



Keeping Our Schools Afloat:  
Findings From Cognitive Elicitations on School Commercialization in Kansas

## A Frameworks Research Report

prepared for the Frameworks Institute  
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## INTRODUCTION

As Kansas Action for Children continues working to improve the chances and outcomes for the state's kids, its success will depend partly on its ability to engage public support for meaningful change. While nearly all Americans say it is important to do "what's best for kids,"

FrameWorks' research has consistently demonstrated that support for any *particular* kind of change may be limited by how people think about the issue. People may lack an understanding of how neglect affects a child's development for instance, or they may feel that only the family can have a real effect on how kids turn out. For example, they may not recognize the importance of particular kinds of interaction; they may have misunderstandings about nutrition or exposure to lead; they may feel that very young children's experiences aren't too important because children that young won't "remember" what happened to them anyway. In a variety of different ways, the default understandings and assumptions that guide people's reasoning about kids can limit or erode their support for various policies and interventions.

The research reported on here, commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for KAC, focuses on thinking related to school commercialization. Importantly, the research focuses on *default* patterns of reasoning – stereotypical patterns that people are likely to return to *even if they know better*. For instance, informed Americans often default to the idea that the *family* determines nearly everything about a child's outcomes, even though they realize on an intellectual level that conditions in the community, economic factors and so forth can have profound effects on children's lives. (Like other default patterns, this one is regularly promoted and reinforced, whether intentionally or not, in the media and other public discourse.) It is critical to consider thinking at this level because it is what guides most people's thinking most of the time. Unless these powerful default models are taken into account, they can derail discussion and prevent people from taking in new perspectives. The default patterns may not be *about* school commercialization per se, but about more fundamental topics, such as the nature of school, of community or of advertising. But it is these often-unconscious understandings of the world that ultimately determine how people respond to communications on that topic.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Interviews and ethnographic encounters with Kansans revealed several key cultural models that guide thinking and discourse on the issue of school commercialization in the state. The first two patterns lead to a stance from which it is hard to see school commercialization as a problem, or even a clear topic. Other patterns, present but much weaker in Kansans' minds, create some opportunities for communicators trying to move the issue forward. The bulk of the report focuses on these patterns.

### Not a topic

One of the important patterns that is made clear by the research is that school commercialization is simply *not a topic in Kansans' minds*. While they may have heard something about the vending machine issue, or some other particular controversy, the broader question of the increasing presence of commercial activity in schools is not a coherent *topic* in people's minds, not an idea they have heard about, not an organizing principle that could help them think about particular cases. The opportunity inherent in this fact is that communicators may be able to make headway simply by crystallizing this topic in people's minds – helping them recognize the *trend* in something like the big-picture way that insiders do.

### The Local Sponsorship or “School-Raising” Frame

One of the dominant and problematic frames that guides Kansans' thinking when they *are* presented with the topic centers on the historical partnership between schools and the businesses in a community. According to this frame, both schools and businesses are prototypical institutions of the community. Schools are iconic community *projects* while businesses are iconic *citizens*. There is a natural and commonsense partnership between the two, with businesses providing support of various kinds (including financial) and schools creating the community of workers and consumers that the businesses depend on. If businesses receive some recognition for their support, or if they gain some consumer allegiance for their efforts, this is viewed as a perfectly fair and normal “fringe benefit.”

This frame has a number of counterproductive effects, from the point of view of advocates concerned about school commercialization.

- *Overextension of the frame*

The familiar story of local businesses sponsoring school teams or events is sometimes extended as an understanding of more complex and abstract commercial partnerships, such as the placement of vending machines and pouring rights, in which the balance of benefits tilts away from the schools and children.

- *Obscuring government accountability*

By laying responsibility for schools firmly on the community, this frame tends to obscure larger forces at work that affect the educational experience, and obscures the role of government in making decisions, as well as funding.

- *Blindness to Corporate Intentions*

The image of businesses as altruistic pillars of the community<sup>1</sup> obscures the “business logic” at work as corporations seek to maximize profits in vulnerable markets, and develop new generations of customers.

- *Little Picture Thinking*

The focus on this idealized community relationship between schools and businesses, makes it harder to perceive or even consider the broader effects of pervasive advertising and other kinds of market relations.

### **Ubiquitous (and Harmless) Advertising**

This frame is made up of several basic “truths” related to commercialization in the schools:

- The “*real world*” is pervaded with marketing, advertising and commercialism – this is the unavoidable reality of life these days.
- Schools are part of the real world, and *isolating kids from reality*, to the extent it’s possible, actually does them a disservice. Kids need to learn how to deal with the world.
- To the extent that advertising/marketing may be a negative influence on children, *it is up to parents*, not schools, to counter it.

This frame has a number of further, unhelpful implications for the issue of commercialization:

- *An all-encompassing topic*

The frame makes it seem difficult or impossible to change the commercialization problem because this would entail changing the whole culture – too big a job.

- *Choice as the “solution”*

Within this frame, a key truth is that kids always have choices. The “solution” to the problem is to make sure they have *good* choices available. Once there’s some fruit juice in the vending machine, for example, the problem has been effectively “solved.”

