The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food

New York Times reporter Michael Moss writes in his article, The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food” about how powerful food companies struggle to maintain their market share, as these companies are being blamed for the obesity problems in America today. Moss won a Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for his reporting on the science, marketing, and psychology behind the in manufacturing of snack products made for consumers. Moss presents a series of case studies that sheds light on how foods are created and sold to people who are poor, uniformed and the most vulnerable. In this article, Moss targets food companies, and attempts to encourage them to take an alternate route, other than produce unhealthful food. Moss has credibility, using ethos, interviewing food experts and executives with firsthand knowledge, who have worked within the food industry in the marketing and product development departments. He does an excellent job of reporting facts, seemingly without opinion. Pathos is used as moss discusses companies attempt to infiltrate schools, trying to influence children at an early age to buy their products, he details of marketing to the poor and vulnerable around the world. Logos is presented by Moss when he reports that Vice president of Draft, Mudd suggested that executive should take some culpability for the obesity crisis and the industry should use the expertise of its scientists to gain an understanding of why people overeat. Once this is achieved, companies should take steps to prevent overconsumption.

Vice president of Kraft Michael Mudd, gave the following statistics when giving a presentation to warn the C.E.O.’s that their companies may have gone too far in creating and marketing products that posed the greatest health concerns;
More than half of American adults were now considered overweight, with nearly one-quarter of the adult population — 40 million people — clinically defined as obese. Among children, the rates had more than doubled since 1980, and the number of kids considered obese had shot past 12 million. (This was still only 1999; the nation’s obesity rates would climb much higher.) Food manufacturers were now being blamed for the problem from all sides — academia, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. The secretary of agriculture, over whom the industry had long held sway, had recently called obesity a “national epidemic.” (Moss para. 5)

Moss interviewed Dwight Riskey, an expert on cravings, “They (Baby Boomers) were not only eating what they ate when they were younger, they were eating more of it.” In fact, everyone in the country, on average, was eating more salty snacks than they used to. The rate of consumption was edging up about one-third of a pound every year, with the average intake of snacks like chips and cheese crackers pushing past 12 pounds a year (Moss para. 63). Riskey had a theory about what caused this surge: Eating real meals had become a thing of the past. Baby boomers, especially, seemed to have greatly cut down on regular meals. They were skipping breakfast when they had early-morning meetings. They skipped lunch when they then needed to catch up on work because of those meetings. They skipped dinner when their kids stayed out late or grew up and moved out of the house. And when they skipped these meals, they replaced them with snacks. “We looked at this behavior, and said, ‘Oh, my gosh, people were skipping meals right and left,’” Riskey told me. “It was amazing.” This led to the next realization, that baby boomers did not represent “a category that is mature, with no growth. This is a category that has huge growth potential” (Moss para. 64).

It’s amazing to think about the fact that Baby Boomers make up 25% of the US population, hold 70% of US assets, and collectively, spend over $2 trillion a year in products and services. The food industry realized they had a reliable, consistent market for their product they stopped worrying about inventing something new, instead concentrated on bringing the customers new varieties of the products
they already loved. Frito-Lay had a formidable research complex near Dallas, where nearly 500 chemists, psychologists and technicians conducted research that cost up to $30 million a year, and the science corps focused intense amounts of resources on questions of crunch, mouth feel and aroma for each of these items. Their tools included a $40,000 device that simulated a chewing mouth to test and perfect the chips, discovering things like the perfect break point: people like a chip that snaps with about four pounds of pressure per square inch (Moss para. 65).

Moss builds up ethos with his readers by interviewing credible food experts and executives who have worked within the food industry in marketing and product development departments. The interviews show the power and scope used by the snack companies, and their efforts to make the consumers food experience on that the customer would crave over and over again.

The reader of the article starts to react with emotion is when Moss talks about the strategy of companies aggressively marketing to school aged children. The processed-food companies infiltrate schools, attempting to influence children at an early age to buy their products. Another way that Moss uses pathos in his article is by adding the details of marketing to the poor and vulnerable around the world. Moss interviewed former president and chief officer of sales for Coca-Cola, Jeffrey Dunn, who gave some interesting facts behind the marketing scheme of Coca-Cola. Dunn told Moss that one of his lieutenants, Todd Putman, said that Coca-Cola’s goal was to out sell every other thing that people drank, including milk and water. Dunn was concerned with the tactic, especially in poor countries where they should depend on Coca-Cola to hydrate their bodies. Moss paraphrased the conversation he had with Dunn and states:

Todd Putman, who worked for Coca-Cola from 1997 to 2001, said the goal became much larger than merely beating the rival brands; Coca-Cola strove to outsell every other thing people drank, including milk and water. The marketing division’s efforts boiled down to one question, Putman said: “How can we drive more ounces into more bodies more often?” (In response to Putman’s remarks, Coke said its goals have changed and that it now focuses on providing consumers with more low- or no-calorie products
(Moss para. 76). Jeffrey Dunn, who, in 2001, at age 44, was directing more than half of Coca-Cola’s $20 billion in annual sales as president and chief operating officer in both North and South America. He states, that in poor countries around the world, the goal was to control as much of the shares as possible.

