

Reading between the Lines

Understanding Food Industry Responses to Concerns about Nutrition

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All eyes seem to be turning to food these days. Cities around the country, following New York's lead, are considering banning trans fats. School districts are removing junk food. Celebrity chefs are trying to improve what comes out of the school lunch room. The Federal Trade Commission and the Institute of Medicine are investigating food and beverage company marketing practices targeting children. Food companies are feeling the heat.

Concerned about rising rates of diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases, public health advocates are demanding change. And the food and beverage industry is responding. Periodic news flurries report company promises to limit advertising to children and improve the nutritional quality of their products. Wendy's promised to remove trans fats. Kraft promised to stop advertising certain products to children under 11. Soda companies promised not to sell soda in elementary and middle schools. The response has been so marked, in fact, that an editorial in *Advertising Age* called on the food industry to stop acquiescing to critics' demands and instead fight back.¹

Consider one example. In September 2006 Frito-Lay, a division of PepsiCo, announced it will introduce a new line of "baked, vitamin-fortified fruit and vegetable chips" to sell in the produce aisle.² This seems like a positive step—after all, the more options there are for fruits and vegetables, the more chances people will have to get their recommended daily servings. But *Advertising Age* reports that the new products "are intended...to improve Frito's image as critics rally against obesity-causing fatty foods like its mainstay potato and tortilla chips."³

How should advocates interpret Frito-Lay's action? When a food or beverage company does something that might be good for health, should public health groups congratulate them publicly? If not, why not? What do these promises mean? When companies' words don't match their deeds the answers are not always clear.

This Framing Brief describes how food and beverage companies are reacting to pressure from public health groups and explores the implications for framing public health's responses to those actions.

HOW ARE FOOD COMPANIES RESPONDING TO CONCERNS ABOUT NUTRITION?

In an ideal world food companies would be able to increase profits and improve health at the same time. Some companies may want to do this, and we want them to succeed. But there is an inherent tension between food and beverage companies profiting from business as usual and the new concerns about health.

The *Wall Street Journal* confronted this tension in an interview with the CEO of McDonald's.

The Wall Street Journal: You've made it a priority to put a big emphasis on health and nutrition both in the menu and in the marketing. Is the message compatible with burgers and french fries and milkshakes?

Jim Skinner, CEO of McDonald's: What I put an emphasis on is what we call balanced, active lifestyles. When you look at the kinds of choices we've provided, we've done more work here than probably any other restaurant company in trying to be part of the solution. We are not going to solve the world's obesity problem. But what we can do is be productive and be part of the solution.

We are not prescribing what people should eat. I don't say to you: "Get up in the morning, and if you don't eat apple slices you're going to have a problem." We have to provide choices so that you say, "I can go there because there's a choice that makes me feel good." But we have to remember who we are. We were a hamburger company. That's the way we started.⁴

Jim Skinner's answer reveals several themes, or frames, that appear regularly in industry responses to concerns about health. Frames are the conceptual underpinning for how people understand what they see and hear. Different frames will suggest different interpretations, different values, and different roles for individuals or government in solving problems. Philip Morris provides us with a good example of how a corporation tries to frame public thinking. In an internal company presentation in 1993,

Philip Morris outlined its strategy to eliminate discussion of health and safety around cigarettes by changing the focus of—we would say reframe—the issue: "Cigarette tax become[s] an issue of fairness and effective tax policy. Cigarette marketing is an issue of freedom of commercial speech. Environmental tobacco smoke becomes an issue of accommodation. Cigarette-related fires become an issue of prudent fire safety programs. And so on."⁵

Food and beverage companies also want to frame how the public views them. The frames from food and beverage companies emphasize personal responsibility over environmental factors, try to shift attention to exercise rather than food, and highlight choice. We can see each of these frames, and a few more, in the statement from Skinner.

Balance, or shifting from an emphasis on food to an emphasis on activity. The first thing Skinner says in response to *The Wall Street Journal* is that he puts an emphasis on "balanced, active lifestyles." One example of this is the recent move by McDonald's to trim down Ronald McDonald and anoint him "ambassador for an active, balanced lifestyle"⁶ to encourage kids to exercise. Focusing on physical activity allows the company to distract attention from the content of its food and mar-

keting. McDonald's also keeps the spotlight on physical activity by sponsoring activities like snowboarding and featuring snowboard star Crispin Lipscomb in TV ads targeting kids.