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This familiar cultural image can operate even in the mind of someone who “knows better.”

- *Choice as part of learning*

Taking “choices” away can even be seen as harming education. Kids need to learn about making choices (about responding to ads, and about sodas and snacks, among other things). Isolating them from things is actually hurting their education.

- *Advertising as an ineffective gesture*

Because most of the public dismisses advertisers’ efforts to manipulate consumers as basically transparent and ineffective, businesses that advertise in school settings are typically not seen as manipulating.

### **Promising Frames: “Unwanted Influences” and “School as Protective Space”**

Two other patterns were identified in the research, but are far less pervasive than frames discussed so far. We refer to these as the Unwanted Influences and the School as Protective Space frames, and each has the potential to be developed as the basis for effective messaging. Developing the first frame would mean laying out concretely the *harms* associated with commercialization. Developing the second would mean promoting the understanding of schools as a Protective Space where different standards apply

#### *Vending machines*

The debate about vending machines demonstrates both the opportunities and limitations associated with getting Kansans to see school commercialization as a problem. There are three aspects of the issue that help Kansans understand vending machines as a problem.

- The products themselves are often recognized as harmful.
- The “message” of the vending machines contradicts school teaching about health.
- Selling snacks at school on school time is (now) against the rules.

On the other hand, none of these points extends to commercialization more generally. To the extent they are effective arguments against soda vending machines, for instance, they imply that marketing is fine as long as products aren’t the kind that hurt kids or contradict basic school lessons or policies.

#### *Conflict with Basic (Kansas) Values*

If the harms of vending machines are limited and specific, the obvious question advocates must answer is, What recognizable harm does commercialization cause? One of the most promising answers is that Kansans were often willing to see advertising and marketing as forces in conflict with basic (Kansas) values – i.e. Unwanted Influences.

- They increase materialism and acquisitiveness.
- They cause kids to “grow up too fast.”
- They encourage “bad behavior.”

As Kansans think about these negative aspects of marketing, they begin to focus on ways that they could limit the exposure of their own children. (And commercialism seems less “inevitable.”) The most obvious steps include limiting television watching or access to inappropriate media of other kinds – but the message could be extended to apply to various forms of commercial expression in schools.

### *School as a Protective Space*

In cases where Kansans are sensitized to the potential harm of commercial marketing, as in the previous discussion, the idea of the school environment as a space that is (rightly) separate from the outside world makes sense. Several subjects in the study identified a contradiction between schools’ mission of teaching students critical thinking and healthy living, and the reality of surrounding them with advertising and temptations.

From this perspective, it is also more difficult to be sanguine about the *intentions* of businesses, and easier to see school commercialization as the unacceptable targeting of children for profit. Rather than a win-win situation, commercialization is recognized as a more one-sided, market-driven transaction, and even a betrayal of children.

Effective communications on the issue would find ways of sharpening people’s understanding not only of the harms of commercialization, but of the special environment of the school.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The analysis presented in this report is based on 21 in-depth interviews conducted by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute in November and December 2006 with Kansans in 5 different communities around the state, as well as ethnographic research including shorter conversations with community members, visits to schools, and participation in school events and fundraisers.

### **Elicitations**

Subjects participated in recorded one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation, while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. Each of the encounters was recorded and transcribed for later analysis. All participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous, so no identifying information is offered in the report.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnographic research was also conducted by trained and experienced anthropologists. Researchers spent time interacting with subject groups, attending events and observing settings where school, community and commerce overlap and interact. Because commercialization relates to so many different areas of American life, the mix of elicitations and ethnography provides a more complete sense of people’s understandings of the causes, impacts and problems associated with commercialization in schools and how this extends to domains of community life beyond the school grounds.

### **Subjects**

With the generous help of the Kansas PTA, subjects were recruited by Cultural Logic in five separate locations, encompassing very different parts of the state: Kansas City, Wichita, Colby, Dodge City and Coffeyville. The 21 elicitation subjects were selected for a range of ages which included 3 Kansans under 30; 6 in their 30s; 6 in their 40s; and 6 age 50 and above. In terms of political leaning, 13 identified as conservative, 4 as moderate or independent, and 3 as liberal.<sup>2</sup> 13 identified as being rural, 7 as suburban and 1 as urban. 6 subjects were employed by schools as teacher, administrator or coach; 6 were active PTA parents or school board members; 6 were parents in the community with children either of school-age or past school-age; 2 were businesspeople active with schools; 1 was a student.

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We now turn to a discussion of the major patterns of thinking identified in the research.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Kansas Secretary of State’s certified voter registration and party affiliation data, 46% of voters in the 2004 election were Republican. Further, the current State Senate is 75% Republican, and the State House of Representatives is 63% Republican. The selection of subjects was intended to lean conservative to reflect to some degree statewide composition regarding party affiliation. [http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections\\_statistics.html](http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html)

## LOCAL SPONSORSHIP, OR “SCHOOL-RAISING”

### Description/Discussion of the Local Sponsorship Frame

This frame guides Kansans’ reasoning about responsibility for an important community institution – the school. Because schools are seen as iconic community projects, particularly in smaller or more tight-knit communities, problem-solving tends to rely on the resourcefulness of that school to mobilize support in the community.

