

News Release

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For More Information Contact:
Gary Ruskin (503) 235-8012

Does the US Chamber of Commerce Support Any Limits on Huckstering to Kids in School?

Today and tomorrow, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is holding a conference on “Business & K-12 Education Partnerships.” But the conference agenda is strangely silent on the most insidious aspect of these “partnerships”: the commercialization of the schools, and the use of the compulsory school laws to corral a captive audience of impressionable children for marketing purposes.

Following is a letter from Commercial Alert to Thomas J. Donohue, President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, asking him about the Chamber’s position on marketing to schoolchildren.

Dear Mr. Donahue:

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says that its conference on “business-education partnerships” is to help create “opportunities for companies seeking to improve their support for K-12 education.”

While nearly all would agree that most schools need more “support,” much of what is called “business-education partnerships” really is plain old corporate marketing, sometimes dressed up with nominal gifts; or else it is public relations, in using schools to boost a corporation’s sagging public image.

Regrettably, in the last fifteen years, corporations have increasingly rejected the notion of philanthropy, in which they give money to schools because it is the right thing to do. Instead, business groups like yours are touting “business-education partnerships” which often involve using schools as public relations props or as marketing arenas to address a captive audience of children. The purpose is not so much to improve education, as it is to increase the sales of junk food and drinks such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi. It is the opposite of philanthropy, but it seems to be the dominant model for so-called “business-education partnerships.”

Absent from the conference’s agenda is any effort to face up to broad public opposition to the use of schools for marketing purposes. Advertising to schoolchildren is highly controversial, and is opposed by organizations across the political spectrum, because of the effects on children’s health, values and education. Many parents are deeply opposed to the way corporations use the schools to promote violent or sexualized entertainment (through ads on Channel One, for example), and values such as materialism, addiction and anti-social behavior. Many parents are alarmed by in-school marketing for soda pop or junk food, since American children are already suffering from an epidemic of marketing-related diseases such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

Parents deserve answers to the following questions:

Does the U.S. Chamber of Commerce support any limits at all on the use of schools for advertising or marketing?

Does the U.S. Chamber of Commerce oppose the use of classroom time for advertising?

Does the U.S. Chamber of Commerce oppose the advertising or marketing in school of any product or service which is legal to sell to children?

Will the U.S. Chamber of Commerce promote no-strings-attached philanthropy instead of marketing to schoolchildren?

Does the U.S. Chamber of Commerce support any reduction in any corporate welfare, or any increase in corporate taxes, which could be dedicated solely to funding schools?

Thousands of schools are facing serious budget shortfalls. If the Chamber of Commerce really wants corporations to “improve their support for K-12 education,” it can best do so by telling corporations to pay their taxes, give back their corporate welfare, and stop lobbying for new tax breaks.

Maybe you’ll hold a conference on that next year.

Sincerely,

Gary Ruskin
Executive Director

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Commercial Alert is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy. For more information, see our website at: <http://www.commercialalert.org>.