US food and drink industry takes steps towards healthier living

Under pressure from public agencies and consumers, manufacturers are helping to reduce diet-related diseases

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Teaching children about healthy eating and marketing responsibly are two of the measures taken by the US food and drink industry. Photograph: Franck Allais/Graphic

Gun violence in the US gets a lot of media attention, but the latest figures show that the average American diet is 13 times more likely to kill you than a bullet.

Diet-related diseases, such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease and many cancers, are responsible for one-third of premature deaths in the US. Not far behind are the numbers for Europe, where heart disease on its own accounts for 20% of all premature deaths.

Children are particularly vulnerable. The US Centres for Disease Control estimated that 1-in-3 US children born in the year 2000 will develop diabetes as a result of diet.

The statistics are grim and getting worse, but perhaps the saddest fact of all is that these conditions are largely preventable. While the science linking diet to disease is widely accepted, less clear is who is most responsible for improving food quality and changing dietary habits: industry, government or the individual.

For the food and beverage industry, which faces increasing pressure from public agencies and consumers to address the effects of their products, the challenge is how to make healthy products while maintaining healthy profits. Still, the industry has taken positive steps in several areas.

Improving nutritional quality

A number of companies are working to reformulate their products to gradually reduce levels of troublesome ingredients like saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, salt and sugar.

Consumer goods giant Unilever says it has been gradually reducing salt and saturated fat levels in its food products. As of last year, 25% of these products met recommended levels of these ingredients, according to the company's estimates.

Many have also developed niche products that reduce certain ingredients linked to disease; walk down a supermarket aisle to find examples such as Campbell's Healthy Request, a line of "heart healthy" soups that have reduced levels of saturated fat and cholesterol compared to its other soups.

Partnering with health organisations

To verify that products meet healthy dietary guidelines, food manufacturers will often team-up with independent health organisations. In the US, one of the most widely recognised certification programmes comes from the American Heart Association. Products that have passed this certification, which must be renewed annually, can display the association's heart check mark symbol on the label.

These types of certifications are becoming increasing popular. By the end of September this year, 945 products from 161 companies were enrolled in the programme – up 14% from the previous fiscal year, says Dennis Milne, a director of business relations at the association.

Promoting personal responsibility

Most large food makers have resisted government regulation, instead favouring

self-regulation and emphasising the personal responsibility of consumers to make their own choices about diet.

To assist with these choices, companies will typically offer healthy eating guides and other educational material on their websites. Kraft Foods even offers a complete online cookbook, featuring low calorie, low fat and low salt recipes.

Easy-to-read food labelling also helps consumers make informed choices. Starting next year, the UK will introduce a colour-coded system of package labelling that will show which foods are considered high, medium or low in nutritional quality. Most in the food industry have committed to comply with the scheme, although participation is still voluntary.

Another approach is to promote lifestyle changes, such as getting more exercise in conjunction with a healthy diet, to combat diseases like obesity. Working with the ministry of education in Turkey, Unilever created its Action at School programme that teaches the importance of exercise and has reached over 200,000 children.

Marketing responsibly

Marketing messages seen in food advertising strongly influence behaviour, especially among children who are forming eating habits that will last a lifetime. Many public health organisations have called for regulation of food advertising much like the restrictions placed on tobacco and alcohol marketing.

To get ahead of these regulations, most of the large food and beverage companies have developed their own set of marketing standards and taken a voluntary pledge to market responsibly to children.

In the UK, the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, an industry-led programme, offers guidelines and maintains a database of these pledges. The Yale Rudd Centre for Food Policy & Obesity keeps a similar database, where consumers and industry watchers can view these corporate commitments.

Calling for more government regulation

While the food industry can offer many positive examples, many outside the industry believe these won't stem the rise of diet-related diseases and health costs to treat those affected.

The topic was front and centre at a United Nations general assembly meeting

late last year that brought together heads of state, government ministers and experts in the field. Olivier De Schutter, a UN human rights expert, called for "taxing unhealthy food, regulating harmful marketing practices and standing up to the food industry."

"Voluntary guidelines are not enough," said De Schutter at the meeting. "It is unacceptable that when lives are at stake, we go no further than soft, promotional measures that ultimately rely on consumer choice, without addressing the supply side of the food chain."

A recent study by the Journal of the American Medical Association also concluded that government could play an important role in fighting obesity and other diet-related diseases. The study cited the success of restrictions on smoking, particularly in New York City where smoking rates have declined 35% over the past 10 years. In September this year, the New York City board of health approved a ban on the sale of sugary soft drinks in sizes over 16 ounces (0.47 litres), a major contributor to childhood obesity, hoping to see similar results.

Protecting against risk

Another push for companies to do more is coming from shareholders. In May this year, McDonald's shareholders voted on a proposal that would have required the company to assess its "policy responses to growing evidence of linkages between fast food and childhood obesity." Nearly 7% of shareholders voted in favour of the proposal, citing their concerns over the risk to long-term profitability and brand caused by the company's impact on children's health.

This level of shareholder response should be a warning call to the company, according to Dale Wannen, portfolio manager at Harrington Investments, a socially responsible investment advisory firm and one of the co-filers of the McDonald's shareholder proposal.

"A vote of 10% or more in favour of a shareholder proposal is something companies take pretty seriously, so 7% is absolutely a step in the right direction," he says. "It's about materiality. Is the destruction of our children's health material to McDonald's long-term shareholder value? I think anyone would say 'of course it is'."

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