

# The Internet

Monitoring Trends – an IBFAN summary • 2001

## WEBSITES: Linking mothers to bottle feeding

Companies should conform to the Code *at every level*, whether or not governments have taken any action (Art. 11.3 of the Code).

The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes states that there should be:

- No advertising or other forms of promotion to the public
- No samples or gifts to mothers that may promote bottle feeding
- No direct or indirect contact between marketing personnel and mothers
- No pictures or text that may idealise the use of breastmilk substitutes, while information and educational materials must contain specified details and warnings



LOOK WHAT THEY'RE DOING!





## NEW CHALLENGE TO THE PROTECTION, PROMOTION AND SUPPORT OF BREASTFEEDING

The Internet is a medium with the capacity to reach millions of consumers around the world. There is no single authority that regulates the Internet or its contents, making it ideal for commercial promotion. Taking advantage of today's technology, baby food manufacturers rely on the Internet to promote their products directly to the public and health workers.

## THE BORDERLESS FRONTIER

Anyone can access Internet sites from anywhere in the world – a vivid example of what globalisation has brought about. It respects no boundaries, languages, cultures, customs nor laws, making it a challenge for the enforcement of regulations prohibiting the promotion of breastmilk substitutes, feeding bottles and teats.

## WEBSITE INCENTIVES

Some company websites offer free samples, gifts and discounts as incentives to purchase products. Three examples are Gerber, Nestlé Carnation and Mead Johnson websites. The Abbott-Ross, Meiji and Morinaga websites make comparisons between the companies' products and mother's milk. All of these practices are in violation of the Code.

## GOING ONLINE

Many company websites offer visitors personalised information and services, for which visitors must register, enabling the company to compile mailing lists. Members of online clubs receive newsletters, discounts, a toll-free number and coupons. Mead Johnson Canada, for example, invites mothers to enrol in a personalised programme for pregnant women called "Baby Steps" because "every baby is special in its own way".



Gerber's website encourages visitors to "Join My Gerber and get \$50 in coupons for Gerber products". Besides photos of baby faces on several pages, the Gerber baby is shown alongside a link to special offers.



Mead Johnson and Abbott-Ross offer free home delivery. Mead Johnson's delivery package offers gifts and samples, discounts after four months and six months in the programme, and a free last shipment at 12 months. The company also offers 10 prizes per year of a US\$ 5,000 Trust Fund.

Another website advertises "quality infant formula at substantial savings" (as much as 30% off the purchase of six cans) and shows pack shots of Babymil, Enfamil and Similac.



Another way to compile information is to survey visitors or to invite mothers to join online clubs for mothers or babies. Members of Abbott-Ross' "Welcome Addition" online club are entitled to newsletters, discounts on formula, free membership in the Welcome Addition Club and "other great values".

## TEXT AND PICTURES IDEALISE BOTTLE FEEDING

Many companies have pictures of infants or other pictures that idealise the use of their products.

- The Nestlé Carnation website shows a baby photo along with the company's full line of formulas and cereals.
- Mead Johnson uses the Peter Rabbit characters to create a nostalgic link between the story book characters and bottle feeding. The advertisement shows the mother rabbit bottle feeding the baby rabbit.
- A photo of a peacefully sleeping baby on the Abbott-Ross website has the slogan, "You can rest assured... Isomil". The familiar Ross brown bear also appears on the site.

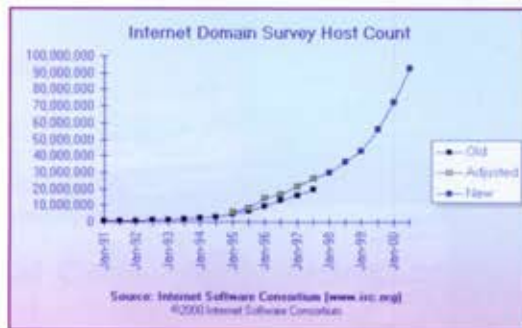
## WEBSITE MISREPRESENTATIONS AND CLAIMS

Abbott-Ross makes a comparison between Similac and mothers' milk by showing a mother and baby with the slogan, "So close to you" along with pack shots of Similac.

