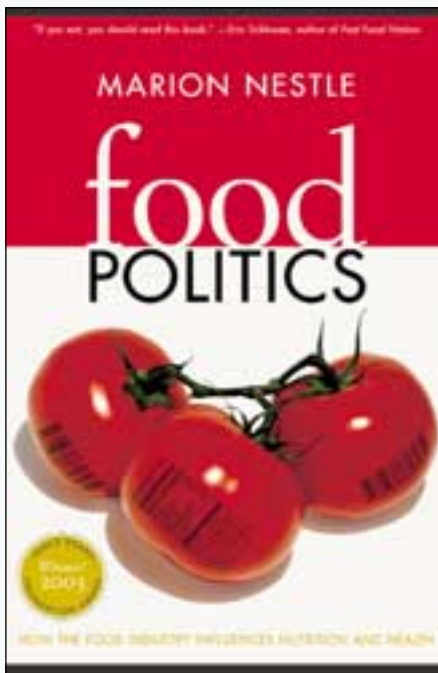


Food Politics: Q & A With Author Marion Nestle

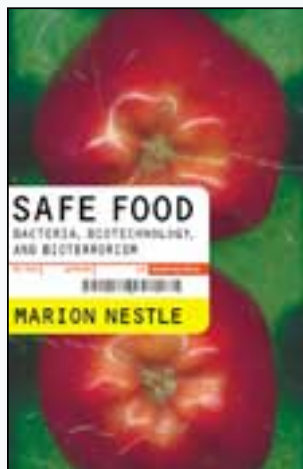


In her book, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (UC Press, 2002), **Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H. '86**, describes how the American social environment presents special challenges to our ability to make wise food choices.

Earlier this year, Nestle took a moment to further explain how our free-market economy places the \$1.3 trillion food industry at the center of the greatest public health challenge since the war on tobacco.

How does promoting eating translate into promoting overeating?

MN: Oh, it's very simple. The big dark secret of the American food system is that there is too much food. It's actually a worldwide problem. It's not that there isn't enough food in the world. There is far too much food; it just



isn't distributed very equitably. And, in the United States, we have available to us 3,900 calories per day for every man, woman, and child

in the country. That's roughly twice what the country needs. So, food companies have only two choices in that situation. They either can get people to eat their food instead of somebody else's, or they can get people to eat more, in general. They aren't sitting around a conference table saying, hmm, how can we make Americans fat? They are saying, how can we sell more of our foods in a highly competitive marketplace?

With great fanfare, McDonald's, Burger King and other chains have been touting changes they are making on behalf of our health—eliminating the "supersizing" of their meals, adding more nutritious choices. Do you see this as a true movement in the right direction, or merely a marketing smokescreen?

MN: It is certainly a marketing strategy. Whether it's going to be successful or not isn't clear. What needs to be understood is that it's not just anti-obesity advocates who are complaining about food industry marketing. It's also very serious investment analysts in some of the largest investment firms in the world who are saying that if companies don't clean up their act, they are going to be in big financial trouble. Every major food company has seen these reports—company-by-company analyses of their vulnerability should people start to eat less. If people ate less, it would be very bad for business.

So these big companies are taking action, partly in response to lawsuits, partly in response to public policy, partly in response to the fear of public backlash against their product. Whether

the companies will actually do what they say they're going to do and whether they will make any difference remains to be seen.

You point out that the industry takes advantage of the vulnerability of children.

MN: Companies really, really want to be in the children's market for three reasons.

First, they want the kids to recognize brands early in life. McDonald's, for example, advertises on Teletubbies. They start really early.

The second reason, actually the biggest, is what's called "the pester factor." They want kids to pester their parents to buy the products, so advertising and marketing are designed to get kids to pester their parents.

There's just been an analysis of advertising that shows that the food industry also tries to establish the third area: they want kids to think that kids are supposed to eat special food. They aren't supposed to eat that icky, boring food that parents eat.

So there are three things: you want brand loyalty; you want pester; and you want special foods for kids. If you look at food marketing with that in mind, you can immediately see that that's what they are trying to do.

How do you answer people who say that no one is forcing children or their parents to eat the junk food?

MN: Any number of ways. First of all, you assure them that if personal responsibility worked, it would have worked by now and that there is no evidence that people's feelings about personal responsibility or concern about their kids has changed within the last ten years when the rates of obesity have gone up so high.

This goes way beyond personal responsibility. We currently have a food environment that is enormously conducive to people overeating. It is now socially acceptable for people to eat all day, for kids to eat junk food every day, and for people to eat larger and larger portions. All of these are raising caloric intake and making people heavier.

For more on Marion Nestle, 2004 Public Health Alumna of the Year, see page 29. [↪](#)