

A Study of Marketing and its Effect on Infant Feeding Practices

A Suleiman, MPH, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur

Summary

A baby milk market was created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was conceived through the mutual attraction of the manufacturers and doctors. This has partly attributed to the change from breast to artificial feeding. This study was conducted to determine whether marketing had any effect on infant feeding practices.

Fifty Malay mothers whose last child was aged less than five years were asked, by questionnaire and by interview, to identify whether several marketing methods influenced their decision on the selection of infant feeding practice. It was found that these mothers felt milk advertisements on television were attractive (72%), were influenced by others to buy a particular brand of formula (38.4%), were influenced by free milk samples to buy a particular brand of milk formula (65.2%) and were not influenced by their doctors on the chosen method of feeding (68%).

More studies should be conducted on a bigger sample in other settings and targeting other methods of marketing to substantiate the above results. Further, similar studies among Chinese and Indian mothers are also required.

Key Words: Advertisement, Infant Feeding, Milk Formulas, Milk Formulas

Introduction

Whereas infant formula companies in the 1800's worked hard to develop formulations that could be used to save the lives of sick babies, by the turn of the century, the lure of the global market had become too much. It was no longer the goal to produce a product solely for the sick infants or for times when mother's milk was not available, the goal grew to producing a product that could replace mother's milk. Skillful marketing and promotion efforts combined with medical complicity, led to artificial feeding

gaining an aura of medical legitimacy. Parents grew to believe that a commercial product could be as good as, or even better than the real thing¹.

Infant formula is a US1.6 million dollar industry². The manufacturers of artificial infant milk engage in various forms of advertising, distribution of free milk samples, television commercials and free coupons. These manufacturers strive to convince women that their product is almost as good as human milk when it is actually an inferior, expensive product. "Even the formula companies admit that human milk is the ideal food and they are merely trying to emulate this nutritional content..."³.

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According to Baumslag⁴, milk companies influence mothers by several methods:

1. Through mass media advertising whereby milk formulas and artificial feeding are advertised via newspapers, magazines, billboards, coupons, information pamphlets/leaflets and brand awareness campaigns.
2. Through retail outlets by giving discounts, tied sales, sponsoring shelf space and giving credit to the outlet.
3. Through hospitals, by sponsoring equipment, supplies, posters and architectural services. Also by giving samples, pamphlets, booklets and gifts on discharge.
4. Through doctors, nurses, midwives by giving grants, travel, equipment, literature, gifts and sponsored conference trips. These healthcare workers then pass on the message by giving advice, prescriptions, samples and booklets.
5. Through professional associations by giving support in terms of money, organizing conferences/seminars, giving research grants and advertising in professional journals. These professionals then advertise for the company during lunches, conferences, travel, lectures and when giving services.
6. Getting though to the mothers by giving brochures, gifts, milk samples, telephone counseling and by getting mothercraft nurses to approach mothers.

This study was conducted to determine whether the milk industry marketing strategies have affected the choice of infant feeding practice among mothers with children less than 5 years old visiting a private hospital antenatal clinic.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted at Mawar Medical Centre Shah Alam, a private hospital. A structured questionnaire was constructed in English and translated to Bahasa Malaysia. A focus group discussion with ten mothers from the antenatal clinic whose last child was less than 5 years was

carried out and ambiguous questions were either left out or rephrased. This was conducted two weeks prior to the actual study. The study was then conducted amongst Malay mothers whose last child was less than 5 years of age who came to the outpatient department irregardless of whether it was their first or follow up visit. Mothers fitting the criteria were picked for the study as they came into the polyclinic. Once the number reached 50, sampling was stopped. Only 50 mothers were chosen because this was the obtainable number during the limited time given to conduct the study (2 weeks). The chosen mothers were then interviewed using the structured questionnaire by the sister in charge of the outpatient department who had been trained on the method of questioning. Data input and analysis was carried out using the Microsoft Access Program.

Results

The 50 mothers consisted of 36 (72%) working women and 14 (28%) housewives. The mean age was 31.1 years. 38% of respondents had secondary education, another 38% had certificate or diploma and 24% had university education. 80% had a last child who was less than 3 years of age. 66% breastfed their last child for a duration of 4 months or less. Only 12% breastfed their last child beyond 1 year.

36 respondents (72%) felt that milk advertisement on television were attractive and 14 respondents (28%) felt they were not attractive. Table I shows the distribution of respondents as to which children's age group the television advertisements were aimed at 58% of respondents felt that the television advertisements on milk formulas were for parents to buy milk formula for children aged one to two years. 26% of respondents felt that the advertisements were encouraging parents to buy milk formula for children aged three to four years. Malaysian television does not permit advertising milk formulas for infants below the age of 1 year. Yet, even without direct advertising, 12% of

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Table I
Age Group of Children that Milk Advertisements are Aimed at

Age group (years)	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 year	6	12
1 - 2	29	58
3 - 4	13	26
5 years and more	2	4
Total	50	100

Table III
Type of Pamphlet Received according to Type of Feeding Practice when Last Child was aged 4 months

Type of Feeding Practice	Breastfeeding Pamphlet	Formula Feeding Pamphlet	Total
Breastfeeding	7	0	7
Mixed Feeding	12	2	14
Formula Feeding	0	10	10
Total	19	12	31

Table II
Reasons for Buying a Particular Brand of Milk

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family members influence	13	28
Baby adaptable to milk	12	26
Tried out different brands and found most suitable	6	13
Attracted to TV advertisement	4	9
A popular brand	3	6.5
Own idea as to the best brand	3	6.5
Doctors influence	3	6.5
Influenced by friends	2	4.5
Total	46	100

respondents felt the milk formula advertisements encouraged parents indirectly to buy milk formula for their babies below one year of age.

