Food Researched: Breakfast Cereal
Focus of Research: The Politics of the Cereal Industry
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Big Cereal and The American Government

Objective
The goal of this research was to uncover the connection between the dollars that Americans use to purchase cereal and the political events that the cereal industry has had a hand in determining. As much of the data is difficult to uncover, this paper first sets out to establish basic knowledge of the politics of lobbying and various political interest groups. Then, the connections are drawn between big cereal’s dollars and politicians and legislation.

Summary of Findings

Introduction to the World of Cereal:
Nearly every American family currently alive currently has a box of cereal in their home. With the current social focus being on obesity and weight loss, the primary focus when considering breakfast cereal generally centers upon its nutritional content. However, the political implications of the gigantic, ever-growing mega-companies that manufacture and distribute cereal are just as important. Like any large corporation, they work hard to create a favorable environment to sell their product. This involves maintaining a firm grasp on two of the most influential ways that Americans receive and internalize information: government policy and marketing. General Mills and The Kellogg Corporation are currently the two largest producers of breakfast cereals in the United States. As large corporations they work hard to manipulate government policy in a direction that is as favorable as possible to the selling of breakfast cereals. While consumers are able to view the way their health is affecting by reading the label on the side of the cereal box, seeing what political affects their cereal dollars are causing is much more difficult to find. In this paper I will locate the government policies and participants that the General Mills and Kellogg corporations have tried to influence and analyze their reasons for doing so.

Where the Power Lies in the Cereal Industry:
There are at least five large cereal production companies in the United States but this paper will only analyze two of them. The reason for that is simple. Larger companies generate larger profits and so have greater income at their disposal to use for political purposes and also larger loot at stake. Together, General Mills and Kellogg control over

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60% of the cereal market in the United States. However, their political clout is not solely based on the vast amount of cereal that they are able to push but also on the way that they do that, namely, the number of smaller manufacturing companies that they own. Having a larger amount of groups under their thumbs allows these large corporations to have more political influence or bang for their buck.

How Large Corporations Raise their Voices:

Large corporations do not, however, simply assert their dominance by making a large profit. They must instead learn to play their system, combining themselves into specific organizations for the purpose of forcing some sort of political change. The two types of organizations that are most commonly used are interest groups and political action committees. While it is basically assumed that every large corporation must have a political action committee neither General Mills nor Kellogg provide a satisfactory amount of information on this topic. On their official company website General Mills does provide a link to the donations made by their PAC displaying a rare degree of transparency, Kellogg does not even contain the word “politics” in their entire website. This illustrates how large corporations do not continue to deliberately maintain consumer ignorance regarding nutrition and food production but also in the realm of company procedure, something that one would hope would be fairly innocuous.

The Ins and Outs of PACs and Interest Groups:

Companies are able to maintain this level of secrecy by avoiding direct political action themselves. Instead, they donate their money to PACs and interest groups which hire lobbying attorneys who advocate in favor of the companies best interests. Companies generally require that a specific percentage of their employers income be donated to their PAC with optional additional donations. With the average grain mill worker making around $14.61 an hour this adds up to quite a bit of money. The bills and acts in question rarely, if ever, actually refer to the company specifically. Instead, they pertain to a broader, less direct aspect of cereal production such as food stamps and fuel. Following the train of influence on these political chains can often be very difficult because it is so rare that those influencing the decision are ever directly referred to, and that is just how big cereal wishes to keep it. General Mills states that any use of company funds for political action must be approved by “the appropriate operating executive, the General Counsel and the Vice President, Government Relations.” This grammatically confusing sentence perfectly illustrates an example of the way that large corporations are able to shift their political

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influences away from the company and into the hands of their PACs and interest groups which, as previously cited, often contain confusingly long myriad of supporters.

Cereal’s Biggest Ally: The Food and Kindred Products Manufacturing Organization

One of the best examples of cereal’s indirect influence in the form of a group can be found by examining the donation trends of the Food and Kindred Products Manufacturing Organization industry Group. This group’s officially defines itself as “include(ing) establishments manufacturing or processing foods and beverages for human consumption, and certain related products.” While it may seem like this includes an almost impossibly wide variety of manufacturers they divide themselves into sub-categories more closely related to their specific product; the cereal industry belongs to the “cereal and breakfast foods” category. As previously mentioned large corporations such as General Mills and Kellogg are quite reluctant to publicly endorse or oppose government regulations. As the third and eleventh largest contributors to The Food and Kindred Products Manufacturing Organization, however, this organization makes it their business to speak on behalf of these giant companies.

Types of Legislations that Big Cereal Supports or Opposes

More then four times as large as any of the interest groups and with that deal with fresh foods that come to market with 121 registered lobbyists the Food and Kindred Products Manufacturing Organization has had vast amounts of influence on a variety of legislation. Through the use of watchdog internet sites and a lot of research it is possible to track the trends in the legislation that they have had a hand in. Although there are some outliers, the cereal industry generally supports bills that increase the government’s authority to control food safety standards and transportation mechanisms. While this may seem bizarre at first, it makes perfect sense that cereal manufacturers would rather have the government responsible for health controls. In the event that a food that they produced has been found to be unsafe or just terribly unhealthy it becomes a prudent business move for them to be able to shift the blame away from their company. Similarly, they always approve the improvement of transportation systems and a reduction of fuel costs so as to be able to more effectively transport their product. The legislation that they have a hand in is always, unfailingly, in the best interest of the company rather then paying attention to the consumer.

Conclusion and Final Reflection

At the beginning of this project it seemed that delving into the world of industry politics could only possibly serve to turn off the educated cereal consumer. However, upon closer examination, it has become apparent that the big cereal companies only behave in a way that is expected of such a large corporation. They act in a way to serve the company’s

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best interests and though they are not acting in an altruistic fashion I have found nothing amoral in their course of action. The politics of the cereal industry are truly interesting without causing the consumer too much worry.

**Sources**


"U.S. Congress Bills Supported and Opposed by Food and Kindred Products Manufacturing | MAPLight.org - Money and Politics." U.S. Congress Campaign Contributions and Voting