

Chew On This, Big Brother ***by Hank Cardello***

This past year in food smelled a lot like Orwell's *1984* to me and it left a bad taste in the mouths of the food industry and their consumers. The hasty, overly-politicized process by which trans fats were banned in New York, Philadelphia and other cities often required substitutes that were higher in saturated fats. Taxes on soft drinks were proposed as part of a "Dump Soda" campaign against Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. Even the old celebratory feel good snack, the cupcake, was vilified for contributing to rising student obesity rates. The food industry has been chasing its shadow at the behest of the government and allowing pundits to stir the pot, rather than taking the rightful lead on the obesity issue.

Government oversight does not guarantee that the right actions will be taken. While exorcising trans fats from frying and baking oils is a good thing, it does nothing to attack the obesity crisis. A fat is a fat. The calories are still the same. Eating fries devoid of trans fats won't shrink anyone's waistline. Basically the regulators pursue a piecemeal approach that often lacks the pragmatism to solving the problem rather than fully engaging all constituents (including the food industry and the consumer).

What we need today is the *right* kind of government involvement. Not meddling, but a constructive partnership that outlines the priority issues to resolve, while allowing business the flexibility to design the solutions. For this to happen, two immediate changes in the government-food business relationship must occur:

Government must back off its campaign to penalize and regulate individual foods they declare as "bad." Eliminating or taxing the most popular foods enjoyed by Americans is not the way to go. Improving them or the way in which they are marketed is. Over-regulation is punitive and regressive, and leaves the door open for government to ban anything it deems offensive. Next year: ice cream?

As quid pro quo, the food industry must take stewardship of the issue and commit to practices more beneficial to the well being of their consumers. Not advertising to children under 12 was a good start; now they must extend that effort across all facets of the marketing mix (such as healthier product formulations; right-sized packages; controlled access to high calorie versions). They must aggressively alter their outdated model from simply selling as much product possible to taking responsibility for their customers' well being.

This is not charity. It is simply good business. Keep your customers healthy and vibrant and they'll keep coming back for seconds year after year. Marketing 101: it's easier to keep an existing customer than going out to find new ones. So if industry doesn't want to change its philosophy out of altruism, then it should do so out of greed. It just makes good business sense.

Unlike Orwell's social parodies, there is cause for hope. In the New Food Society, government and the food industry would partner for the consumer's well-being based on three cornerstone tenets:

“Reprogram.” In exchange for government granting Amnesty to accused “bad” products, the food concerns must “reprogram” how such foods are formulated by the middle of the next decade. Many cost saving changes have been made over the years – even to icon brands – that are hardly detectable to the consumer. New technologies are emerging that can make even the most challenging products tastier and healthier. Lower calorie French fries? Cholesterol-lowering burgers? 8 oz. drinks that fill you up for hours? It’s all doable and researchers are working on solutions today. This Stealth Health approach is good for both industry and the consumer: the food guys get to continue selling their biggest sellers and the consumer eats healthier versions of foods they love without compromising on taste.

Ban “DoubleSpeak.” Americans consume too many calories for their sedentary lifestyles. Period. Rather than protracted lip service to solve the obesity crisis, government should simply advance a blanket demand that the food concerns commit to reducing calories within a set period of time. An aggressive but attainable target would be an average 10% reduction across a company’s portfolio within the next 5 years. Under the new model, government stays out of the details and permits the food industry to determine which products it can successfully modify, increase marketing support for, introduce or acquire. At the same time, industry is on-the-hook to meet a deadline.

Hold the “Ministry of Plenty” to a higher standard. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has recently appointed a new Food Czar to oversee the development of the 2010 dietary guidelines, including the counterintuitive Food Pyramid (why are the “worst” foods at the apex?). This presents a golden opportunity to “think outside the triangle” and eliminate politicized good-bad product characterizations once and for all. Rather, should we not receive learned advice from the nutrition gurus regarding *when, where and how* we should choose certain foods and beverages, rather than condemning them? There is a time and place for all foods. This is the counsel that will better serve the public.

Failure to adopt such measures will only perpetuate our losing battle of the bulge. Now is not the time to transfer decision making into the hands of those who do not fully appreciate the complex dynamics and relationship between food purveyors and their customers. Without change, the outlook is Orwellian: systematic eradication of those foods we enjoy the most.

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