

FOOD PRODUCTION AND HUMAN NUTRITION: THE IMPACT OF HEALTH MESSAGES: FOOD INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

The Australian food industry manufactures a vast array of foods which cater to an extraordinary variety of tastes, preferences and choices. The industry is an extremely competitive one, seeking the custom of consumers who are more demanding and better informed on matters of nutrition than ever before. Food manufacturers are being subjected more and more to a myriad of regulations governing every step they take from production to sale. Each day they have to balance the competing demands of the market place and their individual shareholders. The industry manages its way around the contentious issue of health messages, but needs to be allowed greater latitude in this respect. It has demonstrated that it is prepared and able to act responsibly on this issue. It has a vital role to play in educating consumers about its products in the interests of improving the health of the population. A lot can be learned from the experience of the United States on the regulation of health messages. The National Food Authority needs to agree with food manufacturers on an appropriate policy for health claims and the place of functional foods. In doing so, the National Food Authority needs to be flexible and keep pace with rapidly evolving food science and nutrition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The last 30 years have seen an incredible change in food in Australia and that change has accelerated dramatically in the last decade. Those of us old enough and prepared to admit it, but especially the so-called baby boomers, have experienced wholesale changes in our eating habits, attitudes, diets and level of knowledge and information about nutrition. On average, we are living longer than the previous generation. Many of us still hanker for things of the past which today are frowned upon. Let me name just a few: the skin and fat off the lamb roast (the residue of which became the congealed saturated fat - "dripping" sounds so much better - you cooked with in subsequent meals); the layer of cream at the top of a bottle (not carton) of full cream (not fat reduced) milk; butter - real butter; crusty, still-warm, unsliced white bread straight out of the baker's cart; salt; fried foods; pork crackling.

We have, however, moved on and today we have food markets which accommodate all sorts of tastes, preferences, and choices. Our food supply is one of the best, if not the best, in the world. The extraordinary variety of foods on offer reflects the changing ethnic mix in our population as well as the aging of the population itself. Consumers today are more demanding and better educated on matters of nutrition. They are seeking more and more fresh product, which is at the same time tasty, healthy, varied, convenient and value for money. They still see food shopping as a chore, and want to minimise the number of decisions they have to make about what to do with the food they purchase, whether the price is "right", and how the food should be handled, stored etc.

My company, Goodman Fielder, is Australia's largest food company and has operations in 29 countries. It generates an annual turnover of \$4 billion, and employs around 19,000 people. The company makes a wide range of consumer foods and food ingredients for the

retail, industrial, food-service and hospitality markets in several major product areas, including: cereal-based foods such as flour, bread, baked foods, breakfast cereals, snacks, cakes and cake mixes, soups, pasta and pastry products; edible fats and oils such as margarine, cooking oil, dressings and sauces; food ingredients such as gelatine, starch and stabilisers; poultry, including chicken, turkey and duck.

Its brands are some of the best known in Australia and include Uncle Tobys, Meadow Lea, Buttercup, Steggle's, Praise, Vetta, Pampas, White Wings and Davis. It competes in its various markets with major international companies such as George Weston Foods, Bunge, Sara Lee, Nestle, Unilever, Kraft and Kelloggs.

The company's extensive range of products caters to the diverse demands of the marketplace in the provision of cereal grains in various forms, as well as reduced fat and salt products, and "fun foods".

The company has a corporate nutrition policy directed at ensuring that the company produces and markets foods which enhance the well-being and nutritional health of consumers, as well as satisfying their tastes, appeal and other requirements. This commitment is supported by an extensive research and development effort as well as product development activities. The nutrition policy encourages the enjoyment of a wide variety of nutritious foods while recognising the place of "fun foods" as part of the diet, and the role of exercise in the maintenance of a healthy weight.

II. THE INDUSTRY, MARKETING AND REGULATION

As part of the Australian food industry, we compete every day of the year in many different markets and market segments, against equally "hungry" rivals, for the business of increasingly sophisticated customers and consumers. Every step we take in the process of production through marketing and sale is governed by a myriad of regulations aimed at protecting consumers, ensuring their health and safety, and providing as level as possible a competitive playing field. And in providing products for these markets, we are often faced with competing demands from different lobby groups and consumers themselves. For instance, various pieces of research over the last six years have shown that the greatest concern of consumers about the food they eat is the amount of "chemicals" (such as preservatives, additives) it contains. Of much lesser concern is the level of fat in the food. For the health lobby, these concerns would be reversed in order of importance. As an aside, it is also interesting to note that, despite, or perhaps because of, the proliferation of all types of foods catering to all types of consumers, the incidence of eating disorders (such as anorexia and bulimia) is increasing, rather than decreasing. On the other hand, the incidence of overweight is also increasing. This makes targeting messages very important so as to ensure that the appropriate audience is reached. This, of course, is a topic in itself and one in which the food industry has an extremely important role to play in providing good quality, nutritious and varied products, as well as assisting in the education of consumers about nutrition, sensible eating, and the importance of regular exercise.