Local businesses, meanwhile, are often thought of as iconic citizens of communities. The models of Schools on the one hand, and (Local) Businesses on the other, lead to a pattern of thinking which posits a natural partnership between the two.

In fact, this notion that local companies have a responsibility to support their local schools, through sponsorship and other contributions, is seen as common sense. If these businesses receive some recognition for their support or if they gain some nominal consumer allegiance for their efforts, this is viewed as perfectly acceptable by schools and parents, even if this fringe benefit is typically not seen as the primary motivation for their support.

The power of this “Main Street, USA” style framing, rests on several interlocking assumptions:

- Schools are a reflection of the community
- As community projects, schools are a local and *not* a governmental responsibility
- Businesses are “supercitizens,” “Pillars of the Community” – more powerful than ordinary citizens, and both willing and able to support this important community institution<sup>3</sup>.
- This relationship is seen as so natural that it is largely unquestioned.
- Both schools and businesses benefit from this relationship. It is a win-win situation that is good for the community.

### *Schools as community projects*

Schools are seen as community institutions. They are created and supported by the community and the community feels a degree of collective ownership over them. Accordingly, they are the natural recipients of the gifts and goodwill of the surrounding community. (Supporting a school is, in some senses, analogous with “barn-raising.”)

*We’re here altogether to do what we need to do, educate the children, educate our community, provide and help our community.*

Elementary school teacher

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<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere it is important to remember that we are referring to *default* understandings – ideas that are in everyone’s heads, whether they know better or not on some level, and that are easy to slip into.

In turn, business participation in schools is an important way in which the community itself is strengthened.

*I think it does make the community a little tighter when you can say yes, Excel donated the hamburger; Rainbow Bread Company got the buns for us. The hot dogs came from Jones Packing; the ketchup came from Dillons. If [the students] can see and put it in their mouth, or sit on the chair that Giant Concrete poured, I think that's a big deal.*

Mother active in PTA

*Schools are community (not governmental) institutions.*

Despite the fact that many people recognize that schools are responding to inadequate funding for their schools, very few Kansans mentioned increased taxation as a solution to this problem. This is in part symptomatic of the importance of local autonomy and of Kansans' distaste for any hint of big government.

*I think that you can make certain broad based assumptions and decisions on a statewide basis, but things that affect the community more locally need to be carried out on a local basis.*

Father with grown children

In this sense, although people understand that schools have to abide by the rules and regulations of the state, people do not tend to look to that direction for solutions to the problems of their schools.

*Companies act as ideal citizens of the community.*

According to strong default understandings about the "Decent Merchant," strong in Kansas and elsewhere in the U.S., companies have a responsibility to support key community institutions, of which schools are a prime example, in part because they depend on that same community to keep them in business. Since the companies have more money, they are in a position to contribute to the community in this way, and their actions are seen as generous but expected.

As one man, who is both the parent of a young child and the manager of a fast-food restaurant chain, said:

*I think we all have an obligation to our kids, our families, and the town. They support us and we should support them... I can't speak for everybody, but in my situation, I think it's more of just giving back. I feel, like I said earlier, whether it's Nike helping out or*

*Tim's Pizza, I think we have an obligation to make sure that our kids do have uniforms and such.*

Businessman with school-aged child

*Business support for schools is "natural."*

These relationships between schools and businesses are generally viewed as both natural and appropriate, and often have long local histories.

*Big companies like to give. They like to get known for their contributions. And I would say that it is a generous county where there's always people trying to raise money for sick children or the hospitals or other schools.*

Mother of teenagers

*Everyone benefits from "partnerships" between schools and businesses.*

Most informants agreed that it is natural for businesses to get something back in exchange for their support; it becomes a simple question of fair exchange.

*I think [sponsorship] is a show of support and in most communities, smaller communities especially, it's true where local businesses support the team, I think the community will in turn support those businesses . . .*

*. . . I wouldn't see how that (commercials on Channel One) would influence children any more than anything they would watch on TV at home. I think that's reasonable to help underwrite the cost of the programming.*

Father with grown children

Far from being treated as a negative, this benefit for the company is seen as a key component of what makes this relationship such a "win-win" scenario for both schools and businesses.

*If he's supporting the teams in the neighborhoods, the neighbors and residents will support that company.*

Mother with teenage schoolchildren

In this frame, however, the recognition that a company gets, which may or may not lead to future patronage, is seen as merely a bonus to the ultimate goal of "give something/get something" mutual support, rather than the goal itself.

*I don't buy those jerseys or offer to buy those jerseys with the intention that all those kids are going to come up and eat that day. I did it because they needed it, but at the*

*same time I'm sure there was somebody somewhere appreciative and might say, hey let's eat at [my restaurant], they're pretty good people.*

Businessman with school-age child

In this frame, naming a sports field, for example, is a way that a school can give back something to the organization that provided the funding for the field. This privilege allows the school to maintain a sense of reciprocal value in this social exchange by allowing it to give as well as to receive something of value.

