

## ***Life Cereal Lessons***

***by Hank Cardello***

The proposed Harkin-Murkowski amendment to update the nutrition standards in America's public schools is inappropriately linked to the farm bill now pending in the Senate. Grafting school nutrition onto the bill, though it reads beautifully in all the senate-office press releases, is a disservice to consumers and to the same food and beverage industry partners who approve the amendment.

Of course, as Senator Murkowski's press releases make clear, prominent leaders of the food industry stand behind this amendment, it's an easy political win for them, buying the industry and the government another three years to bring something to the table. But let's be careful of cupcakes offered by a Nanny State just interested in satiating the nation's hunger for solutions to the obesity issue.

Left to their own conscience and profit-driven devices, many of the world's giant food corporations have been silently leading a new charge to improve the nutritional profile of some of our favorite foods and changing their product portfolios to include healthier options. For instance, take a look at Coca-Cola, a company prominently invoked in this debate. The friendly red can, once the singular symbol of a company veritably promiscuous in its marketing campaign which depicted people wanting to "buy the world a Coke and keep it company", now shares a corporate parent and vies for vending machine and shelf space with its sibling products Coca-Cola Zero and Vitaminwater which admonish people to "hydrate responsibly."

The un-marketing of health food is such an irony. Industry leaders have been lured into playing games with smoke and mirrors to address the current firestorm over obesity when the reality is their actions speak far louder than any words. While they are getting very smart about how to improve the nutritional content of some of our favorite foods and drinks, the food and beverage industry has learned not to make this a marketing differential.

When McDonald's launched its McLean Deluxe burger in the 1990s, indeed for having introduced salads and skinless chicken, their franchisees went up in arms in defense of the iconic and classically unhealthy burger and Wall Street followed suit, with some financial analysts staying away from McDonalds, in effect punishing the company for seeming to abandon its core value of providing "delicious" food in favor of more "nutritious" food.

So, smart marketers have learned the lesson of Life Cereal and don't tell Mikey what's good for him.

Before anyone knows it, McDonalds will have completely changed its oil, frying all the food in a trans fat-free brand that offers the same taste as the brand that has provided McDonald's fries their signature flavor all these years. The company issued corporate communications to this effect last year but you can bet we won't be seeing any commercials about the healthier fries. That would scare away the customers and investors.

Corporate commitment to health goes beyond product enhancements. In the area of weight management, Unilever is developing food products that can reduce hunger pangs between meals. The company has a

Nutrition Enhancement Program which takes World Health Organization dietary guidelines and translates them into benchmarks for key nutrients. Over the past three years, Unilever has put more than 19,000 of its recipes through this nutrition profiling model, which resulted in the near-silent transformation of their product line. The company eliminated 15,000 tons of trans-fats, 10,000 tons of saturated fats, 17,000 tons of sugar and 2,000 tons of salt from their brands.

Over 490 billion Oreo Cookies have been consumed since Nabisco introduced them in 1912. For over a year now, the company has baked these without trans fats and sales have not suffered. They have also introduced Organic Oreos, but despite the chemical-free flour and sweeteners, the nutritional profile is basically the same. So, this is a bit of smoke and mirrors at play. The real service Nabisco has offered is in its packaging: selling 100 Calorie packs to help with portion control.

General Mills lives its commitment to healthy customers by incenting management through a corporate bonus structure tied to the development of healthier products. We'd never know it, because there is no advertising campaign to tell us, but General Mills has more than 100 products with 100 or fewer calories per serving.

Simply stated: the food and beverage industries have to improve their products because if they don't they will kill off their heavy users. They just can't talk about what they're doing because people want what's good, not what's good for them. So, while the industry is making legitimately healthy moves, the only credit they can get is the bogus glory of their name on a government feel-good press release.

The Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, brought in 2006 by this same bi-partisan team of Harkin-Murkowski, was a good start so let's consider that a snack to tide the issue over and see the government hold off on legislation reform until there is a real meal on the table. And meantime, let's eat cake. It's lower in fat and calories than it used to be, Nabisco will sell it to you in a reasonable portion size, or if you bake one at home you can always add your own vegetable puree.

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