The food industry, then, faces a complex task of balancing the competing demands of the marketplace and ensuring that the shareholders are kept happy! These days we hear a lot about "bottom lines". For the food industry, the "bottom lines" are sales and profitability. Consumers and the marketplace are at the one time our lifeblood and our ultimate sanction.

Faced with such a hostile environment, how does the food industry manage its way around the contentious issue of health messages?! Health messages, of course, come in various forms and are subject to different levels of regulation. Health claims (relating to disease prevention) are currently restricted in Australia under Section A1 (19) of the Foods Standards Code, whereas nutrition claims (referring to the presence or absence of a particular nutrient in a food) are permitted under Section A1 of the Code. I will deal with these two types of health message in turn.

First, health claims. To use the vernacular, the jury is still out on these. The National Food Authority (NFA), while rejecting a proposal relating to them by the National Health and Medical Research Council, said that it would review the issue in the course of its standard-by-standard review of the Food Standards Code. No doubt the NFA will draw heavily on the experience of other countries, such as the United States of America, where certain health claims are permitted. The process of debate in that country in relation to health claims began with the ground-breaking claim by Kellogg's in 1984 that its All Bran product could help reduce the risk of certain types of cancer. This led to a proliferation of similar claims for other products and the debate heated up considerably over the years that followed. It culminated in the passing of the National Nutrition Labelling and Education Act (NLEA) under which health claims in seven areas are permitted. These relate to certain nutrients and types of foods and their relationships or linkages with the specific diseases of osteoporosis, hypertension, cancer and coronary heart disease. The Act will rein in some of the more extravagant and irresponsible claims made by food manufacturers seeking to jump on the health claims band wagon. It must be conceded that things had really got out of hand back in 1989, when in a survey conducted by an advertising agency, 74% of Pepsi drinkers said they would switch to Coke if it had oat bran in it!

The Australian Grocery Manufacturers of Australia Ltd (GMA), the members of which account for 85% of the production and sale of packaged grocery products annually in Australia, last year took the bit between the teeth and adopted a self-regulatory, voluntary Code of Conduct for the provision of information on food products. The code, which is currently under review, seeks to assist GMA member companies to increase consumer knowledge about food products and their contribution to a healthy and enjoyable diet, as well as ensure that all nutritional and other product information is accurate, consistent with food regulations, based on sound and objective scientific considerations, and easily understood by consumers. This code deals, in part, with the issue of health claims and provides guidelines on the same which, until the existing regulations are amended, simply remain as a statement of GMA policy on the issue. The code highlights the many benefits from providing health claims on packaging and in advertising. These include the increase in nutrition education efforts, enhancement of consumer understanding of the link between diet and health, and improved product nutritional quality for a variety of nutrients across entire categories of products. The GMA is of the view that factual statements on diet and health are in the best interests of the overall health of the Australian population.

Secondly, nutrition claims. Whilst the issue of nutrition claims is not as contentious as that of health claims, it is nonetheless controversial. There is, however, a broad measure of agreement over the regulation of these claims between the NFA in its draft Code of Practice on nutrient claims in food labels and in advertisements, and the GMA in its Code of Conduct mentioned above. There is broad agreement on the content of nutrition information panels which are required to accompany a nutrition claim and both codes provide considerable detail about the information required to support a nutrition claim. However, more work is being done to gain a better understanding of labelling issues of concern to consumers. It is accepted that nutrition panels are confusing and overly complicated to many consumers. This is a real issue for food manufacturers from a packaging point of view, given the amount of space available on a package to meet the statutory requirements and allow for promotional, branding and other advertising messages.

As mentioned earlier, my company has invested considerable resources and money in product research and development as part of its corporate nutrition policy. The policy document itself details the multitude of Goodman Fielder products specially developed for their nutritional qualities and benefits. Fat is a nutrient which is receiving a lot of attention from different sectors, such as health practitioners, educators, food companies and food marketers. The company has introduced many products over the last few years which are aimed at endeavouring to improve the level of fat in the diet, as well as the proportion of "healthy" fats in the diet. A few examples will suffice.

Our poultry division, under the Steggles brand, after years of selective breeding, succeeded in breeding a chicken that had significantly less fat than other commercial breeds.

The Steggles geneticists were able to naturally reduce the fat content of the chicken, essentially in the abdominal cavity and under the skin, without affecting the tenderness, taste and moisture of the meat. The chicken, so bred, offers a valuable, low-fat source of protein in the diet, and an opportunity to further reduce dietary fat consumption. A number of the Steggles breed portions have been approved by the National Heart Foundation as meeting its strict criteria for fat content. In addition, the Steggles brand offers a large range of turkey products which are not only low in fat but also have a favourable ratio between unsaturated and saturated fats.

