How the Food Industry is Joining in the Fight Against Obesity

As the nation faces up to the growing obesity epidemic, a variety of players are stepping forward to focus on the delivery of healthful nutritious food at reasonable prices. Key players in the food and restaurant industry are doing their part to shape the food environment and help consumers make smarter choices, especially at young ages when lifelong habits and impressions are molded. They say they are showing that helping each customer make informed healthy choices more easily is a simple yet powerful tool to help combat obesity.

McDonald’s, a leader in the fast food industry, pledged in 2011 to offer improved food choices in its restaurants. In September 2012, McDonald’s released a nutrition progress report outlining the steps it took to innovate their menu and reduce sodium. Since September 2012, McDonald’s USA restaurants have listed calorie information on restaurant and drive-thru menu boards nationwide, ahead of final federal regulations being released. McDonald’s USA Happy Meals now automatically includes produce and the option of fat-free chocolate milk or 1 percent low-fat white milk. All of McDonald’s USA’s national Happy Meal television ads since the beginning of 2013 include a nutrition or active lifestyle message.

In 2006, McDonald’s USA was among the first companies to join the Better Business Bureau’s Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, pledging to only advertise Happy Meals that meet specified nutrition criteria in national advertising primarily directed to children.

McDonald’s USA is committed to reducing sodium by an average of 15 percent across its national menu of food choices by 2015 and reducing added sugars, saturated fat and calories by 2020.

The National Restaurant Association also is helping customers make informed choices. The group has a membership of 980,000 restaurants spanning the gamut from casual to fine dining. Joan McGlockton, vice president of the restaurant association, stressed that as customers demand healthier options, restaurants are focusing on meeting those desires. According to McGlockton:

- 86 percent of adults say restaurants offer more healthy options now than they did two years ago.
- 71 percent of adults say they are trying to eat healthier at restaurants now than they did two years ago.
- In 2013, “healthful kids’ meals” are the number 3 food trend. The concept also ranked in the top 10 of the National Restaurant Association’s “What’s Hot in 2013” chef survey.

Given this reality, the association recently launched a KidsLiveWell Program, which puts a spotlight on restaurants that are offering more healthful kids’ meals. In order to qualify, the restaurants must provide foods that meet the 2010 USDA dietary guidelines. Joining this program is strictly voluntary, but in two years, 41,000 restaurant locations and 140 restaurant brands have chosen to participate.

It’s not just restaurants that are working to provide more healthful foods. Kraft Foods is working to do that through these voluntary policies:

- Only marketing to children under strict conditions, such as not placing ads in schools;
- Supporting active lifestyle initiatives; and
- Making food labels easier to read and understand.

The actions of these companies have some common themes. First, industry groups believe food labeling is a simple but powerful tool. The further expansion of food labeling may present common ground for policymakers and industry representatives. Several of the initiatives target children in an effort to help establish good eating habits. On that same track, responsible marketing may be another common ground.

RESOURCES

1. Email correspondence with Tara Handy, Harlan Levy, Mariam Valencia-Bedrosian and Heidi Glunz, McDonald’s USA Global Government and Public Affairs, on July 29 and 31 2013.
3. Email correspondence with Joan McGlockton, vice president of the National Restaurant Association on July 31.