The Food Industry: Promoting Public Health

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The Bell Institute, formed in 1998, symbolizes General Mills' vision for health and nutrition—of creating a world in which healthy eating is easy. The Bell Institute is an interdisciplinary group of scientists committed to providing healthy food solutions without taste or convenience compromised. Disciplines represented include mammalian molecular biology, food-process engineering, food-product development, physical chemistry, nutrition science, dietetics, law, food science, epidemiology, and chemistry.

The food industry is key in the integration of agriculture and medicine, through its role in producing and marketing healthy foods and its role in enhancing the public health. The role of the food industry in public health goes back at least 50 years to the Food and Nutrition Board's national policy for enrichment of flour. Today the industry plays a significant role in funding health and nutritional research, in educating health professionals and consumers, and in forming nutrition policy.

General Mills and Public Health

The Bell Institute and General Mills are very involved in promoting public health through education both directly and indirectly. Direct communication is via messages on consumer packages, through trade promotion in grocery stores and other retail outlets, in advertising and in public relations. Indirect communication focuses on policymakers and implementers, government agencies, health professionals and educators, and research scientists.

Since its integration with Pillsbury in November of 2001, General Mills has been the number-one purchaser of oats and wheat and the biggest supplier of whole-grain cereals in the United States. Because of this significant stake in whole grain, General Mills has funded between $2 million and $3 million dollars in epidemiology and clinical research on the association of whole grains

with prevention of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Results of collaborative research with the United States Department of Agriculture on dietary intake showed that only 8% of Americans consume three servings of whole grains per day, which is the recommended intake level.

In 1998, General Mills initiated the first authoritative health claim that was authorized in the new Food and Drug Administration Modernization Act. That claim allowed General Mills and other manufacturers to label food products saying, "In the context of a low fat diet, whole grain foods like (fill in the blank), reduced the risk of heart disease and some cancers." We selected Cheerios as the initial product to display that wording.

The benefits of whole grains were directly communicated to consumers by placing the health claim in banners on our products, in advertising, and through public relations, which reached 20 million consumers via TV, radio, and print. Indirect communication focused on educating health professionals. When the Dietary Guidelines for Americans mentioned whole grains explicitly for the first time in 2000, we produced a kit to teach health professionals about the underlying science.

The Bell Institute has a speaker bureau available to health professional groups, usually at state meetings around the nation. Speakers are provided on requested topics to health-professional groups, with speaker fees and expenses paid, so that those health professionals can learn about public-health initiatives.

Calcium

In 1997, General Mills started fortifying children's cereals with 10% DV of calcium. This decision was based on assessment of scientific research on dietary intake. Cereal is a logical vehicle to deliver calcium because it is so widely consumed by American children, and because it can be supplied in a bio-available form. Market research found that consumers widely supported calcium fortification. Follow-up research indicates that they continue to appreciate this addition.

Prior to this fortification, we determined that significant numbers of children did not have adequate intake levels of calcium. Research showed that mothers understand that calcium is significant for themselves, but they have low awareness of calcium's importance during childhood bone-forming years. They think that their children get enough calcium, when, in reality, significant numbers do not. Mothers don't know much about their children's calcium needs, nor how to achieve adequate intakes.

We offered education about calcium on our cereal boxes and placed a "button" there showing that extra calcium is supplied. Also, we published advertisements promoting the fortification. Because it takes at least six messages from various sources in order to penetrate consumers' awareness, advertisements and cereal-box messages have become important in the overall scheme of nutrition education.

General Mills also partnered with the National Osteoporosis Association to create educational materials that were distributed to health professionals on cereals as a source of calcium in the diet. The brochure discussed the importance of peak bone mass, regular physical activity, calcium during pregnancy, recommended intake levels, and food sources of calcium.

Folic acid

Folic acid has been mentioned by several other speakers. Our enrichment policy has been a successful public-health initiative. Each year about 2,500 babies are born with *spina bifida* or other forms of neural tube defects. Since folic-acid enrichment was initiated, there has been a 19% reduction in neural tube defects. Recently, General Mills partnered with the March of Dimes to produce teaching material on folic acid for use by WIC professionals in patient education. The handout for participants and the brochure for professionals give a brief background of the importance of folic acid and provides a teaching outline via facilitated group discussion. This is a technique that has been shown to promote behavior change. It's not perfect, but it absolutely is advantageous in encouraging people to change behavior over the traditional method of telling people what they should do.

Cholesterol

The last example of public-health communication is a kit on the recently revised national cholesterol-education program and American Heart Association dietary guidelines. The Bell Institute worked with two health professional organizations, the Preventive Cardiology Nurses Association and the American Association of Cardiovascular Pulmonary Rehabilitation. We found that they knew little about nutrition and that they lacked teaching tools. We addressed these needs by developing the kit that has now been distributed to every member of these organizations. A Web site was developed for health professionals who can sign on and then order materials or other support for teaching public-health issues.

Summary

The food industry provides a key link between agriculture and health, and is an important contributor to public health. Direct and indirect communications are necessary in order to reach consumers with public-health messages. The potential is enormous for benefit through reaching a broad spectrum of Americans with well designed public/private partnerships. I applaud the organizers of this conference because it symbolizes that kind of partnership. We must work to develop and maintain trust among the government officials, healthcare professionals, and food-industry representatives in order to maximize positive public-health messages.