*All business is local.*

It was striking that, while thinking in this frame, Kansans did not tend to distinguish between a local family-owned business and a franchise of a multi-national corporation. In this sense, Pepsi-Cola, Sonic restaurant and Wal-Mart were just as much local citizens as Joe's Pizza or Dodge City Tires.

As one woman grumbled about how a corporation sometimes *didn't* come through with donations, she phrased this criticism in terms of a very local exchange:

*When you call and ask [Pepsi], can you donate cups or something, they won't because they've already given all they can give. Which I have a hard time believing for the amount of Pepsi that is drank in this town.*

Mother active in PTA

In fact, forming relationships with multi-nationals may be better, simply because they have more resources to make available:

*The [local] schools had Coca-Cola-bought billboards and stuff like that and it really made an impact on our sport stadiums . . . And then I know another district that does stuff with CiCi's Pizza, which is more local . . . For districts that don't have that deal with Coca-Cola or don't have that opportunity, they're still dealing with their antiquated stuff.*

Coach with school-age children

Experts readily draw a distinction between small, family-owned businesses in which owners may serve on local school boards, be members of local congregations and social clubs, versus multi-national corporations who mobilize sophisticated marketing and public relations campaigns in order to maximize their profits. It is important to note, however, that when it comes to school commercialization, average Kansans tend to collapse them all into the first category.

## Sources of the Local Sponsorship frame:

The pattern of understanding discussed in this section draws on a variety of more general patterns of thinking and experience.

- *Decent Merchant*

As previously mentioned, the “Local Sponsorship” frame draws on the powerful and more general American cultural model of the Decent Merchant/Upstanding Businessman.

- *History*

In Kansas communities, there is a long history of the “local business sponsor” of community institutions, teams, events, prizes and so on.

- *Corporate PR*

Many companies and corporations go to great lengths to publicize their local activities as examples of good community participation.

- *Gift exchange*

From an anthropological perspective, the exchange of valued items is a central component of human organization in cultures throughout the world. Exchanges based on social reciprocity, rather than simple, utilitarian or market-value exchanges, are among the most important, since they help create and define social bonds and structures. These gift exchanges provide safe opportunities for individuals and groups to build sanctioned relationships with others who may be of different status than themselves or who may be exchanging goods or services of different market value. In these exchanges, both parties feel they are gaining and giving something important.

We mention this universal principle of human psychology and social interaction because it seems relevant in several ways to the present topic:

- The human desire for these types of reciprocal exchanges may be part of what makes business/school partnerships so popular, allowing them to be framed as win/win scenarios.
- The desire for reciprocal exchange is so strong that it may make people *want* to see large corporations (even international ones) as local community members, so that exchanges between them feel safer and more socially meaningful.

For example, if people *want* Pepsi to be a social partner, they integrate Pepsi into school fundraisers and thank the company through banners that re-enforce Pepsi’s place in the local community. It is comforting to see Pepsi in that light even when advocates can show evidence that Pepsi’s real goal lies in drink sales, not community building.

The power of reasoning like this is such that it can guide people's thinking *away from* the reality as understood by experts.

### **Distorting Effects of the Local Sponsorship Frame**

While many aspects of the Local Sponsorship frame are both accurate and helpful, the frame also leads to a number of distortions.

- *Overextension of the frame*

This framing of local businesses sponsoring school teams or events is very familiar to most people and is sometimes extended to explain more complex and abstract commercial partnerships, such as vending machines and pouring rights, in which the balance of benefits tilts away from the schools and children.

- *Obscuring Government Accountability*

By laying the responsibility for the school so firmly on the community in which it is situated, this frame tends to obscure bigger issues for failures in the school and can absolve greater governmental bodies of their role in supporting the state's children.

- *Blindness to Corporate Intentions*

Evocations of businesses as idealized, altruistic citizens obscure those instances in which companies are more insidious or exploitative (i.e. when they are actively recruiting children as new customers when and where they are particularly vulnerable).

- *Little-Picture Thinking*

The strong focus on this idealized community relationship between schools and businesses makes it harder to perceive any general, pervasive harm of advertising and other kinds of market relations.

Because of these distorting effects, the Local Sponsorship frame tends to reinforce patterns of thinking that make it harder for ordinary Kansans – even those who have substantial experience with local school systems – to understand the problem of school commercialization.

At the same time, because this cultural model is widely shared and deeply held, it is difficult to displace. In fact, critiques of commercialization that pre-suppose that people regard businesses critically or suspiciously are likely to be rejected, because they seem to violate common experience and common sense.

## COMMERCE AND ADVERTISING AS THE “SEA WE SWIM IN”

### Description/discussion of the Frame

This frame involves several deep “truths” related to commercialization in the schools:

- The “real world” is pervaded with marketing and advertising, and this influence is unavoidable.
- Not only are schools unable to protect young people from this real world, they probably shouldn’t try. Providing an environment that is free of marketing influences does kids a disservice. They need to learn how to negotiate this world.
- It is up to *parents* to teach kids how to use good judgment (when responding to ads or anything else) – not schools.