In a similar vein, PepsiCo and Kraft sponsor fitness programs to help members of the School Food Service Association (school lunch workers) lose weight and become better role models.⁷ Sponsorships are a mechanism for keeping the company associated with activity

rather than its products or other marketing.

Choice implies personal responsibility. When it comes to choice, Skinner says, "We are not prescribing what people should eat. I don't say to you: 'Get up in the morning, and if you don't eat apple slices you're going to have a problem.' We have to provide choices so that you say, 'I can go there because there's a choice that makes me feel good.'"

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Highlighting choice is a key framing tactic. Providing consumers with choice absolves companies of responsibility for what those choices are, which is reasonable up to a point. After all, McDonald's doesn't force people to buy hamburgers instead of salads, as Skinner notes. Choice is hard to argue against since 1) Americans value it highly, and 2) it is reasonable to expect individuals to make better choices when it comes to eating and health.

The emphasis on choice reinforces the common frame in American culture that individuals are solely responsible for their own health. Choice links directly to personal responsibility. Personal responsibility is extremely important, but decisions are always made in a context. Focusing on choice obscures the context.

HOW ARE FOOD AND BEVERAGE COMPANIES COMMUNICATING THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT NUTRITION?

When Philip Morris wants to shift public debate away from the health and safety of cigarettes toward fairness, freedom, and accommodation, the company's strategy is executed using "third parties like restaurant owners and hospitality organizations"⁸ and others who may not appear to be funded by, or have a direct connection to, the company. Food and beverage companies are using similar strategies to shift public debate away from the content of food and marketing practices to balance and choice.

Being a Good Corporate Citizen by Marketing Goodwill

In some contexts, industry may downplay its profit motive and highlight its role as a "good corporate citizen." Coca-Cola's \$1 million donation to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentists in 2003 is one example;⁹ McDonald's \$2 million commitment to fund the new McDonald's Center for Type 2 Diabetes and Obesity at The Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California is another.¹⁰

Funding scientific research is new for McDonald's, but it is a tactic that has been used by other industries,

including the tobacco industry. The company is seeking to burnish its image as a partner in helping to solve the problem of Type 2 Diabetes, while at the same time serving to "fend off high-profile accusations that the company is partly to blame for the 16% of US children and adolescents who are overweight or obese."¹¹

Food and beverage companies tout these contributions to remind the public and lawmakers that they are part of the solution, another theme repeated by McDonald's CEO Skinner. The "good work" becomes a marketing opportunity. Promoting good works is a method used by many industry organizations across many different fields to deflect attention from their not-so-good works.

For example, in May 2006 when major beverage companies, including Coca-Cola Co., PepsiCo, and Cadbury-Schweppes, declared that by 2009 they would no longer sell sodas in the nation's elementary and middle schools they also announced a \$10 million advertising campaign to herald their new policy and emphasize the healthy drinks, including water and milk, which will continue to be sold in schools. Why invest so much money in this ad campaign? According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "the trick for beverage companies is to look like they are doing the right

thing for kids—without implying that their core products are bad for children or contributing to the country's obesity epidemic."¹²

Companies like Altria, which owns both Kraft and Philip Morris, have a long history of launching campaigns that appear to be about improving health, but are really efforts to gain goodwill by demonstrating corporate responsibility. The campaign's true purpose, stated in company documents, is to distract

or thwart public health efforts and, at the same time, make the company look reasonable and responsible. One document from Philip Morris notes that the tobacco company's corporate sponsorships are intended to "create goodwill that benefits PM by influencing public opinion, which in turn is used by us to influence political opinion/action."¹³

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Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Creating Innocence by Association

Corporations have a long history of diffusing criticism by creating associations with other groups that work squarely for the public good. This is known as “innocence by association.” It is a well-known tactic of tobacco companies and now food companies are doing it too. One example comes from the American Dietetic Association (ADA), the major group representing professional dietitians, which partners with food companies like General Mills and McDonald’s. The partnerships benefit the companies, but in some advocates’ eyes, diminish the credibility of the ADA. “It makes no sense for an organization of nutrition professionals to have such a close association with McDonald’s when we know that McDonald’s invented super-sizing and continues to market large portions of calorie-dense, low-nutrition foods,” says Leslie Mikkelsen, program manager at Prevention Institute and a registered dietitian. “As dietitians, it’s important that our professional association maintain independence from specific companies so we can objectively assess their practices.”

