

Doing ads against obesity yet shilling for junk food: What the Shrek?

If advertising weren't effective, it wouldn't be so pervasive. Part of the pervasiveness of advertising lies in the fact that with so many ads out there - not only on TV but billboards, signs, online and other electronic media - some eye-catching gimmick has to be used to lure folks to the message.

When children are involved, though, it's a delicate line that is too easily crossed.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has been using Shrek in public service announcements to help encourage children to lead a healthy lifestyle. Public service ads over the past 20 years have been pretty much consigned to the television graveyard as stations try to squeeze as much revenue as possible out of each programming day.

Shrek would seem to be a smart choice. The green-tinged ogre had already been featured in two highly successful movies, each of which raked in hundreds of millions of dollars in domestic box office alone, and a third "Shrek" installment hit cinemas nationwide in mid-May, just in time to rake in the dollars of schoolkids and parents alike thirsting for some half-decent entertainment at the movies.

But Shrek - or rather, his copyright holders - didn't get limited to mere public service advertising.

A review by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood found 16 separate food promotions for "Shrek the Third" featuring more than 70 different products:

- McDonald's, for Happy Meals and TV ads with "Shrek the Third" characters.
- Pepsico, for Sierra Mist Free soft drinks and Cheetos that make the eater's mouth turn green.

- Masterfoods, for Skittles, Snickers and three different varieties of M&Ms.
- Pez Candy, for Shrek Pez dispensers.
- Kellogg's, the biggest offender - exploiter? - of all, with more than 60 Shrek tie-ins on various brands owned by Kellogg's, including Keebler cookies and crackers, Sunshine crackers, Eggo frozen breakfast foods, Yogos snack foods, and Kellogg's Pop-Tarts and cereals.

As overbearing as some may think the federal government is, there is no way a Shrek anti-childhood-obesity public service ad can compete against the marketing muscle of these five food-producing and merchandising giants, each of which has global reach.

The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood started an online petition campaign to get Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt to "fire" Shrek as the department's, er, spokesogre. "There is a conflict of interest inherent in simultaneously promoting junk food and public health," the campaign asserted in a sample letter it hopes citizens will send to Leavitt. "Why would young children follow Shrek's advice about healthy living and ignore his entreaties to eat Happy Meals and Pop-Tarts?"

The market for products aimed at children ages 3 and under is worth an estimated \$20 billion. So it's little surprise TV stations skirt the rules to tap into that market.

In May, the Federal Communications Commission proposed a total of \$36,000 in fines against TV stations for violations of the rules governing children's TV, including advertising.

The biggest fine, \$20,000, was aimed at WRBL in Columbus, Ga., for what the FCC called "willful and repeated" violations of rules requiring it to file reports on compliance with children's TV ad limits, failure to publicize the existence of its children's programming reports, and for not reporting its FCC-friendly kids programming to the publishers of program guides.

WQRF in Rockford, Ill., faces a \$10,000 fine for not publicizing its children's programming reports, while KTVK in Phoenix faces a \$6,000 fine for failing to

publish those reports.

The fines are a relative drop in the bucket compared to the continued windfall of ad revenue.

One possible solution is a bill sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, that would give the Federal Trade Commission the authority to restrict unfair advertising to children.

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