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Healthy Choices: Shaping Consumer Behaviour in Nutrition

The food industry has some supersize communications challenges to chew over.

Obesity levels worldwide have more than doubled since 1980 and according to the World Health Organization there are at least 1.5 billion overweight people on the planet.

With one in every 10 adults now obese, it's a sobering thought that about three million deaths a year are directly attributable to excess weight. As a result, diet is an emotive issue and one that ranks high on the public health agenda – obesity is a global epidemic surpassing hunger as the chief nutrition problem, even in some developing countries.

Many developed countries have made healthy eating campaigns (such as 5 A DAY fruit and vegetable portions) a central plank of their public health programmes over the past decade. Yet obesity has remained stubbornly on the rise, putting greater pressure than ever on food companies in the context of both regulatory developments and public opinion. For nutrition communications to deliver, the campaign needs to be

tailored to meet the diverse needs of the consumer audience. Messages cannot be effective as part of a mass campaign that targets 'everyone'. Engaging consumers means understanding who you are targeting, what their barriers are and who their influencers are.

The onus is no longer simply with public health officials and nutritionists, food companies need to engage with consumers and build trust. In so doing, they can help change behaviour, allowing consumers to make informed choices about food content, healthy portion sizes and balanced diets.

The food industry has come a long way in its attempts to provide healthier choices for consumers, building credibility through responsible marketing, greater transparency and consistent messaging. The recent Deloitte report *An Appetite for Change: Food & Beverage 2012* confirmed that eight out of 10 leading food and beverage manufacturers recognise that health

is the principal external issue driving the industry as it moves forward. In line with this has been a move away from traditional consumer communications strategies towards a specific consumer health approach often incorporating scientific evidence and expert endorsement.

Community-centric approaches need to be at the heart of tackling the obesity epidemic. With greater insight into each specific community environment – the influencers, the communications networks, the relationships – it's possible to determine the most effective route for delivering clear and consistent messages aimed at motivating consumers to adopt long term healthier lifestyles.

Community and local influencers are also at the heart of a more holistic approach now being adopted by a number of markets, engaging consumers with communications strategies that centre on combining education on nutrition with physical activity. A great example is Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* campaign,



launched in 2010 to address the shocking situation that one in three children in the US is obese.

Let's Move has garnered universal support for its integrated approach. Backed by the first ever Task Force on childhood obesity and a record investment of \$10 billion, the campaign brings together high profile sports personalities and prominent academics in paediatrics, through to politicians leading the fight against childhood obesity in their local communities.

In April 2011, pop star Beyoncé released the single *Move Your Body* – a reworking of her hit *Get Me Bodied* – as part of the *Let's Move* campaign. The accompanying video featured a dance routine and healthy eating cues designed to promote a healthier lifestyle to kids. As YouTube hits for Beyoncé's video topped nearly 4m in its first week, it's clear that the US has devised an inspired strategy, delivering clear and consistent messages via two of the most influential routes for engaging kids: a pop star involvement with a message delivered through dance and music.

It's also important to look at the targeting for *Let's Move*. Research indicates that a child's eating patterns are formed by the time they reach 12/13 years old, after which it is increasingly difficult to bring about changes in attitudes and behaviour. Initiatives targeted at younger children and their parents are therefore fundamental in helping to establish healthy lifestyle habits.

Meanwhile, in the EU some three million children are thought to be obese, contributing to a total obesity bill of up to eight per cent of EU GDP per year. Several pan-European and national campaigns/roadshows have been launched as a result of WHO and European Commission pressure.

Slogans like *Eat it, Drink, Move It* target children and parents, clearly making the link between diet and physical activity.

Ireland's successful *Food Dudes* programme has focused on peer-modeling in order to get children interested in eating fruit and vegetables. In Germany, the nutrition and health ministries developed a national action plan - the *IN FORM* initiative - to support some 35 projects including the establishment of centres of physical activity to promote healthier lifestyles and balanced diets for children, as well as trying to address socio-economic health inequalities. The *5 al día* campaign in Spain, launched in 2000, provides a great example of public-private partnerships and its organising association encompasses more than 100 members. Other countries, such as Italy, have focused on educational programmes for schools to improve pupils' dietary knowledge and help them make better food choices.

In Brussels, food and drink, retail, catering and advertising industries work closely together with policy-makers, consumer organisations and health NGOs to pool best practice and develop appropriate guidelines that encourage healthy eating. Multi-stakeholder projects, such as the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity & Health launched by the European Commission, and the *EATWELL* evaluation programme, are based on the premise that close cooperation on policy development between all stakeholders, particularly the industry, can help identify the right tools to positively influence consumer food choice.

Despite industry voluntary efforts and self-regulation initiatives in product reformulation; national health

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ministries' marketing campaigns on healthy choices; and, educational campaigns by the food and drink industry, EU regulators still seem intent on introducing more stringent regulation on food labelling and marketing communications and are set to clamp down harder on misleading nutritional claims.

We recognise that nutrition communication is a complex science - just as industry collaborates with retailers, government, consumer and professional groups to develop effective communications strategies - so do we. At Weber Shandwick we draw upon the diverse backgrounds of our teams in consumer, public health, healthcare, food safety, corporate and public affairs working in partnership to address the needs of our food and nutrition clients helping them navigate the crossroads facing the industry.