Table II shows the distribution of respondents by their reasons for buying a particular brand of milk formula. Four of the respondents never bought a milk formula because their children were still breastfeeding. Of the remaining 46, 13 (28%) were influenced by family members, 3 (6.6%) were influenced by doctors and 2 (4.5%) were influenced by friends to buy a particular brand of infant formula. Only 4 (9%) were influenced by television advertisements.

Only 31 respondents (62%) out of the 50 in this study received pamphlets on infant feeding. Table III shows that 19 received pamphlets on breastfeeding and 12 received pamphlets on infant formula feeding. It was found that out of those who received pamphlets on breastfeeding, 7 (37%) went on to breastfeeding their last child up to the age of 4 months and 12 (63%) practiced mixed feeding. For those who received infant formula pamphlets, none practised full breastfeeding up to 4 months, 2 (16%) practised mixed feeding and 10 (84%) practised total formula feeding.

Out of the 50 respondents, 23 (46%) received free milk samples, all from the health care facility after delivery on the day of discharge. From this 23, only 8 (35%) were influenced to buy a particular brand of milk formula. The other 15 (65%) were not influenced by the free milk sample given to buy a particular brand of milk.

As to whether doctor's advice regarding infant feeding influenced their choice of practice, 16 (32%) felt that their choice was influenced by doctor's advice and 34 (68%) felt that their choice was not influenced by doctor's advise. This meant that one-third of mothers in this study followed their doctor's advice with regard to choice of infant feeding. Only 4 (8%) of respondents felt that they would follow the advice of doctors to stop breastfeeding.

Discussion

72% of respondents felt that milk advertisements shown on television were attractive. According to Rosengarten⁵, television is a mass medium in the truest form, reaching the most number of people at any one time. Since television reaches audiences locally, regionally or nationally depending on the type of programming, this is particularly good for businesses with multiple locations or products with national distribution such as milk formula products. If an advertisement is placed in specific time frames or during specific shows, a company can be reasonably assured that the same viewers are watching, giving the advertisement consistent viewing. The milk formula advertisements in Malaysia usually appear in the evening slot between 4 pm and 7 pm and is targeted at parents of young children. The interesting finding is that 12 % of respondents felt that milk advertisements on television were aimed to encourage parents to buy milk products for children less than one year of age despite the fact that all the milk advertisements on Malaysian television were on formulas meant for children aged above one year. This is because there is a ban on milk formula advertisements for babies aged one year and below.

According to Rosengarten⁵, a brochure or pamphlet is a promotional piece developed to sell a product or service, the content is the most important part and its purpose is to inform the reader with the intention of selling. It is designed to let customers know all about the product offered and why it is better than the competition. In this study it was found that respondents who received pamphlets on breastfeeding went on to practice breastfeeding whether fully or mixed. Respondents who were given formula feeding pamphlets went on to practice mix feeding and total formula feeding.

Palmer¹, states that milk samples given during the sensitive antenatal period can encourage the doubt that reduces the possibility of

breastfeeding success. A report from IBFAN⁶, found that in Malaysia, several hospitals (especially private ones) reported receiving enough free or low cost milk formula to feed all newborns in their hospitals. Baby milk companies give the milk on a monthly rotation basis, and all mothers also receive a free tin of milk sample on discharge from hospital. Free cans of infant formula and gift packs filled with free samples and coupons are detrimental to breastfeeding. Such "gifts" have been shown to "decrease the chances an infant will be breastfed even partially until four months of age"². Many manufacturers supply pediatricians and hospitals with free samples of their products, which are then given to new mothers. A new mother who receives a free formula sample from her hospital or doctor thinks that the hospital or doctor endorses the product⁷. 46% of mothers in this study were given milk samples after discharge. This figure is high compared to a study in Bangkok whereby 26% of mothers reported receiving free samples of breastmilk substitutes, infant formula, bottles or teats⁸. In this study it was found that 65% of the respondents who received milk samples were not influenced to buy that particular brand of formula.

According to Palmer¹, the medical-commercial relationship in the United States became a model for similar relationships the world over and has undermined breastfeeding wherever this relationship has been established. When women complain they have too little milk, health workers often suggest a substitute before they have investigated the problem. Also, doctors are eager to have infants show the greatest possible gain therefore it is the doctors, not the mothers whom it is so difficult to convince that breastfeeding can work. In this study, it was found that only 32% of respondents felt that their choice of infant feeding practice was based on the doctors advice. As to the buying of the brand of infant formula, most (28%) were influenced by their family members and only 6.5% were influenced by their doctors.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the limitations of this study, it is concluded that the marketing of milk formulas may have an effect on the choice of infant feeding practice. Breastfeeding advocates should look into Wilkenson's⁹ suggestion in marketing breastfeeding which involves finding the markets accurately and gearing everything and everyone in the operation towards selling breastfeeding into these markets as well as

beating the competition in this case the milk formula companies.

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