#### *The pervasiveness of advertising*

Advertising and other forms of commercial expression – creating opportunities or temptations to buy – are recognized as ubiquitous. These influences are so familiar that they often pass unnoticed and seem to form part of the *natural* backdrop of our lives.

*I don’t see anything bad about having a vending machine or having that kind of company sponsor them. I mean, it’s just the way everything is. There is a soda machine everywhere you go. They can’t be sheltered from their life.*

Mother of school-age child

*Schools **cannot** protect students from advertising influences.*

As the above quote also suggests, many Kansans seemed resigned to this reality.

*I really don’t think we should push a lot of marketing in the school to the kids, but kids are very visual and if they see it on the television or see their friends have it, they’re going to bring it. Your kids are going to be exposed to it one way or another.*

Former school board member with grown children

*Schools **should not** try to provide havens from advertising.*

Beyond feeling helpless in the face of the greater culture of consumption and advertising, Kansans sometimes suggest that schools are behaving *unnaturally* if they attempt to establish themselves as marketing-free zones.

The following are some other typical responses to the idea that schools should be commercial-free.

- *Fantastical or unnatural*

The notion was most often met with surprise or confusion. It was viewed as novel and far-fetched.

*You've got to live within reality and commercials pay the bills.*

School administrator

- *Pointless*

Establishing the schools as these types of zones would only be a token symbolic gesture.

*I don't think it's going to matter, because they see those things on the street anyway.  
It's an everyday thing of life.*

Mother of teenagers

- *Impossible*

Advertising is everywhere and the task of regulating it is inconceivable.

*I don't think you can do that. Not even on a school level, I mean, because there's the Nike shoes and the Pepe jeans or whatever. But there's always going to be something there--that's advertising.*

Mother of two

- *Harmful*

Schools are actually hurting students by sheltering them from reality .

*(T)hey've got to know life. Outside of school, what do they know? I mean, if the school's going to shelter them to where they don't know what **real life** is, then they're not going to make it. They have to be aware of what's out there to prepare them for the rest of the world.*

Mother of pre-schooler

### *Ineffectiveness of Advertising*

Interestingly, despite the fact that advertising is everywhere and “unavoidable,” many Kansans (like other Americans) question its effectiveness. As one school principal says when commenting on the commercials included in the Channel One news programming for schools:

*We're so programmed for commercials anyway. You know, you're either going to watch them or you're not and they were the same ones seen on TV, so I never saw any conflict between the news and the advertisement on Channel One.*

School administrator

In many cases, people were reluctant to acknowledge an ulterior motive for advertisers. More frequently, people maintained that *normal* advertising is informational and doesn't force people to do anything they don't want to do.

*I think it's a good thing just to put signs up. There's nothing wrong with that.*

*Q: Do you think that Coke wants to put a sign up to try to get new customers?*

*A: No. It's just advertisement.*

Community member with no children

If advertising is in fact both natural and ineffective, then the presence of advertising in and around schools is seen as harmless and is therefore unlikely to motivate spirited opposition.

*It's parents' job to help children navigate a consumer society.*

Although advertising and consumerism is not a danger for a fully competent adult, people do recognize that children have to learn to navigate the temptations and opportunities of our marketing-saturated society. Given this perception, it might be assumed that schools ought to play a greater role in teaching children how to function in that society. However, although there seemed to be some support for media studies electives, the task of teaching children how to function in a consumer society fell almost entirely to parents.

When this man was asked about junk food ads targeting children, he responded:

*I think the education process needs to begin in the home . . . I would hope a parent would have taught them and educated them to at least open their horizons a little more to different nutritional avenues besides soda pop. You know, "You must eat Brussel sprouts or, just eat potatoes." I think kids get channeled into whatever their parents [do].*

Father with grown children

For most people, dealing with advertising had little to do with the kinds of knowledge and sophistication that schools are meant to teach. In fact, it had little to do with advertising itself at all. Instead, these conversations turned to such observations as people need to learn to be able to prioritize, know what they want, resist temptation, plan for the future, defer gratification and so on. Imparting these kinds of moral lessons and life skills is regarded primarily as a parent's job.

If children struggle with these issues, Kansans are less likely to blame marketers than to blame parents who have failed in their child-rearing. The woman below complained about children whining to their parents about things they've seen advertised on TV:

*When I'm with the kids and they want something that [I don't think they should have] I say no. They want to throw a tantrum, that's fine.*

*Q: Do you think there is a way of helping the parents out there that aren't doing that?*

*A: I don't know. That's the way our family has always done that . . . [Other parents] feel it's okay that they are buying them everything they want because they're too busy or something.*

Mother with grown children

From the perspective of the Ubiquitous Advertising frame, commerce and advertising are simply an everyday "fact of life" that people have to deal with. Advertising, unless it is dishonest, is a normal and mostly harmless part of the landscape, except for those people who have not developed the strength of character and common sense that allows them to make good judgments. In this model, it is not the commercial landscape that needs to be changed, but rather that parents need to be more effective.

