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Abstract

Effects of direct-to-consumer marketing of infant formula on formula choice and loyalty

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Abstract

Objective: Estimate effects of expert recommendations and direct-to-consumer advertising of infant formula on formula choice and loyalty to assess importance of Code violations.

Methods: Data are from the Infant Feeding Practices Study II, a U.S. national longitudinal study. Mothers were asked about exposure to formula advertising during pregnancy and about receiving a hospital gift pack that included formula samples and coupons and receiving samples in the mail when their infants were 1 month old. Switching formula was asked when infants were 2, 5, 7, and 9 months old and was also measured by use of different formulas monthly. Analysis included 1700 mothers who fed formula at infant age 1 month and used logistic regression, Generalized Estimation Equation analysis, and random effect models. Control variables included mother's demographic characteristics, infant characteristics, feeding patterns, and formula tolerance.

Results: Some support was found for Hypothesis 1: Expert recommendations increase brand loyalty and decrease switching. Mothers were more likely to use hospital formula in Month 1 than to choose formula for other reasons; those who used the hospital brand were less likely to switch formula in later months, and mothers who used a formula recommended by a doctor were less likely to switch. Some support was found for Hypothesis 2: Free hospital samples and coupons increase brand loyalty and decrease formula switching. Mothers were more likely to use the hospital brand at month 1 if they received a sample at discharge, but not if they received a coupon for formula at discharge. Receiving a free sample did not affect later switching but receiving a coupon reduced switching of formula groups. Hypothesis 3 was supported: Direct-to-consumer marketing activities overcome brand loyalty and increase formula switching. Mothers who chose the month 1 formula for market reasons were more likely to switch. Among mothers who chose the hospital brand in month 1, those prenatally exposed to internet formula advertising were more likely to switch.

Conclusion: Providing formula samples in hospital gift packs increases use of that formula, and other marketing activities do not cancel the effect. Among hospital formula

users, providing a coupon for the hospital formula reduces switching, and formula web information, which often includes coupons, increases switching. Marketing formulas through hospitals may increase use of the more expensive brands and lead families to pay more than necessary for formula. In the current formula market, direct-to-consumer formula marketing may financially benefit formula feeding mothers. The effect of formula marketing on breastfeeding is not addressed in this analysis.