
INTRODUCTION

Did you know that:

- u the typical American receives more than 3,000 marketing messages daily and US marketers spend \$1 billion annually on advertising to children?
- u the Pope has asked Pepsi Cola to help deliver his message to the world?
- u private companies provide millions to British schools, a good proportion raised through product marketing aimed at children?

Seeing Through the Spin examines how public relations (PR) influences our perceptions of transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and how these organisations affect development, public health and the environment. It questions whether commercial sponsorship of education is justified, and whether its benefits are outweighed by its risks to health and society.

The pack has been produced by Baby Milk Action, a small non-profit organisation based in the UK, which is part of a global network of citizens groups called the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). Baby Milk Action has been campaigning for responsible marketing of baby foods for over 20 years, in an effort to reverse the decline in breastfeeding, a lifeline in communities without clean drinking water. The baby food issue is controversial and complex and has focused attention on the harm caused by marketing by multi-billion dollar companies, and the way they have worked to undermine marketing controls.

Like other transnational companies, the baby food companies use sophisticated PR strategies to portray an ethical and health promoting image. In this way they hope to deflect criticism and gain the trust of mothers and health workers. Companies know the value of sponsorship. Their vast resources can give them influence – be it over a small NGO in South Africa, a hospital in the Philippines, or a primary school in Kent. At the same time they use this as evidence of corporate citizenship which creates opportunities to forge greater understanding of business. In this new world which companies are attempting to create, all of us are expected to work together in ‘partnership’. But do we all want the same things? Do we all share the same goals?



illustration: Neil Bolton (UK)

The \$7.8 billion annual promotion budget of the world's largest food company (a company with 8.5 thousand brands) is four times the size of the World Health Organisation's total budget of \$1.86 billion, 8 times more than UNICEF's, and more than the Gross National Product of Ghana (\$6.7bn in 1995). Does the aim of the company to become market leader harmonise or conflict with the aim of the UN to achieve health for all?

While the money being offered by companies may appear tempting, it is important to remember that all corporations have a legal duty to maximise profits for their shareholders. Any investment – in education or anything else – must show a return, in either the short or long term. It is no wonder then, that so many sponsorship schemes in schools are linked to highly profitable brand promotion for foods and other products aimed at children. But do teachers recognise this as marketing to a captive audience? How many lay aside concerns about healthy eating, perhaps even ignoring established guidelines, and instead encourage children to buy snack foods – just to raise money for the school?

Teaching materials present an even more complex problem. Their educational content is more difficult to evaluate and through them the boundaries between advertising, marketing and independent information become blurred. From our research it seems that teachers have no formal way (other than their own judgement) of assessing material which is sent to them – much of it unrequested. Companies are skilled at using terms such as 'sustainable development' and 'corporate responsibility' but how are we to know if this is merely window dressing? If a soft drinks manufacturer claims to be taking a lead in environmental protection, will students using its teaching materials assume they are saving the planet each time they buy the drink?

We are all struggling to understand our increasingly complex, globalised world, where our lives are inextricably linked with people and communities in places we know little about. If the bulk of our information – even our core educational materials and services – comes from companies with a vested interest in 'free' trade, how are we to evaluate the impact of such ideology? Who will be able to count the cost when things go wrong – or even recognise that there is a problem?

The simple fact is that power and wealth are becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of a small minority who believe that the market place is the most effective way to organise society. The consumer's buying decision is now the ultimate arbiter of what is considered right or wrong. *I shop therefore I am.*

I hope this pack will encourage you to address these issues in your work with young people, and provide you with the tools to develop their ability to question these assumptions and become active, aware 21st century global citizens.

Patti Rundall, Policy Director, Baby Milk Action

“ **Many TNCs say they have seen the error of their ways and have rectified their mistakes (or at least are in the process of doing so). Eager to do their best for “our common future”, they claim to be keen to listen to their critics. Thus ‘dialogues’ with companies or industry organisations are frequently portrayed as the way ahead for citizen groups seeking corporate accountability, rather than ‘confrontational’ strategies such as boycotts.**

But how are industry critics to know whether, when and how entering into ‘dialogue’ with corporations will be effective? What are the dangers and limits of doing so?

An answer requires exploring the ways in which calls for ‘dialogue’ or ‘cooperation’ have masked attempts to manipulate public debates; to silence or neutralise critics; and to create an image of socially-concerned businesses. In short, it requires an introduction to contemporary corporate public relations or PR. ”

Judith Richter, in *Engineering of Consent: Uncovering Corporate PR*
1998