

Soft drink companies copy tobacco playbook to lure young users

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Tobacco conglomerates that used colors, flavors and marketing techniques to entice children as future smokers transferred these same strategies to sweetened beverages when they bought food and drink

companies starting in 1963, according to a study by researchers at UC San Francisco.

The study, which draws from a cache of previously secret documents from the [tobacco industry](#) that is part of the UCSF Industry Documents Library tracked the acquisition and subsequent marketing campaigns of sweetened drink brands by two leading [tobacco companies](#): R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris. It found that as tobacco was facing increased scrutiny from health authorities, its executives transferred the same products and tactics to peddle soft drinks. The study publishes March 14, 2019, in *The BMJ*.

"Executives in the two largest U.S.-based tobacco companies had developed colors and flavors as additives for cigarettes and used them to build major children's beverage product lines, including Hawaiian Punch, Kool-Aid, Tang and Capri Sun," said senior author Laura Schmidt, Ph.D., MSW, MPH, of the UCSF Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies . "Even after the tobacco companies sold these brands to food and beverage corporations, many of the product lines and marketing techniques designed to attract kids are still in use today."

Fruit Juice, Sports Drinks Linked to Obesity, Metabolic Disease

American youth currently consume an average of 143 calories a day in sugary beverages, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These calorie-dense drinks do not provide the satiety of foods and are associated with obesity and metabolic syndrome, a cluster of conditions that increase the risk for heart disease, stroke and Type 2 diabetes.

Sugary beverages include most fruit juices, sports and energy drinks,

soda and other beverages sweetened with added sugars, including honey, fructose, glucose, sucrose, dextrose, corn sweetener, malt syrup, corn syrup, brown sugar and raw sugar.

The new papers, which are available in the UCSF Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library, a subset of the UCSF Industry Documents Library, reveal connections between the tobacco and food industries.

Tobacco giant R.J. Reynolds led the transition to sweetened beverages in 1963 when it purchased Hawaiian Punch from Pacific Hawaiian Products Company. The beverage previously had been promoted to adults as a cocktail mixer, but R.J. Reynolds sought to beef up the drink's "Punchy" mascot—a counterpart to the "Joe Camel" cartoon character the company used to promote cigarettes—and featured it on toys, schoolbook covers, comics, tumblers, clothing and TV commercials. Punchy became the "best salesman the beverage ever had," according to tobacco industry documents.

In the '60s and '70s, the company conducted taste tests with children and mothers to evaluate sweetness, colors and flavors for Hawaiian Punch product line extensions. The children's preferences were prioritized, the authors noted.

By 1983, R.J. Reynolds introduced the nation's first juice box, marketed as a "handy little carton that comes with its very own straw." This innovation was largely responsible for a 34 percent jump in sales, according to industry documents.

Kool-Aid Joins Marlboro

Meanwhile, tobacco competitor Philip Morris had acquired Kool-Aid, via General Foods, in 1985. The company flipped its marketing audience from families to children, created its "Kool-Aid Man" mascot, and

launched collaborations with branded toys, including Barbie and Hot Wheels. It also developed a children's Kool-Aid loyalty program described as "our version of the Marlboro Country Store," a cigarette incentives program.

"The Wacky Wild Kool-Aid style campaign had tremendous reach and impact," said first author Kim Nguyen, ScD, MPH, who is also with the UCSF Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies. "Lots of kids in the '80s dreamed of getting swag from the Wacky Warehouse. What is really 'wacky' is that the Kool-Aid kid program was modeled after a tobacco marketing strategy designed to build allegiance with smokers."

By 2004, Philip Morris had developed at least 36 child-tested flavors to its Kool-Aid line, of which some—like "Great Bluedini"—integrated colors with cartoon characters. The tobacco giant also acquired Capri Sun and Tang, and used similar child-focused integrated marketing strategies to drive those sales.

Most sweetened beverage manufacturers claim to limit marketing to children of unhealthy foods and drinks. The industry launched both the Children's Advertising Review Unit, to promote responsible advertising to children through industry self-policing, and the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, which states that it devotes 100 percent of "child-directed advertising to better-for-you foods."

"The industry claims that these [tobacco](#)-inspired marketing strategies are not actually targeting children and should be excluded from these industry-led agreements" said Schmidt. "But the evidence cited in our research shows that these product lines and marketing techniques were specifically designed for and tested on children."

The authors conclude that, given the current high rates of childhood obesity, there is a clear need to replace current industry-led voluntary

standards with well-enforced government regulations on marketing sugary beverages to [children](#).

"Parents do play a significant role in what their kids eat and drink," Nguyen said. "However, we cannot underestimate the influence of these beverage corporations and their marketing. They intentionally develop marketing campaigns that appeal to kids by making the drinks fun and exciting."

Provided by University of California, San Francisco

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