- Meiji claims its formula can deliver the same growth as breastmilk. On a question and answer page, Meiji advises a mother whose four-month old mix-fed daughter apparently "doesn't like breastmilk" that it is okay for her gradually to switch to giving only formula milk.
- Morinaga's website, meanwhile, claims its formula milks are similar to breastmilk and says that it contains an added protein found in colostrum that fights infection. The company's page on breastfeeding suggests a complicated procedure, advising mothers to weigh their babies before and after each feed, wash their hands, clean around the nipple and placing limits on how long the baby should feed on each side. Elsewhere the company gives deceptive indicators of "lack of breastmilk" and suggests feeding schedules for mixed feeding.

## DISCLAIMING LIABILITY

Nestlé Carnation, Freegifts4kids, Kidsgrowth and Abbott-Ross' Similac websites direct visitors from outside the USA to a webpage informing them of the existence of the Code, in an attempt to relinquish the companies of responsibility for their websites' Code compliance. Because the company's website can be accessed around the world, the disclaimer is intended to protect the company in countries where, unlike the USA, baby food promotion is prohibited by law.



The Internet has grown phenomenally over the past few years. The number of registered hosts has grown from 10 million in 1996 to almost 100 million in July 2000.



Mead Johnson is one of several websites that have special offers. A printout of a webpage can be used at participating hospitals to redeem a free Enfamil Peter Rabbit Diaper Bag that contains formula samples.



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## MULTIPLICITY

Some companies have different websites in different parts of the world and tailor their information according to the degree of implementation of the Code in the country of the website (e.g. Nestlé-Switzerland and Carnation-Nestlé USA). Companies such as Mead Johnson, Abbott-Ross and Nestlé have a different website for each one of their brands.

## LINKS TO DOCTORS AND NURSES

Another promotional method is not only to use the company's own website but also to advertise products or services on other websites aimed at mothers or mothers-to-be. Baby food companies provide a large proportion of advertising on such sites. For example, **freegifts4kids.com** is sponsored by Gerber, Nestlé Carnation and Mead Johnson's Enfamil and contains links to their websites. Such sites contain (sometimes inaccurate or misleading) infant feeding recommendations, surveys and offers of products and club memberships. **Kidsgrowth.com**, as another example, is sponsored by Similac (an Abbott-Ross formula) and recommends complementary feeding well before six months of age. Mothers in the USA and Canada receive samples, discount coupons, newsletters and gifts through such sites. Mead Johnson gets more than it pays for with Enfamil's sponsorship of the sites **WebMD** and **WebRN** as the contents of supposedly professional articles on those sites are shockingly anti-breastfeeding. The extent of this mutually beneficial relationship is evident in that **WebMD** is advertised on the top of Enfamil tins.

Abbott Laboratories received a boost in the credibility of its products when company researchers were quoted in an online article by the US FDA titled "Infant Formula: Second Best But Good Enough" The article serves industry's interests in saying, "Infant formula is increasingly close to breastmilk".



### The only one . . .

In January 2001, when the WHO Executive Board specifically warned about the use of Internet advertising for products under the scope of the International Code, the USA government was the only one to object and even wanted all references to "electronic" media deleted.



This pamphlet forms part of a series of 5 IBFAN pamphlets which report on marketing trends. The benchmark standards are the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions. The information is based on independent monitoring carried out by IBFAN groups around the world in 2000. The full report containing evidence of Code violations by companies is available in a 72-page IBFAN publication *Breaking the Rules, Stretching the Rules, 2001*. The report is available to non-profit groups at US\$ 6 and US\$ 15 to profit groups. A set of pamphlets costs US\$ 5. Prices are inclusive of postage.



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