The company’s strategy was to repackage Coke into smaller, more affordable 6.7-ounce bottles, just 20 cents each. Coke was not alone in seeing Brazil as a potential boon; Nestlé began deploying battalions of women to travel poor neighborhoods, hawking American-style processed foods door to door. But Coke was Dunn’s concern, and on one trip, as he walked through one of the impoverished areas, he had an epiphany. “A voice in my head says, ‘These people need a lot of things, but they don’t need a Coke.’ I almost threw up” (Moss para. 77).

Using Ethos, Michael Mudd of Kraft drew a connection to the last thing in the world the C.E.O.’s wanted linked to their products: cigarettes. First came a quote from a Yale University professor of psychology and public health, Kelly Brownell, who was an especially vocal proponent of the view that the processed-food industry should be seen as a public health menace: “As a culture, we’ve become upset by the tobacco companies advertising to children, but we sit idly by while the food companies do the very same thing. And we could make a claim that the toll taken on the public health by a poor diet rivals that taken by tobacco.”

Logos is used by Moss when he talks of the food industry coming together to come up with products that customers want, that are more healthy.

11 president and CEO’s of Americas largest food manufacturing companies came together, the companies included Pillsbury, Kraft, Nabisco, General Mills and Procter &Gamble, Coca-Cola, and Mars. James Behnke, an executive at Pillsbury, led the discussion. We were very concerned, and rightfully so, that obesity was becoming a major issue, Behnke stated. “People were starting to talk about sugar taxes, and there was a lot of pressure on food companies.” A chemist by training with a doctoral degree in food science, Behnke became Pillsbury’s chief technical officer
in 1979 and was instrumental in creating a long line of hit products, including microwaveable popcorn. He deeply admired Pillsbury but in recent years had grown troubled by pictures of obese children suffering from diabetes and the earliest signs of hypertension and heart disease. In the months leading up to the C.E.O. meeting, he was engaged in conversation with a group of food-science experts who were painting an increasingly grim picture of the public’s ability to cope with the industry’s formulations — from the body’s fragile controls on overeating to the hidden power of some processed foods to make people feel hungrier still. It was time, he and a handful of others felt, to warn the C.E.O.’s that their companies may have gone too far in creating and marketing products that posed the greatest health concerns. (Moss para. 2)

The CEO’s talked of marketing and for example how the Yoplait brand had transformed traditional unsweetened breakfast yogurt into a veritable dessert. It now had twice as much sugar per serving as General Mills’ marshmallow cereal Lucky Charms. And yet, because of yogurt’s well-tended image as a wholesome snack, sales of Yoplait were soaring, with annual revenue topping $500 million. Emboldened by the success, the company’s development wing pushed even harder, inventing a Yoplait variation that came in a squeezable tube — perfect for kids. However, the companies did not take full responsibility for the widening of America, they also stated that they were only giving the public what they demanded – that sugary, salty fatty foods are what sales, there should be a matter of willpower on the part of the consumer.

The makers of Lunchables did try to add more healthy ingredients, coming up with a low fat version was developed, using meats and cheese and crackers formulated with less fat. The Lunchable sold poorly and was labeled and “inferior” by the public, so it was quickly scrapped. The next marketing strategy was to create “Lunchables with Dessert”, the already fattening lunch item, now included your choice of M&M’s, Reece’s Peanut Butter Cups, or a Snickers bar. Sales went through the roof. Annual sales hit 800 Million in the US and over on billion in Britain. Geoffrey Bible, former CEO of Philip Morris states, ‘If you take Lunchables apart, the healthiest item in it is the napkin.’ Moss has given
proven statistics for this information, placing blame not only on the companies, but on consumers who are willing to pay for convenience and taste over health (Moss para. 2).

The meeting was remarkable, because for the first time there were admissions of guilt. Moss adds credibility to the article by using information obtained at this meeting, using statement directly coming from prominent CEO’s of major food companies. It is also made apparent by Moss that the blame doesn’t just lie with the manufactures, but with the buying public as well.

The good news with this article is that the food companies realize the problem, and there have been progress made by those in the industry who are determined to make some changes. Dunn from Coke has pushed for was to stop marketing Coke in public schools. Many others who were very successful in marketing and developing junk food have pulled their skills to create healthy snack that will be accepted by the public, for example the packaging of baby carrots and the Cutie Oranges, are two such examples of snacks brought to you by individuals who worked for these companies who decided to try to make a difference.

Moss was able to create a well written and balanced article, using all three persuasive techniques, common sense and logic was used throughout the article. Intelligent opinion was given based on research and facts. He first pointed out using facts the concerns of the growing epidemic of obesity in the country. He then talked to several CEO’s and marketing directors of major food distributors in America. They told him of the aggressive marketing tactics used to sell their products, especially to children. He also showed that some of the blame needs to be taken by the people themselves, and to become informed and use the power of their dollar to make companies willing to make healthy changes to their products. The then concludes with a glimmer of hope, that there are powerful people in these companies that are willing to use what they have learned, (motivated by a little guilt) to find and market healthy products for the consumer, that they will purchase (Moss para.83).
Work Cited