The question of independence is important because the public relies on nonprofit public health organizations for guidance, as do policy makers. Close association with food companies may inhibit a public health organization from taking a strong stand to support approaches to prevention that go beyond providing information to improving food environments for whole communities.

For example, the ADA has collaborated with food, beverage, and marketing groups to form the American Council for Fitness & Nutrition, whose motto is “A healthy balance for life.” The executive board members all come from industry: the American Beverage Association, Campbell Soup Co., Coca-Cola Co., General Mills, Inc., Grocery Manufacturers of America, The Hershey Co., HJ Heinz Co., JM Smucker Co., Kellogg Co., Kraft Foods Inc., Masterfoods USA, PepsiCo, Inc., Sara Lee Corp., and Unilever, Inc.

According to its web site (www.acfn.org), this nonprofit Council is working to find solutions to the obesity epidemic in the US, providing information and

encouraging collaboration to tackle the problem of overweight. The site emphasizes balance—echoing Skinner’s frame—and highlights the personal actions people can take to improve their health. While the information on the web site is in keeping with many public health recommendations, it focuses on raising awareness and changing personal behavior rather than the many policy and environmental approaches to the problem.

By working with the ADA through the American Council for Fitness & Nutrition, companies can show that they are partners in trying to solve this public health problem. But by maintaining a focus on the individual’s responsibility for the problem of overweight, the food and beverage companies shift attention away from their own products and practices. Furthermore, voluntary actions companies take may forestall policy changes the public health community seeks but the food and beverage companies want to avoid.

Attacking Their Critics

Two high-profile food industry critics, professor Marion Nestle and journalist Eric Schlosser, have been at the receiving end of food industry attacks.

- While publicizing her book, *Food Politics*, Nestle received a letter from a law firm representing the Sugar Association, Inc., a group of 15 companies whose mission is “to promote the consumption of sugar as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle through the use of sound science and research.”¹⁴ The letter accused professor Nestle of making “numerous false, misleading, disparaging, and defamatory statements about sugar” and threatened legal action if she didn’t stop.¹⁵ Professor Nestle was not intimidated by the Sugar Association and continues to promote her research on how the food industry influences nutrition and health.
- When the movie version of Eric Schlosser’s book, *Fast Food Nation* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, members of the food industry took both direct and indirect action. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, McDonald’s sent a memo to its franchisees stating that it “was considering dispatching what it called a ‘truth squad’ to get out the message that McDonald’s offers

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a healthy menu and provides good jobs as part of a full-scale media campaign to ‘set the record straight.’”¹⁶ Executives from McDonald’s Corporation also showed up at talks that Schlosser gave at local schools, to challenge the presentations.¹⁷

Food and beverage companies are sensitive to criticism. They work hard to keep a positive image of themselves foremost in the minds of the public, to sell products, and in the minds of lawmakers, to maintain a favorable policy environment. So, rather than engage in a fight with a critic directly, many companies form trade associations to take the heat—and dish it out—for them. One of these groups is the American Beverage Association, formerly the National Soft Drink Association; another is the Sugar Association, Inc., which led the charge against Nestle.

The Center for Consumer Freedom is a similar sort of organization in that it is supported by many food companies and restaurant associations. Richard Berman, a lobbyist for the food and beverage industry, founded the Center for Consumer Freedom (originally the Guest Choice Network) with \$500,000 from Philip Morris. The Center for Consumer Freedom works to discredit scientists and organizations working to protect the public’s health in order to improve the business environment for food and beverage companies.¹⁸ Among the favored targets of the Center for Consumer Freedom are Nestle, professor Kelly Brownell and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

By using front groups, food industry organizations can make it appear that there is “grass roots” public opposition to things like restricting food and beverage marketing targeting children, rather than an organized, well-funded corporate campaign to discredit public health advocates. This tactic—the fake grass roots campaign—is known as “using astro turf.”

Reformulating Products

Companies are also responding to critics by reformulating products and changing marketing practices. Ultimately, this will be a prominent strategy for the food and beverage industry if it truly wants to remain profitable and contribute to health at the same time.

