

## Junk Food Sells

To get another angle on the question, I went to visit Ann Hale, a marketing professor in McGill's Faculty of Management.

Hale laughed when she saw the products, and then remarked on the lack of nutritive value in each of them. I felt a curious sense of *deja vu*.

She said longevity was one reason for the persistence of the brands of cereals. People who ate these cereals as children were now feeding them to their own children.

"People then didn't even think of the nutritional value of what they made."

"People who buy these are just trying to make their kids eat something in the morning," added Hale.

Hale said the cereals were marketed to capture the attention of children.

"When you think of the product decisions a family makes, there are very few that children have a say in. One of the only decisions that kids make is what cereal they eat."

Hale said that attempts to appeal to kids are the reason for the large turnover in kids' cereals, and the preponderance of brands following consumer brands, such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Dinosaurs.

Children's cereals are usually placed lower on the supermarket shelves than adults' cereals in order to attract the eyes of children.

The Froot Loops box bore what looked like an advertisement for Lego toys with the possibility of getting one with several cereal-box vouchers.

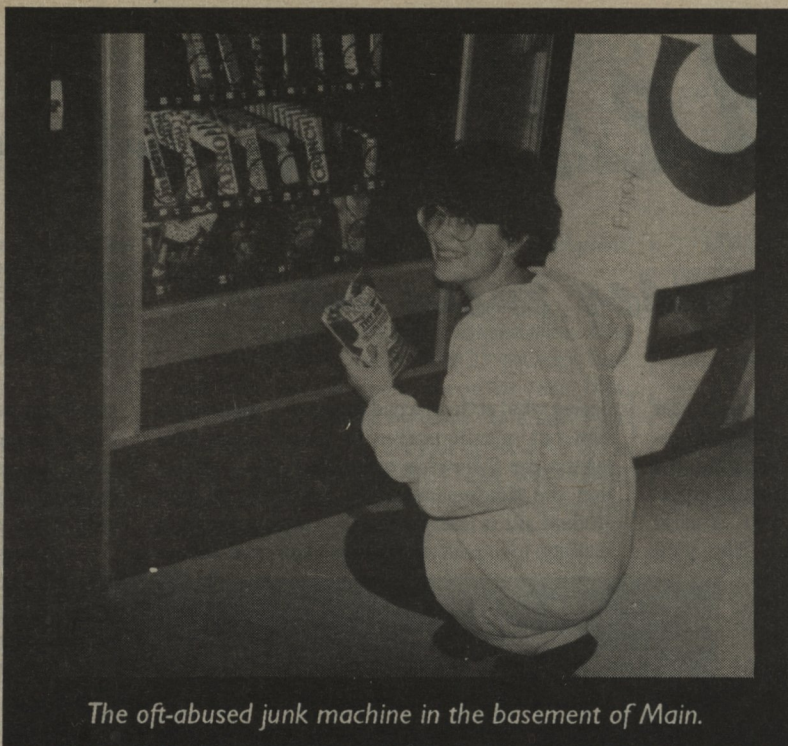
Hale explained that this "co-operative advertising," in which firms such as Lego paid to advertise on the Froot Loops box, benefitted both the toy company and the cereal. The toy company got advertising space and Kellogg's was able to use the vouchers for toys as a way of selling more cereal.

Moving on to the granola bars, I asked Hale why Quaker would produce these products, as they were low in nutritional value and not very different from other products already on the market.

"It's just good marketing," said Hale. "These are targeted for a specific consumer need and they are targeted very well."

"All of these brands maintain a close contact with people in the market," she said. "They are very much focused on changes, and the question of 'What is a way to make people buy it?' If they simply sold granola, nobody would buy it."

She added that the "trendier" products tended not to last very long, replaced by new



The oft-abused junk machine in the basement of Main.

trends in the competitive arena of the supermarket.

Hale had a similar explanation for the appearance of types of cookies derived from other cookies, such as Oreos.

"The cookie market is extremely competitive now," said Hale. "Oreo is one of the products with a large market share. Every year there are new products so [companies think] if they don't diversify, they will lose their entire market share."

She said the same thing had happened to soft drinks such as Coca-Cola, who were forced to expand their line of products, coming up with such things as decaffeinated Coke and Cherry Coke in order to retain their market share.

The ideas for new products begin with market researchers who determine what will sell, and research and development teams who determine what can be produced most efficiently. Market researchers include people from a variety of backgrounds, including Social Sciences and Statistics. Research and development teams also include a lot of educated people, many of them with PhDs.

The market researchers work with focus groups (made up of consumers), do brainstorming to come up with new ideas and come up with prototypes.

The amount of research varies according to the novelty of the product. For new products, researchers will take the product to a pre-test market. There consumers will be given the products for free and asked questions about them, the most important being: would you buy this again?

Pre-test markets can cost up to \$50,000 per product. If they reveal interest for the product, then the product may go to a test market, in which the new product is marketed

in one city.

Test markets are even more expensive, often as much as one million dollars.

To me, this seems to be a lot of work to create something which doesn't do a lot of good and may do some harm. Hale said that doesn't necessarily mean it shouldn't happen. "There is demand for these products. I mean there are a lot of things that are not good for us, like alcohol and cigarettes. Everything carries a risk with it these days. I don't think you can turn the clock back. I think it's one of the things of a free market economy. The consumers do determine what is produced."

But, I said, surely that's what advertising is about -- creating demand for products. Surely the marketing machines to some extent determine people's choices.

"What we would love to be

able to say is that advertising can talk you into buying something you wouldn't ordinarily buy. If that was true, everyone would go into advertising."

## Gratuitous Gratification

But if Hale was right, and the reason for these products was primarily consumer demand, what would make people want these things?

My talk with Tom Naylor shed some insight on this question. "We live in one of the first societies where people are not dying of hunger," said Naylor. "So the industry is geared toward providing gratuitous gratification, rather than what is absolutely necessary to survive."

Naylor said food manufacturers targeted much of their efforts towards producing foods that would provide this sort of gratification for the least amount of money, regardless of nutritional value.

"It's socially preposterous, but it's quite rational from the industry's point of view," he said. "The next logical step is they're going to sell predigested food."

The end of this story comes with me bringing the food back to the newspaper office. The staff fell on it with glee. As I write, Damion Stodola is munching away on the last of the Froot Loops (straight out of the box, with no milk involved.) I don't understand how they can eat anything that colour.

Strange things indeed. Useless or not, bad for us or not, it seems impossible to enter any supermarket without being confronted with food items made for a market in which nutrition seems the last thing in mind. It seems madness, but it's part of who we are.