# The sneaky ways junk food brands get positive news coverage

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Public health experts are calling for government action to protect Australians from the influence of the unhealthy food, alcohol, and advertising industries, after new research published today unveiled the "sly" ways they exploit Australian consumers.

Two new papers published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* showcase industry tactics, from generating news coverage promoting unhealthy foods, to co-opting not-for-profit organizations to push-back against government marketing reforms.

In one study, researchers analyzed the way that fast food restaurants use public relations (PR) tactics to generate positive news coverage of their unhealthy products and enhance their reputation.

The first study found that three of the biggest fast-food chains in Australia issued at least 52 press releases over a 12-month period. Just over a quarter of those releases (27%) profiled unhealthy food products and another quarter related to corporate social responsibility.

These media releases usually translated into overwhelmingly positive coverage (93%) for fast-food brands across Australian media outlets, generating at least 86 print and online news stories—most relating to unhealthy food products. Media coverage was found across 31 Australian news outlets.

The other study analyzed how the unhealthy food, alcohol and advertising industries influenced a Queensland government proposal to restrict advertising of unhealthy food and alcohol on publicly owned assets.

The study found that those opposed to the reforms used a range of tactics to influence the proposal, including directly meeting with the Minister for Health and co-opting five charities into supporting their position. The proposal was subsequently altered and is yet to be adopted.

Professor Kathryn Backholer, Vice President for Development of the Public Health Association of Australia, and Co-Director of the Global Center for Preventative Health and Nutrition at Deakin University was

an author on both research papers.

She says that the unhealthy food and alcohol industries, alongside the advertising industry, are using devious tactics to protect their profits, at the expense of Australians' health.

"Australians are trying to make the best food choices for the health of their families, but this research shows how companies are undermining this by ensuring that junk food marketing infiltrates every aspect of our lives. The advertising industry is also using sneaky tactics to ensure that government doesn't introduce reforms that protect children from unhealthy food and alcohol advertising."

Dr. James Kite, from the School of Public Health, University of Sydney was a co-author on the fast food PR study. He says that many consumers may not realize that generating news coverage is a tactic that is deliberately being used by the food industry to boost profits.

"Fast food chains are using masked marketing tactics like media releases to get around our usual skepticism towards advertising. It's covert and sly—media outlets need to be proactive in protecting us from being bombarded with unhealthy food advertising at every turn."

Adjunct Professor Terry Slevin, CEO, Public Health Association of Australia, says that as well as showcasing the tactics used by big businesses, the findings should offer a warning to journalists, not-for-profit organizations and governments to protect themselves from industry exploitation.

"Australian charities are often underfunded and under-resourced, so it's easy to imagine how the lure of pro bono advertising space and other 'partnership incentives' translated into them supporting industry interests and opposing reforms to limit unhealthy advertising.

"Likewise, Australian media outlets are often reliant on advertising dollars from unhealthy industries and so may be more open to their promotional media releases.

"But we can't let money and power dictate our health. Ethics and health must come first.

"Australia has successfully regulated the marketing of other harmful industries, like tobacco, to protect the health of Australians, and it's time we did the same with unhealthy foods."

At a national level, the Public Health Association of Australia is calling for comprehensive government action to reduce the impact of poor diet and overweight on Australia's surging rates of chronic disease.

Key asks include funding and implementing the National Preventative Health Strategy, introducing a health levy on sugar-sweetened beverages, mandating the Health Star Rating system, and restricting junk food advertising to children.

At the 2024 Queensland election, the Public Health Association of Australia's Queensland Branch will also be calling for government action to remove the link between government properties and junk food.

This would include removing unhealthy foods from Queensland-owned properties such as hospitals and school canteens, and revisiting the policy to remove unhealthy food and alcohol advertising from state-owned assets.

**More information:** Ruby Brooks et al, Covert marketing of quick-service restaurants via news media in Australia: A content analysis,