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Unfortunately, international research shows that the majority of companies are not attempting to reformulate their products.¹⁹ Some are trying, though many industry efforts to date seem designed to deflect criticism rather than turn healthy foods into profit centers.

At the request of the World Health Organization, researchers investigated whether McDonald’s and Kraft

Foods were keeping their promises to change products and practices to protect health.²⁰ While both companies had made some changes, the researchers concluded that the food producers were also undermining those efforts. McDonald’s introduced salads—a step in the right direction certainly—but some salads and dressings have more calories from fat than the hamburgers. And at the same time McDonald’s put salads on the menu it also added new chicken sandwiches high in

calories, fat, and sodium. It still puts toys in Happy Meals. Kraft reformulated some of its “Lunchables” but “even when reformulated the product is still nutritionally questionable,” the researchers concluded.²¹

Food companies like General Mills have introduced whole grain cereals, but so far the reformulations have been disappointing. How much of an improvement is whole grain Cocoa Puffs if the first ingredient remains sugar? Many companies’ “better for you” or “healthier” products may have marginally fewer sugars or salts than the original product, or have the same amount of sugars, salts, and fats but have an added vitamin. “Healthier” does not necessarily mean “healthy.”

Some of the reformulations appear to be responsive to consumer demand but may serve other purposes. *Advertising Age* explains why Kraft and others create new products to capitalize on trends like “low carb” even though they know the trends fade in about two years, well before the products will become profitable. In a statement to St. Joseph’s University marketing professor John Stanton, a food industry executive explains: “In the long run, it will be cheaper to offer those items to consumers even if they don’t make money than to pay lawsuits for not giving consumers choices.”²² In what will appear to the public as a responsive effort to create low-carb foods, the company is really trying to

indemnify itself against potentially expensive jury verdicts in the future.

Of course, food and beverage companies' efforts to reformulate products and practices have just begun, and with time some may benefit the public's health. But with no government agency charged with monitoring the effects, the public doesn't know if the companies are doing what they say they will and whether the actions make a difference.²³

FRAMING PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACHES TO NUTRITION IN LIGHT OF INDUSTRY ACTIONS

So, back to our question: How should public health groups respond when food and beverage companies appear to be making a change for the better? The answer is: It depends. It depends on what the industry has said or done. And, it depends on your organization's overall strategy.

It depends on the industry action. The circumstances of the food and beverage industry's words and actions will be different in different places and times. We've outlined in this *Framing Brief* the patterns in what companies say and do in response to concerns about health, but any company's specific action or comment will happen in a particular context. The Sugar Association sending a threatening letter to professor Marion Nestle is different than CEO Jim Skinner talking with *The Wall Street Journal* which are both different than PepsiCo sponsoring an exercise program for school food service workers. Because each new action will happen in a new context, the action will have to be assessed and reassessed so you and/or your organization can determine whether and how to respond.

It depends on your overall strategy. Your organization's overall goals and objectives, its overall strategy, and the values underlying that overall strategy, should dictate whether and how you respond. Responses may range from a simple letter to the editor of a newspaper or a whole campaign to change a corporate practice. Always respond on your own terms. That means your response will be anchored in your organization's overall strategy and your core values.

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Your overall strategy describes the change your organization is seeking in the world, including what you want changed and how you are going about it. For many community-based organizations concerned about preventing chronic disease, the overall strategy is about creating healthier food environments and more opportunities for physical activity, often by creating or changing local laws and policies.

Steps for Developing Responses to the Food and Beverage Industry

At times it may be enough just to be aware of industry actions so you can understand their impact on the food and activity environments in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. At other times your organization may want to join the chorus that is demanding more from the food and beverage industry. When you are developing a response, use these steps to guide your thinking.

- 1. Identify the frame being used by the industry.** Based on the patterns we've seen across issues, we expect that the industry frames will emphasize freedom, choice, and personal responsibility, linked to the circumstances at hand. They are likely to shift the debate from food or marketing to physical activity and balance. Ask: How is the industry's frame being expressed in this instance?
- 2. Identify the frame that you want to promote, irrespective of the industry actions.** That is, what frame promotes your organization's overall strategy? What are the values underlying that frame? Much of the time, community organizations' frames will emphasize shared responsibility for health because community-based organizations are working to improve people's choices and the environment in which they make those choices.

