that market segmentation is the key to growing market share and winning new customers. Some countermarketers have learned this basic lesson. Junkbusters, an Australian group, used the appeal and character below to appeal to parents of young children, a group motivated to challenge junk food marketing in order to protect their kids and provides a platform for parents to complain about troubling ads.



Fed up with junk food marketing that targets your kids? Want to speak out but not sure how? Tell us about it! The current regulatory environment of junk food marketing to children is complicated. Junkbusters makes it easier for concerned parents to complain about inappropriate junk food marketing. Voice your concerns here. Junkbusters message to parents and their character “Shamburger.” [Credit](#)

Criticize industry targeting of vulnerable populations

Children and young people are the customers global transnational food companies want and need to continue to generate profits today and in the decades to come. Much of their marketing targets these and other groups that have the potential to grow their market share. In their video, *A Taste of Change*, the group NCD Free criticized Coca Cola for using enticing ads to target young people and Latinos.



A Taste of Change by NCD Free. [Credit](#)

Establish a distinct countermarketing campaign brand

Truth showed the value of creating a brand that could compete for attention and loyalty with the Big Tobacco brands. Some food countermarketers have tried the same. KIDZ, a group that says its campaigns are “kid created, kid led, and kid spread” uses the slogan KIDZ bite back, explained in the text below.



[Credit](#)

Youth ages 8 to 12 lead this campaign to expose how Big Fat Industries and Couch Potato Companies take advantage of youth by promoting over-consumption of unhealthy foods and drinks, as well as encouraging over-use of TV watching and video gaming. KidS don't get it, But KidZ do. And KidZ are spreading the word to their

families, friends, neighbors, classmates – even elected officials who need some education about Big Fat Industries and Couch Potato Companies.

Engage users in all phases of campaign

Some food countermarketers are developing new ways to engage young people in designing the campaigns, serving as campaign spokespeople and delivering campaign messages in face-to-face encounters with other young people. Not only are young people credible and authentic communicators, they are also less expensive than the Madison Avenue advertising companies that some of the national countermarketing campaigns have hired.



User-created art work from Dunk the Junk. [Credit](#)

Responding to the challenges facing food countermarketing

To date, food countermarketing lacks the body of evidence that has demonstrated the effectiveness of tobacco countermarketing. It is important to note that it is *not* that food countermarketing is ineffective –only that researchers have not yet conducted the long term studies, mostly because food countermarketing has yet to achieve the scale and reach that warrant systematic evaluations. To encourage more discussion, we list five objections to food CM that food activists and public health professionals have sometimes raised, then suggest possible responses to these concerns.

1. Countermarketing is too negative. We ought to develop more positive messages and focus on increasing access to healthy food.

Food activists and public health professionals have done a good job here in New York City and around the nation in starting to make healthy food more available. That's a big step forward. But the public health evidence suggests that to reduce obesity, diabetes and other diet-related conditions, people will also need to eat less unhealthy food. While individual choice is important, it is simply a fact that food marketing remains a major influence on unhealthy diets. If we fail to challenge that marketing, we miss an opportunity to make a difference, and allow the global food industry to dictate how people learn about food. Developing new CM campaigns does not preclude positive campaigns to, for example, drink tap water or eat fresh fruits and vegetables. The two approaches reinforce each other.

2. Many people dislike Big Tobacco but food companies like Coca Cola and McDonalds are still loved around the world. Countermarketing won't work in this climate.

Fifty years ago, many smokers loved their tobacco companies too. Change may come slowly but already many in the United States are reducing their sugary beverage consumption because of public health campaigns and concerns about health. Media coverage of the soda industry has become more critical. The tobacco CM campaigns contributed to public disapproval of big tobacco. Can food CM precipitate a similar decline in corporations contributing to premature death and preventable illness among children and families around the world? The only way we can find out is by trying.

3. Effective countermarketing campaigns are too expensive. The truth campaign had hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement. Most food countermarketing projects operate on a shoe string.

To reach scale, food CM will need more robust and stable funding. Whether the public health community, elected officials and food justice movement will be able to generate the resources needed to bring this approach to scale remains an open question. Some local officials use revenues from soda taxes to fund public education campaigns, a possible strategy for the future.[\[29\]](#) Others have proposed a prevention fund with multiple streams of support as a possible revenue source[\[30\]](#). Social media technologies have now made it possible to launch national and global campaigns with far fewer resources than are needed for mass media. Nevertheless, to have a population impact, it is true that food CM will need to find additional sources of financial and political support. By engaging young people in designing and delivering CM campaigns, we mobilize an important asset of low income communities.

4. There isn't yet evidence that countermarketing works. How can we justify using it?

If we had waited for evidence of the effectiveness of tobacco CM, which took two decades to evolve, or tobacco litigation, which also took several decades to show results, hundreds of thousands of additional smokers would have experienced avoidable premature death or illnesses. Studies should be launched now to build a body of evidence showing food CM works (or does not work). Advocates should already be looking to achieve consensus on the key research questions and methods needed to test its efficacy. Practice-based research can

accelerate the learning that will be needed to use this strategy to complement other efforts to reduce diet-related diseases.

5. Countermarketing is a copout. What we really need to do is regulate and tax the food industry to stop producing products that contribute to diet-related diseases. That's where we ought to be focusing our efforts.

Some food activists argue that CM is a distraction from the essential tasks of improving regulation and strengthening public sector oversight of the food industry on product formulation, marketing, retail distribution, pricing, lobbying, campaign contributions, and sponsored research.

While regulation is an important response to food industry practices that jeopardize public health, multiple synergistic practices are always more effective than any single strategy. To reduce smoking, public health professionals have used taxation, smoking bans, litigation, public education and more. CM was an essential part of this mix. Public health researchers should find out how it can play a similar role in reducing the burdens of diet-related diseases. In addition, CM campaigns should be designed to build public support for stronger regulation of harmful practices.

Next Steps for Food Countermarketing in New York City

Already several organizations have started to apply the lessons from tobacco CM to unhealthy food and beverages. A year ago, the New York City Department of Health sponsored #OurVoiceNYC, a youth-driven movement amplifying the vision, voices, and actions of young people to create a just and healthier NYC. In a campaign called #SodaKills Project, teens took to the streets of New York to counter the marketing tactics of sugary drink companies that target communities and shorten lives.



[#OurVoiceNYC](#) teens in Times Square saying loud and clear that [#SodaKills](#).

[Credit](#)



Counter ad developed by Youth Educators for East Harlem

For the past two years, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute has sponsored Youth Educators for East Harlem, a program that trains young people to develop and deliver countermarketing campaigns against unhealthy beverages in East and Central Harlem. Next month, the Institute will release a toolkit for other youth or food programs that want to develop youth countermarketing activities. Other schools and youth organizations have prepared young people to resist food industry marketing and educated parents and youth workers about food industry marketing practices.



To further develop food and beverage countermarketing activities in New York City, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute is convening a meeting for youth and food organizations that are currently engaged in food counter marketing or plan to develop such activities in the coming months. To receive an invitation to this October meeting, please contact Charita Johnson at Charita.Johnson@sph.cuny.edu.

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