### **Ideas that reinforce the Ubiquitous Advertising frame**

Beyond the fact that business and advertising are so deeply integrated into contemporary American culture as to be taken as a given, the frame fits with and is reinforced by some basic values (that happen to be held by conservatives in particular):

- Individual Responsibility (We make our own choices; our actions aren't determined by outside influences).
- Parental Responsibility (Parents – not schools – should be teaching kids about values, priorities and choices).
- The Consumer-driven economy (Products and services exist because consumers want them, not because they are being foisted on consumers by marketers).
- Liberty (The opportunity to freely choose among consumer products is an important aspect of liberty).

## **Distorting Effects of the Ubiquitous Advertising frame**

Naturally, this frame has counterproductive effects on thinking, from the perspective of advocates on school commercialization.

- *An insurmountable “problem”*

The frame makes it seem difficult or impossible to change the commercialization situation because this would entail changing the whole culture – too big a job.

- *Choice as the “solution”*

Within this frame, the clear implication is that kids always have choices. The “solution” to the problem is thus to make sure they have *good* choices available. Unfortunately, this means that once there’s some fruit juice in the vending machine, for example, the problem has been effectively “solved.”

- *Choice and learning*

Taking “choices” away can even be seen as harming education. Kids need to learn about making choices (about responding to ads, and about sodas and snacks, among other things). Isolating them from things is actually hurting their education. The underlying assumption is that kids are miniature adults – i.e. “rational actors” – who operate much as other consumers do.

- *Advertising just to advertise*

If advertising is seen as ineffective (as it often is), businesses that advertise in school settings seem not to be motivated by profit, but by the desire to help or simply to be seen.

## **PROMISING FRAMES: “UNWANTED INFLUENCES” AND “SCHOOL AS PROTECTIVE SPACE”**

Given the dominance of the Local Sponsorship and Ubiquitous Advertising frames, we recommend an approach based on activating two existing but less dominant frames, Harmful Marketing and School as Protective Space. The first of these puts forward reasons to consider commercialization harmful, and the second concerns the role of schools in protecting children from harms.

### **Discussion/description of the Unwanted Influences frame**

A major obstacle for advocates is the fact that most Kansans *do not see the harm* in school commercialization per se. As discussed above, Kansans see the participation of businesses in fundraising and sponsorships as good and constructive – and they see advertising in schools as both essentially harmless, and a fair trade-off for the benefits that advertisers supply.

In order to motivate the public to support restrictions on school commercialization, it will be important to raise people’s awareness of the real and potential harm that can result in schools from exposure to advertising and consumerism.

#### *Legislating against vending machines: a narrow problem*

The debate about vending machines is a good case in point in that it demonstrates both the opportunities and limitations associated with getting Kansans to see school commercialization as a problem. In the case of vending machines, there have been three distinct aspects of harmfulness that have a cumulative effect and which have created some consensus about the need to limit access.

- *The products themselves are harmful.*

Sugary and high-fat snacks are unhealthy when consumed excessively. Although most Kansans are not in favor of banning such snacks outright, widespread knowledge about the “obesity epidemic” among children convinced many people that these products are potentially problematic.

*Pop is bad for you . . . The kids – we have a lot of overweight children, so that's not good. Kids love free things, so if anything is free [from] Pepsi, they'll be there. I don't think it's really good.*

Teacher with pre-school child

- *The “message” of the vending machines contradicts school teaching.*

Another example of harm is the way in which soda and snack machines could seem like an endorsement of unhealthy foods at a time when schools are trying to teach kids better eating habits. This sense of school *hypocrisy* was disturbing to many people

*It's not really helping them out any, especially in high school if you're trying to teach them all the health and benefits of their lifestyle.*

Mother of school-age child

*Q: Does it sound like a good idea that we'll show a news program, but you have to watch a couple of minutes of advertising?*

*A: Not really. Not with this Wellness thing that they're trying to put in place to discourage kids from eating all the [junk food]. If it was more commercials geared towards healthy foods I could see the commercials. But if we're trying to promote all the wellness, we don't need all the [junk food] stuff.*

School administrator

- *Selling snacks at school on school time is against the rules.*

As regulations limiting the marketing of snacks and drinks come into play, selling these products becomes, by implication, wrong. Although in some ways this kind of legislation may have to rely on some pre-existing public consensus, it can also help lead many of the public to accept that there is something bad or harmful going on.

*What we generally do is we put the school design on the front and then we put our sponsor [Harley-Davidson] on the back. And there was one parent that was concerned with that. Of course, we made sure she realized that there is no law against riding a motorcycle, so and they gave their money very, very generously.*

School board member and mother

For the woman below, a proponent of public/private partnerships, the question of legality ended the conversation about vending machines:

*Q: It sounds like you feel that this is a good opportunity for one of those public/private partnerships.*

*A: Sure.*

*Q: With McDonald's maybe?*

*A: No. No-no-no. That's just a—*

*Q: The kids could buy McDonald's in the cafeteria.*

*A: In the state of Kansas we now have the child nutrition regulations now. We're no longer – we can no longer do things like that. We can't even have carbonated drinks*

School administrator

There is not doubt that identifying and lobbying against these kinds of problems is and will continue to be an important part of children's advocacy in the state. However, *none of these three issues extends to the issue of school commercialization more generally*. On the contrary, they are likely to leave people with the understanding that schools really ought to make sure that the products that schools are promoting are legal, harmless, and don't contradict schools' teaching.

