

Sweet savage food marketing at the New York Times

February 26, 2013 Walter Olson

Opinions will inevitably differ on which was the silliest single sentence in the very long, very silly screed against food marketing that ran in Sunday's New York Times Magazine ("The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food"). Some will nominate the Times' own breathless summary of Michael Moss's effort: "Inside the hyper-engineered, savagely marketed, addiction-creating battle for 'stomach share.'" — especially since the article's actual contents in no way bear out the loaded term "addiction" or later promises of "insider admissions of guilt" based on "thousands of pages of secret memos."

The article promises to show how "The Food Giants Hooked Us" (the subtitle of Moss's new Random House book) on a diet of "convenient and inexpensive" food that caters to our collective taste for sugar, fat and salt. Columnist Barton Hinkle has already helpfully provided a way to skip 9,000 words or so of slogging with this summary of the revelatory bottom line:

You might want to sit down for this.

All set?

Here it is: Food companies work very, very hard to find out what will give you, the consumer, the most pleasure for your money — and then the diabolical fiends actually give it to you!

Seriously, you are supposed to be absolutely horrified by this. You can tell by the ominous language the author, Michael Moss, employs to describe how "food engineers alter a litany of variables with the sole intent of" — brace yourself — "finding the most perfect version" of a product. The most perfect version, of course, is the one that will "be most attractive to consumers." (The horror.) The piece even quotes one food-company executive who describes the strategy: "Discover what consumers want to buy and give it to them with both barrels."

Thus in one story Moss relates at length, the maker of Dr Pepper prepares for the launch of its very successful Cherry Vanilla spin-off flavor by trying out a bunch of different formulas to see which ones consumers like best. The company even keeps an eye on the cost of flavoring ingredients. Shocking!

Moss — who confirms in a Times "6th Floor" interview that he favors government regulation of the food biz — relies heavily on a California-based critic of the food industry named Robert I-San Lin who used to be a researcher for Frito-Lay. I wish he'd informed Times readers — I had to find it out on Google for myself — that his source

appears to be the same guy as this hawker of nutritional supplements who bills himself as “the world’s foremost leading expert on nutrition in health-promotion, disease-prevention, and anti-aging.” Not just “foremost” or “leading,” but “foremost leading.” If you’re not impressed, shame on you.

But back to the quest for Moss’s silliest single sentence. Some may prefer his throwaway admission that when Kraft Foods actually tried to do what he berates the company at length for not doing — developing a healthier version of kids’ Lunchables — the result “tasted inferior, sold poorly and was quickly scrapped.” But I’m partial toward the one alleging that the Coca-Cola Company makes a point of directing advertising toward existing Coke devotees “in an effort to control as much market share as possible.” “Control,” because it doesn’t sound sinister enough to be trying to “keep” or “gain” market share, let alone, as a lesser writer might have put it, to “sell as much Coke as possible.” And yet even Coke doesn’t get to *control* what people choose to drink tomorrow, any more than the New York Times Magazine can *control* its market share of persons looking for an unchallenging way to spend Sunday afternoon.

All that either Coke or the Times can do is hype the product to within an inch of its life, and hope people keep buying.

Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the editor of *Overlawyered*.

Read more: <http://dailycaller.com/2013/02/26/sweet-savage-food-marketing-at-the-nyt/#ixzz2M7O88rn7>