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Vending Group Starts Anti-Fat Effort

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The vending machine industry, taking heavy criticism as kids and other Americans get fatter, is launching an anti-obesity marketing campaign to improve its image and fend off efforts to remove machines from schools.

A big part of the effort: color-coded stickers on vending machines to separate healthful items from those that hungry snackers should, in the industry's words, "choose rarely."

The National Automatic Merchandising Association's effort, "Balanced for Life," includes computer software available to schools for \$100 that was developed by a hospital to rate food by color codes.

The move comes a day after the government issued guidelines urging Americans to exercise 30 to 90 minutes a day, eat less and choose whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

"People are going to eat what they want to eat," said Richard Geerdes, the association's president and chief executive. He said that when some schools in Los Angeles removed vending machines, consumption of snack food "shifted to a different source."

"A solution like that doesn't work," Geerdes said.

The industry is promoting the "Snackwise Nutrition Rating System," developed by Columbus Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

The software evaluates the nutrition content of food based on calories, fat, sugar, protein, fiber, calcium, iron and vitamins A and C. A snack is assigned a point value, which is then translated into a color. Green is "best choice," yellow is "choose occasionally" and red is "choose rarely."

For example, a 1.25-ounce package of cinnamon-flavored Teddy Grahams is a "green" snack, while a package of Grandma's Chocolate Chip Big Cookies is a "red" snack.

Critics of the food industry say marketing to children is a major cause of obesity.

Thursday's event featured pro football Hall of Famer Lynn Swann, who urged parents and their children to exercise, even if it was just doing sit-ups and push-ups during commercials while watching TV.

Two watchdog groups questioned Swann's paid role in the industry program because he also serves as chairman of the President's Council on Physical Fitness.

"(Swann's) ability to speak out on the need for children to limit their junk-food intake will be severely compromised by his role as spokesman for the vending machine trade association," said Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington in a joint statement with the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Swann is being paid, but a spokeswoman for the association said she did not know how much. Jackie Clark said the questions raised about his role were "very silly."

Swann's position on the president's fitness council is unpaid and requires less than 60 days a year of his time, according to the Health and Human Services Department. Spokesman Bill Pierce said Swann's involvement in the industry campaign was not a government conflict of interest. He praised industry efforts to respond to concerns about obesity.

"It's important that this message get out everywhere to all sectors of the country," Pierce said.

The association event also featured a Colorado Springs high school principal representing the National Association of Secondary School Principals, who said that vending machines provide crucial funding for extracurricular activities.

Jay Engeln said his school received about \$30,000 annually from the machines that funded such programs as prom tickets for students who couldn't afford them.

He said that the machines get turned off at breakfast and lunch times and that the top beverage purchase was bottled water.