### *Commercialism and Unwanted Messages*

Although in general people are not concerned about school commercialization in and of itself, there were some objections voiced in the interviews to commercial messages in schools:

- *Increased materialism and acquisitiveness*

People recognize that aggressive advertisements stimulate kids to want (and nag for) commercial products. This increased materialism and greediness goes directly against the religious and moral training that parents think they should be conveying to their children. Although Kansans believe that it is ultimately up to the parents to bring their children up right, there is some potential to make clear "what parents are up against."

*In everything the PTA sells, there's always candy. Let's buy a big humongous ten pound Hershey bar for a buck fifty and everybody comes knocking on your door at dinnertime: "Hi, is your Mommy there?" And they're holding up the Hershey bar so that all the kids in the family can see. "Mommy, mommy, we want that. Yeah-yeah, please-please!" And the mother is trying to get them to eat their spinach at dinner.*

Mother with school-age children

- *Advertising and the media encourage "bad behavior."*

Kids' exposure to messages that encourage rebelliousness, disregard for parents and elders, that equate success and status with material purchases, and so on are disturbing to parents. Physical outcomes like eating disorders or increased aggressiveness are examples of harm that people are prepared to link to advertising.

*I know all my kids have noticed – my husband really gets worked up – all commercials related to women are about obesity and getting rid of wrinkles and fat and all that stuff. . . The girls have huge self-image issues from very early now. My daughter is almost 13 and she has been worrying about it for at least two or three years now . . . It's in everything – in magazines, TV, music videos.*

Mother with school-age children

*Most companies . . . just want to sell their product and they don't necessarily think about the consumer and the consequences their consumer has to pay for their lack of self-control. It's not their responsibility . . . Profit is the bottom line.*

Businesswoman with school-age children

- *Advertising is causing kids to “grow up too fast.”*

As marketers have reached more deeply into childhood in their efforts to create consumers, this has created a certain amount of potential backlash among the public. Parents understand that the ongoing sexualization of girls’ fashions, for example, is driven by marketers and advertisers.

*The advertisement is getting so much more open. I mean like the sex, the tampons and all this sort of stuff. My God, I never knew [these things on] TV or on commercials. That's how old I am. Today, it's right there in front of my two year old, three year old. That doesn't need to be there. There is a place for that, and I think it has gone way too far.*

Mother of pre-schoolers

Importantly, when Kansans are thinking from the perspective of the Unwanted Influences frame, the complacency about exposure disappears – i.e. the Ubiquitous Advertising frame loses its power. As people began to speak about the negative aspects of marketing, they immediately began to think in terms of *the ways that they could limit the exposure of their own children*, most obviously by limiting television watching or making sure they see more appropriate magazines.

*Well, of course my kids don't watch too much TV . . . .*

Father with school-age children

By extension, exposure to commercial messages in school would also be something to protect kids from.

#### *An answer to the Choice argument*

The idea of free choice is so powerful in Kansas (and American) culture that it can be difficult to find an effective counter to it once it is raised. The Unwanted Influences frame is one that allows people to avoid this cognitive trap.

## School as a Protective Space

When people are sensitized to the potential harm of commercial marketing, it makes sense that school should be a place where they are protected from these harms. Schools are already understood as places that are supposed to be *safe* in a physical sense.

*We're a drug-free, gun-free school already and most of the schools already are. I mean, kids have brought cap guns to school and they've gotten suspended. So the kids pretty much know that there's to be none of that kind of stuff on the property. Staff that smoke have to go off the school property to smoke. They're not allowed to be on property at all.*

School administrator

If the Unwanted Influences frame is successfully evoked, then it is possible for people to understand that marketing, like other potentially harmful influences, ought to be excluded from the school grounds.

*I'm a business person myself and it would profit me to go in at lunch time and have my snacks . . . and just be able to park my little cart and let the kids come up and buy whatever they wanted to. [But] I don't think that is the place for me to profit off of kids being at school.*

Businesswoman active with PTA

In the context of the vending machine controversy, several people identified a contradiction between schools' *mission* of teaching students critical thinking and healthy living on the one hand, and the reality of bombarding students with advertising and surrounding them with temptations (many of them unhealthy) on the other. This sense of mission, if successfully evoked, helps people reject the idea of commercial messages in school.

*I feel like in schools they should be learning information that they're supposed to be in school for.*

Mother active with PTA

Once people see commercial expression as Unwanted Influences and School as a Protective Space, it is easier for them to open their eyes to the business logic behind much of school commercialization: many companies are deliberately targeting children for profit. School isn't just another place where kids happen to see advertising. Instead, it is a specific marketplace unto itself. As a captive market, kids are even "betrayed" by systematic commercialization.

