

SCHOOL MEAL DEALS

This article by Joanna Blythman first appeared in *The Guardian*, and is reproduced with kind permission.

School vouchers on food aimed at our kids are just token offerings

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What do primary school children have to do these days to please the headteacher? Get their homework in on time? Go to bed earlier on weekdays? No – the answer is to consume as many packets of crisps, biscuits and fizzy drinks as possible.

Yes, you read right: schools up and down the land are at risk of being tempted by heavy commercial pressure to encourage their pupils to eat junk food, and in the process collect vouchers on wrappers that the school can cash in for educational resources. Last year, if you collected foil tops from packets of Pringles, say, you got some sports equipment, while greasy tokens cut off any bag of Walkers crisps (including Doritos, Monster Munch and Quavers) earned you free books. This year, McVitie's has joined in: its biscuits, Skips, Mini Cheddars and Hula Hoops now bear tokens that can be exchanged for maths equipment.

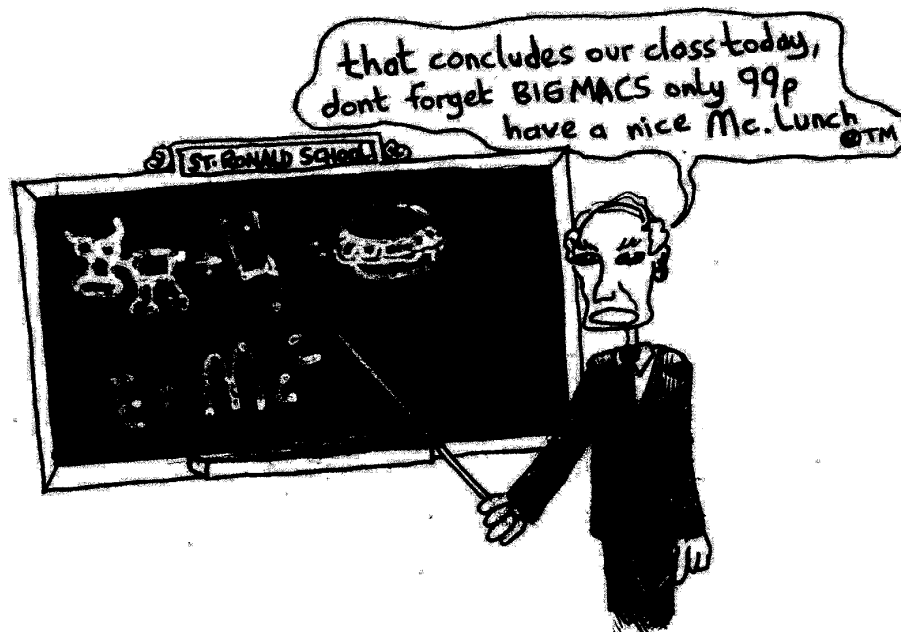
This is the latest scheme dreamed up by food manufacturers, and it's working a treat. Corporate public-relations departments refer to it as 'in-school marketing', and it's proven a better tool for generating junk food sales among children and their parents than any advertising campaign. With this strategy, the crisp, biscuit and fizzy drink manufacturers can then present their products as having a useful contribution to make to children's physical or mental well-being. And, by linking them to some moral high ground – literacy, sport, education – they can have a real field day. It's what's known in the marketing business as a 'paradox concept' – which, in a nutshell, means you link two disparate and contradictory concepts and use them to entice the gullible.

The particularly audacious nerve of the 'tokens for junk food' approach is that cash-strapped headteachers get sucked into endorsing the products and lending them their seal of approval. So, while children are being taught about healthy eating in the classroom, they may also be asked to deposit tokens from junk food in the school office. Talk about mixed messages.

The food manufacturers are not the only ones at it, either. Tesco is now offering Computers For Schools vouchers at the check-out – the vouchers are emblazoned with the brand logos of its charitable sponsors, which happen to include sugary fizzy drinks Pepsi, Tango and 7-Up, and Dairy Lea, the makers of Dunkers and other such delightful, sodium-and fat-laden snacks that have been targeted at the juvenile lunchbox market. That's not to say that children don't eat such junk foods, anyway, but where is the encouragement for them to eat more healthily?



Illustration: Sarah Guthrie (UK)



Tesco responds to criticisms of its scheme with a less-than-convincing prepared Questions And Answers leaflet. “Q: Does Tesco have any concerns regarding the health issue of these products? A: All products are clearly labelled and if any shopper should have any health concerns they should directly contact the product concerned.”

Tesco also insists that its sponsors’ branding is “very subtle” and that shoppers collect vouchers even if they don’t choose their products. Perhaps some of McVitie’s maths packages might come in handy here for a little mental arithmetic – spend £10 on anything in Tesco, and you collect one voucher; spend 89p in Tesco on a two-litre bottle of Tango, and you collect one voucher. So, hands up children, which purchase should the voucher-maximising customer choose?

Tesco would do well to look over its shoulder at its main rival, Sainsbury’s, which also operates a ‘school points’ scheme, but which has ditched the sponsors. “We found that both parents and schools did not favour having extra points on certain products, and that parents preferred to carry on their normal shop and still help the school without being pressurised into buying particular brands,” says a Sainsbury’s spokesman.

In Sainsbury’s, then, customers can automatically build up school points on their reward card, which are electronically credited to a nominated school’s account. It’s an effortless and streamlined scheme that must appeal to the school staff members whose unfortunate and time-consuming job it has been of late to count and bag thousands of spent wrappers and vouchers. But, laudable though the store’s own scheme may be, Sainsbury’s still sells plenty of branded junk food that has school vouchers on its packaging.

Tesco, however, is adamant that its Computers For Schools scheme has benefited both schools and consumers. “It is a good example of cause-related marketing, where companies and causes come together to benefit the community,” says Tesco’s community affairs manager, Fiona Archer. Last year alone, Tesco delivered some £10.5 million-worth of computing equipment to more than 20,000 schools, a perfect example of the Business In The Community initiatives so favoured by Tony Blair. But many schools already have two iMacs in each classroom yet no specialist art or music teacher. Such initiatives simply cannot address the chronic funding shortages that hamper schools.

And what happened to the concept of the promoting healthier eating in schools? Our genial sponsors want their pound of flesh, after all. A packet of Doritos tangy cheese flavour 3Ds may deliver one token towards a free book, but to get it the kids have to eat a maize-and-oil snack that is processed with cheese powder, flavour enhancers monosodium glutamate, disodium inosinate and disodium guanylate, further flavouring, added caramel and sunset yellow colours, all tastily rounded off with salt and sugar.

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