

Remember when the Avon lady came knocking? Today's Avon reps are apt to be schoolchildren, some as young as nine. And where the Avon lady may have used the soft-sales approach, these children are desperate to sell, for their classrooms are in competition over the sales. The Avon catalog to the child comes with order forms and collection envelope for payments, plus a "Fundraiser Prize List" setting forth the "sales level you achieved"; one such is "\$300-\$399.99." The small print states in English and Spanish, "Do not ask a stranger to buy," which indicates, the promoters are well aware that they send children into possibly dangerous territory. Then the "winner" class gets singled out for a "rewards party"—which is no reward in terms of health: the parties feature pizzas and sodas, or else cookies and sodas, or it might be an ice-cream party. If this happened once a year it would be one thing, but the parties go on all the time. As soon as one sales campaign ends, the next one comes along. One school offered limousine rides to students who sold \$300 worth of merchandise ranging from foodstuffs to picture frames, all vastly overpriced.

When my granddaughter began kindergarten at the elementary school in my neighborhood, she brought me catalogs for expensive jewelry, monthly flyers for "Pizza Day," and so on. A student assembly was called for a PTO member and a marketer from Great American Opportunities ("Great American Opportunists" would be more fitting) who pitched cookie dough. In my granddaughter's backpack I found a glossy brochure of mouthwatering cookies (rather than of the three-pound-tubs we were supposed to buy) along with a list of trinkets promoted as "family" prizes: "If one student earns a prize, every Family Member at [X] Elementary School will receive the same prize. For example: if you family sells 11 items, all the students would receive the prizes from level 4, 7, and 11."

What does "11 items" signify? Eleven tubs of cookie dough. At a throw of \$14 each, our family would have to spend \$154 to qualify. (At Sam's Club I found tubs of almost twice the volume at less than half the price.)

I attended PTO meetings and was disturbed by what I saw. Our Great American Opportunist represents an array of companies pushing him to pitch their wares to PTOs. "He shared the many options of fundraisers . . . his sales are 42% profit for the schools," say the minutes of the man's visit. I was soon uninvited to these meetings on grounds that I am not the parent or legal guardian of an enrolled child.

I went from teacher to principal to school superintendent, then Ted Adams, to Jane Stalcup of the Board of Trustees, handing out flyers as I went from WIN WYOMING ("Wellness in Wyoming") with its "Alternatives to using food as a reward: Promote better health with these classroom reward ideas." Both Adams and Stalcup said it's not their job to "police internal school activities."

Yet PTO promotional activities go against school-board policies as they go against the federal and state laws that mandate classroom time to be used solely for instruction. In today's classroom, teachers are obliged to hand out all manner of material, then collect the sales returns. They are obliged to encourage sales competitions and welcome "rewards parties." Ted Adams informed me, he used to be badgered by companies wanting to sell things at schools or putting up posters in hallways. "I sent them away," he said. "They don't come around much any more."

They have found a back door: PTO meetings—but PTO members lack the clout and the savvy of a superintendent to send the imposters packing.

Juliet Schor in her well-researched *Born to Buy* shows how marketers blame parents for the greed and confusion that go with a commercialized childhood even as they brag to their clients about their means to exploit “the nag factor.” Schor advocates a ban on marketing to schoolchildren, first and foremost a ban on food marketing. Research by the National Academy of Sciences links the marketing to kids of sugary, salty, fatty foods to the alarming rise in childhood obesity and related health problems.

Wyoming children are hyped into becoming mercenaries. PTO members rehearse them in practices entirely at odds with elementary-school education. They do so in the name of raising money for classrooms; thus, families, teachers, principals are bullied into compliance. Schools need to upgrade their computers. Schools need new whiteboards. The lists are endless, and the marketers know it.

Why, one wonders, when our state treasury salts away millions of surplus revenue for “a rainy day,” must children go peddling in the streets in the name of a school’s needs? Why must they risk being shamed by classmates for failing to meet a quota, suffer through family conflicts provoked by PTO promos in economic hard times? In a state that touts its good life, it’s a sorry day for children burdened down with adult-style sales jobs and competitions.