*To put [the school] in a situation where we were indebted to [a sponsor] makes me uncomfortable . . . The one that has the most money who can get into the school, or the most clout – I have no idea how they get in there and how they work those kinds of things.*

Businesswoman with school-age children

*If you're gonna be an educational system, then educate and I think you can do it without the commercials. Don't put the commercials there for the kids to have to watch just to get the programming. I just don't like that. To me, it's like they've got a captive audience and so whether you like it or not, those images are going in your brain. I don't think that's good.*

Former school board member with grown children

### *Localizing the issue*

*The Protective Space frame has the advantage of making the issue more manageable. It is no longer about the all-encompassing and morally ambiguous climate of advertising in our culture; instead, it is about what children experience in a specific space that is supposed to maintain high standards.*

*I know it was an eye-opener for me when we had this talk about businesses coming in and targeting schools for promotion of their business.*

Mother with grown children

### *Community and Protection*

Finally, the Protective Space frame fits nicely with the powerful sense (in Kansas) of schools as community institutions. The community has a responsibility to protect youth from the harms of "captive marketing," and people may agree that the schools have let them down in this regard. At the end of an elicitation with a mother and businesswoman that had dwelt on the problems of commercialization, she tried to articulate her anger about her community's failure to really protect and nurture its children:

*[It is] difficult for younger children to make these kinds of choices. I think hitting them with a barrage of [advertising] is unfair and unrealistic. Parents ought to be able to stand up and say we live in America, so we ought to be able to say this is not what we want. We ought to be more in control. Schools belong to us. They don't belong to – so maybe I talked myself into being more adamant about – "don't do that!" That our children are not in a position to be able to make those choices well, and that we shouldn't put them in those positions until we've had an opportunity to teach them and*

*help them mature and help them use those critical thinking skills – stretch that just a little bit before they have to use them. That it comes quick enough.*

Businesswoman with school-age children

## CONCLUSION

This paper reports on a number of powerful and counterproductive frames that currently guide Kansans' thinking as they confront the topic of school commercialization. It also describes several frames that are sometimes encountered in conversations with Kansans, but that are not as basic or robust as the problematic frames. In order for advocates to make headway on the issue, they will need to do more than *refer* to these frames – i.e. saying that advertising is an unwanted influence, or that schools ought to protect kids, is not enough to counter the strong default perspectives about the relationship between business and schools. Instead, advocates face the difficult job of creating and refining a set of sharp, concrete and user-friendly messages that help average people focus on these more productive perspectives:

What is school commercialization? This is a term that average Kansans don't understand, and more importantly, it is a process and trend that they currently have little awareness of. Simply defining and illustrating the trend in clear ways would be a very helpful step.

Harms of commercialization in schools: Right now it is difficult for Kansans to imagine these harms, beyond the limited cases where products are actually harmful. The Unwanted Influences frame helps prime people for the idea that commercial messages can be harmful, but communicators might look for clear and definite ways of expressing these harms.

Business logic: Currently, default frames like the Decent Merchant predispose Kansans towards one set of understandings about why businesses are interested in schools. Explaining the business logic of advertising and other forms of “support” may go a long way towards shifting people to new perspectives on the phenomenon.

Special mission of schools: The Protective Space frame gives Kansans a “head start” in appreciating how commercialization might violate the mission of schools, but communicators can certainly find ways of promoting and strengthening this understanding.

While there is no question that advocates on the school commercialization issue are fighting against some powerful cultural forces, it is also clear that each of the above messages could constitute a powerful tool for moving the issue forward.

## APPENDIX: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

### Frames

Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as *frames*. For example, the concept of a “father” is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, biology, responsibility, and so forth. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. They are revealed most clearly in the language and reasoning a person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that “frame” is a general term—used somewhat differently in different disciplines—to refer to more specific concepts such as *cognitive model*, *cultural model*, and *cultural theory*, discussed below.

### Cultural models vs. cultural theories

A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (*The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, D'Andrade 1995). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge—the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst. Cultural theories are closely related to public discourse and, because they are explicit understandings, to rhetorical positions adopted for purposes of argument.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem. A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others—more specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth). Cultural models are associated with private understanding and individual reasoning.

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss's study of blue-collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the American model of self-made Success. In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force—i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.

## **Cognitive Analysis**

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues. For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women should stay in the home and nurture children. Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the “Supermom”), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant, deeply held models to which a given subject such as “School” is connected (literally or through metaphor). Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues. Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

## **Metaphor**

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak, and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as “weather”—i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about any given topic are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape. The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents.

## **Subjects and sample size**

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax—a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a relative few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects' culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).

*The FrameWorks Institute* is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

*Cultural Logic*, headed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, adapts current cognitive and social science methodologies to research on public interest issues in order to uncover the cultural models that underlie opinion and behavior. Cultural Logic techniques include cognitive elicitations (semi-structured, one-on-one interviews), analysis of media and other public discourse, and ethnographic observation.

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