3. Articulate the messages that will communicate your frame. Be sure you can articulate the frame and the values clearly and simply, without using jargon. We suggest constructing a message using just a few sentences that have a statement of concern, a policy objective, and a values dimension. The message answers the questions: What's wrong? What should be done? And, why does it matter?

4. Be able to pivot from the industry’s frame to your frame. Assume the starting point in a reporter’s interview or another conversation is a statement reflecting the company’s viewpoint. Acknowledge the viewpoint but refocus—make a logical connection to—your frame. Typical food company frames distract from a public health approach to nutrition. Your response can refocus attention back to the need for healthy environments.

The objective of Steps 2 and 3 is to help you become fluent in talking about environmental changes to improve nutrition and activity. The companies’ products and marketing have created a toxic environment for health.²⁴ Now, many of their actions distract from paths to prevention that include improving those environments. Advocates will have to frame debate so the public and policy makers can see the importance of the settings and circumstances in which people make their health and eating decisions.

Public health advocates can do this by using frames that include values of shared responsibility, not just personal responsibility. While people can be expected to take responsibility for their health, they are not always in control of those choices. For example, parents should make good nutrition choices for their children. But parents don’t choose what is stocked in grocery stores. Parents don’t control pricing strategies that make 20 ounces of soda cheaper than 20 ounces of milk. Parents don’t decide whether a grocery store will be located in their neighborhood. Parents don’t spend more than \$1 million an hour, every hour, every day, on marketing to lure children to products that can shorten their lives, but the food and beverage industries do.²⁵ Personal responsibility matters, but so does the environment in which those decisions are made, and it is the industry and policy makers who support them who largely determine the nature of that environment.

The objective in Step 4 is not to counter an industry argument point-by-point. You may be able to do that, but you run the risk of reinforcing the company’s viewpoint rather than shifting the debate to reflect your own frame. And, especially if you are talking with a reporter, you don’t want the article to be a “he said-she said” that

focuses on the controversy between you and the company. The point of Step 4 is to move the conversation away from the industry’s frame to your frame. You can do that in a conversation or single interview, but ultimately it is a long-term framing battle between a public health perspective and a marketplace perspective.²⁶

To be ready to pivot from an industry statement, you need to know where you are pivoting from (Step 1) and where you are pivoting to (Steps 2 and 3). Industry representatives, like McDonald’s CEO Skinner, already do this. They pivot from the public health viewpoint back to their company’s viewpoint. So, Skinner says McDonald’s wants to be “part of the solution” and points to his support for “balanced lifestyles,” often in the form of physical activity programs. This is how industry representatives try to shift the focus from food and drink—in the case of *The Wall Street Journal* interview from “hamburgers and french fries and milkshakes”—to exercise and to the choices people make. If the conversation stays focused on exercise, balance, and choice, then the company may be absolved from responsibility.

But encouraging physical activity and healthy choices does not negate companies’ responsibility for producing and marketing products that harm health. Companies make choices, too. To refocus back onto the environment, advocates could ask, for example, why McDonald’s expends its marketing dollars promoting physical activity rather than marketing healthier options as aggressively as it markets unhealthy products. Or, ask why companies manufacture and market foods of inferior nutritional quality for children in the first place.²⁷ Pivot from an industry spokesperson’s statement about balance or physical activity by acknowledging it and then saying what you think the company could do next if it is serious about health.²⁸

Food and beverage companies go to great expense to get their perspectives heard. The positive publicity helps companies maintain that they are part of the solution to the problem of childhood nutrition, and not part of the problem. They take the public sentiment about these issues very seriously. Advocates should, too. If you think that supporting physical activity doesn’t

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absolve a company for its other practices that harm health, be able to explain why. If you're pleased with a company action, commend it—but if you are not pleased, say so. Say why it matters to you and why it matters to others. Collect examples from your work, your neighborhood, and the people you know to illustrate your points. Overall, stay focused on your goals so that together we can create environments in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and homes that foster healthy eating and active living.

For more on food industry practices in response to concerns about nutrition see Michele Simon's new book, *Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back*, New York: Nation's Books, 2006.

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