Coca-Cola and PepsiCo vow to stop ads aimed at children
Andrew Bounds

Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, the world's largest beverage companies, plan to stop targeting under-12s with advertising by the end of the year, in response to rising worries over child obesity.

Other international soft drinks makers are also likely to endorse a new marketing code to be unveiled today by the International Council of Beverage Associations, the industry's umbrella group.

The US groups are expected to make a pledge to implement the code worldwide by the end of 2008 at this week's World Health Assembly, the annual meeting of the World Health Organisation in Geneva.

The WHO and government regulators have been pressing the food and drink industry to address fast-rising obesity among youngsters. With 400m people dangerously overweight, today's generation is the first forecast to live shorter lives than their parents.

While companies in many countries, particularly in the European Union, have brought in voluntary curbs, the code is the largest commitment yet.

"Adopting robust guidelines ... broadens our industry's commitment to providing meaningful leadership around the world," Alain Beaumont, secretary general of the group representing European soft drinks companies, will say.

"As parents and grandparents ourselves, we recognise that children may be more susceptible to marketing campaigns and may not always be able to make the right dietary choices for themselves."

Drink and food companies fear they could become as demonised as the tobacco industry if they are seen to be pushing unhealthy products to children.

Under the ICBA guide-lines, companies agree to eliminate the marketing of beverages, including carbonated soft drinks, to any audience comprising predominantly children under 12.

The policy covers paid media outlets such as television, radio, print, the internet, phone messaging and cinema, and includes product placement. It does not cover water, juices and dairy-based beverages.

Consumers International, a consumer watchdog, said the code did not go far enough. "We need globally agreed restrictions that hold the entire food and drink industry to account, not piecemeal self-regulation," said Emily Robinson, CI's campaigns manager.

Tim Armstrong, a physical activity expert at the World Health Organisation, welcomed the move, especially its global reach. Health regulation is often weaker in poor countries.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, May 20 2008. World News, p. 2.