

International groups boycott Nestle products to end indiscriminate advertising, 1977-1984

- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [1]

Timing

4 July

1977

to:

4 October

1984

Location and Goals

Country:

International

Country:

United States

Country:

Australia

Country:

Canada

Country:

New Zealand

Country:

United Kingdom

Country:

Sweden

Country:

Germany

Country:

France

Country:

Finland

Country:

Norway

Location Description:

The movement was first initiated in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA and spread to ten countries by 1983

Goals:

To stop Nestle from all promotion of infant formulas in developing nations.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 077. International consumers' boycott

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 077. International consumers' boycott

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 077. International consumers' boycott

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 077. International consumers' boycott

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 077. International consumers' boycott

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 year 2 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- NGO activists
- consumers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

InFACT (Infant Formula Action)

IOCU (International Organization of Consumers Union)

War on Want

The Third World Action Group of Bern

ICCR (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)

IBFAN (International Baby Food Action Network)

Partners:

U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy

WHO

UNICEF

External allies:

The Washington Post

Involvement of social elites:

U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy

WHO

UNICEF

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Consumers
- NGO activists
- Senator Edward Kennedy

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- UNICEF
- WHO

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 year 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Nestle Corporation

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Artificial baby milks—so called “infant formula”—became widespread commercial product during the early decades of the twentieth century. Among many companies involved, Nestlé’s was the biggest promoter, controlling more than 40% of the estimated \$1.72 billion market. Nestle aggressively pursued the interest from infant formula with indiscriminate marketing. The marketing that evoked popular indictment was their promotion of infant formula in the Third World. Most people in the Third World lacked resources to consume infant formula safely, with unhygienic water supplies and surroundings making it difficult to keep the bottles sterile.

This stirred up fierce controversy in international society. In 1939, in Singapore, a doctor named Cicely Williams reported for the first time on deaths she witnessed caused by infant formula. In 1973, the issue gained public attention by a cover story, “The Baby Food Tragedy”, issued by the magazine *New Internationalist*. In 1974, War on Want, a British Charity group published an article “The Baby Killer”. When the Third World Action Group (AgDW) translated “The Baby Killer” in German with a new title “Nestle Kills Babies”, Nestle sued them with libel charges in Bern, Switzerland. Although Nestle won the case in 1976, it was virtually AgDW’s victory. While charging mild fines on AgDW, the court advised Nestle to make major adjustment regarding its unethical marketing practices. But Nestle did not take the recommendation seriously.

On July 4, 1977, as a response to Nestlé’s inattentive stance despite the court’s recommendation, Infant Formula Action (InFACT) launched a boycott campaign in Minneapolis, USA. By November, the campaign became a national level campaign; by 1978, the boycott attracted international attention, spreading to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

The goal of the campaign was simple. InFACT demanded that Nestle “immediately stop all promotion of infant formulas in developing nations.” This would involve an end to advertisements, distributions of “gifts”, and cutting out ties with health professionals that were promoting the infant formula in the Third World. To achieve this goal, the campaign laid out systematic strategies: 1) to actively engage in debate to raise awareness rather than leaving it hidden; 2) to internationalize the boycott so that they could fight transnational corporations (TNC); 3) to set churches as a legitimate base; 4) to appeal to the middle class, who were the primary consumers

of Nestlé's products.

It is also interesting to note that, despite the systematic efforts, the activists did not initially envision their attainment of goals in their lifetimes. It was not until they accumulated substantial experiences and information that they realized that the boycott did not have to bring down the whole of Nestle corporation interests. The practical target, they realized, was only \$40 million, the amount that Nestle could profit by violating the demands of the boycott. Thus, if Nestle lost more than \$40 million as a result of the campaign, it would conclude that the violation was not worth pursuing.

Initiating the educational campaign first, activists created leaflets containing lists of Nestle products to boycott and distributed them through volunteers. They also engaged in local community debates and teach-ins, and encouraged local newsletters to cover the issue.

The campaign also employed other methods. The volunteers were provided the addresses of the main Nestle officials and encouraged to write letters to them. Douglas Johnson, the leader of the campaign, also marched with people holding coffins and banners to erect a big baby bottle outside the Nestle office in the US.

Local events also sprouted up more spontaneously. Lois Happe, an activist from Boston organized the "Boston Nestea Party". Nestle products were symbolically dumped after the activists' demonstration. In North Carolina, an activist named Lew Church targeted supermarkets. She and other activists picketed and leafleted in front of supermarkets and persuaded the costumers not to buy Nestle products. In one instance, the owner of the supermarket agreed to display the arguments of the boycotters on his shopping bags. The local events created synergistic effects when they were coordinated into one event. For example, various communities participated in the "Clip Nestle Quick" campaign by collecting Nestlé's coupons. The collected coupons were then loaded onto a truck named "Boycott Express". The truck started from San Francisco and travelled up to New York Nestle Headquarters, eventually to dump the accumulated coupons.

The campaign was also sustained both by national and international institutions. On May 23, 1978, Senator Edward Kennedy began the US Senate hearings, in which he reproached Nestle for its indiscriminate infant formula marketing in Third World countries. On October 9, 1979, WHO and UNICEF held their joint conference that brought together government and industry officials, NGO activists, and consumer groups to halt the irresponsible promotion of artificial formula.

As a result of the conference, it was agreed that an International Code should be drafted to exert an internationally acknowledged sanction upon the excessive marketing of infant formula. Although not legally binding, the Code that finally came into existence in 1981 was incorporated into the national laws by the Member States. Moreover, by the end of the conference, five NGOs—IOCU, War on Want, The Third World Action Group of Bern, InFACT, and ICCR—launched the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) to work in concert against indiscriminate marketing of infant formula. But Nestle remained adamant in their refusal to abide by the Code.

In 1981, the internal strategy of Nestle was exposed to the public. A clandestine memo sent from Nestlé's Vice President Ernest Saunders to its managing director was leaked to InFACT. In the memo, Saunders said that drawing public attention by the company's direct challenge on activists will only harm corporate interest. Instead, he suggested that third parties, seemingly unrelated to Nestle, speak on its behalf. He mentioned an article written by Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) as a best example that fits his strategy. In the article, EPPC labeled the boycotters as "Marxists marching under the banner of Christ." As a matter of fact, the *Washington Post* later found out that Nestle had given EPPC \$25,000 as a "donation". Nestle met more public opposition as a result of this "Nestlegate".

Although Nestle tried to retrieve public support and detach it from the campaign by bringing Nestlé's policy slowly toward the campaigners' demand, the effort could not prevent the campaign from growing. The boycott campaign grew both in terms of depth and breadth. Strong grassroots momentum prevailed, making it hard for Nestle to discredit the campaign. The campaign became so internationally widespread that ten countries participated in the boycott.

Finally, on January 24, 1984, Nestle announced that it agreed to abide by the International Code in the Third World. IBFAN, as a response, agreed to suspend the campaign for six months, allowing Nestle a time to implement the change in policy. Nestlé's implementation process was thoroughly monitored for six months, and at last, IBFAN decided to call off the boycott on October 4, 1984.

Research Notes

Influences:

The International Boycott Against Nestle Products in 1977-1984 was influenced by Third World Action Group's publishing of the translated article "Nestle Kills Babies" (1)

The Nestle boycott in 1977-1984 influenced the relaunched boycott in 1988 (2)

Sources:

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"Taking on Goliath: The Nestle Boycott (1977-1984)." Anwar Fazal and Radha Holla.

<http://www.theboycottbook.com/>

* Short movie clip of senate hearing can be found on: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-_yitXcHU0

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class>