Meadow Lea Foods, part of the Goodman Fielder Consumer Foods Group, has successfully developed a range of healthy fat products to fit current lifestyle and diet trends, as well as consumer preferences. It offers a range of canola oil-based products and a sunflower oil-based cooking oil. Late last year, Meadow Lea Foods launched Olive Grove margarine, Australia's first margarine to be made with olive oil (30%), with National Heart Foundation approval.

Another part of the Consumer Foods Group, The Uncle Tobys Company, manufactures an extensive range of cereal-based products and dry groceries as breakfast cereals, muesli bars and snack products. These products offer considerable nutritional benefits such as a reduction in fat and an excellent fibre profile.

The Goodman Fielder baking arm, Quality Bakers Australia, manufactures bread and pastry products principally under the Buttercup and Pampas brands. Many of these products have been developed to meet the National Heart Foundation's guidelines on salt, fat and sugar and are excellent sources of soluble dietary fibre. Early this year, the company launched a new white bread known as Wonder White, which contains more fibre than its multi-grained cousin. This product is aimed at satisfying consumer demands for a higher fibre-containing white bread.

II. A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF NUTRITION MESSAGES

I believe that it can safely be said that the Australian food industry acts responsibly in the way it deals with health messages in relation to its products. As a food marketer, I strongly support the notion of letting the market decide what products are produced and sold, with a minimum level of regulatory interference. I should also mention a few other personal perspectives.

First, nutrition is a complex subject which simply cannot be addressed with even the most elaborate education campaign. The links between diet and health are well established, and a more informed consumer will be likely, though not necessarily, to utilise nutrition information "positively" by consuming nutritious foods. Consumers, however, need to receive this information in lay terms over an extended period before they can be expected to start responding to it. Here, the food industry has a first class opportunity for assisting in the educative process by providing detailed information about its products. The industry should not be unduly restricted in the information it provides as long as such information is soundly based. Further, the very important role in educating consumers that the industry has to play should be recognised and given appropriate weight by the authorities. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this role has the potential to assist in improving the overall health of the population.

Secondly, whilst the recently enacted NLEA is not totally acceptable from a food industry perspective for a variety of reasons, I suggest that we have a lot to gain from the US experience with its implementation. Our regulators should not set about re-inventing the wheel on how best to regulate health claims in Australia. At all times, the NFA needs to be flexible and keep pace with rapidly evolving food science and nutrition. The NFA should address the issue quickly and develop a policy so that food companies are not unduly stifled in their product development work. Responsible food manufacturers accept the requirement that health claims be substantiated and are prepared to work with the NFA to agree on the appropriate level of substantiation. Again, we can learn from the US experience in this regard.

Thirdly, the food industry and the NFA need to agree on the place of the so-called

functional foods in this whole debate. The market is racing well ahead of the NFA in this area. Already we are seeing advertising and promotion which is testing the limits of the Food Standards Code (not unreasonably or irresponsibly, in my view). There is also a lot of interest in the new fermented milk Yakkult product which is intended to improve the flora of the bacteria in the digestive system.

Fourthly, it concerns me that unlike health professionals, food companies are not allowed to recommend specific foods for the prevention or control of health problems. I say this for two reasons. In some health professional segments, the level of credibility of the information or advice provided is in inverse proportion to the state of nutrition knowledge of the provider! Further, the concentration on "good" or "bad" foods by some health professionals rather than on good or bad diets, is extremely unhealthy! Food companies, of necessity, know most about their individual products and are best placed to provide responsible and helpful information on them. They are, however, restricted from doing so. The more soundly based information the food industry is allowed to provide on its products, the more likely it is that an informed market place will respond sensibly and appropriately.

Fifthly, a hobby horse of mine: could we all think about putting the word "enjoyment" back in to the food instruction manual. I know we should eat to live and not vice versa, but I also know that no food will ever be nutritious unless it is actually eaten. We don't have to martyr ourselves to the healthy eating cause, and grimace with every mouthful of "good for you" food we eat. Exercise and/or eating less can do wonders for any indulgences or aberrations we may be guilty of! The challenge is to make enjoyable food healthy. Or is it to make healthy food enjoyable? It probably does not matter. What does matter is that consumers are relieved of unnecessary anxiety over their eating habits by receiving realistic and practical advice in relation to their diets. For instance, food pyramids and models are fine in principle, but in practice can be idealistic, and certainly unhelpful to consumers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I strongly believe that the food industry should be allowed to get on with the job of producing and promoting food products with a minimum of regulatory intervention. I say this on the basis that the market place is, and should continue to be, the ultimate arbiter of industry behaviour and practice. I stress, however, that the industry accepts the need for appropriate guidelines on food messages to be agreed between the NFA and the industry. These guidelines should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the rapid advances in nutrition science and the nutritional roles that food products can play in the interests of national health. The days of the old snake-oil merchants are long gone!

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