A Little Common Sense Goes a Long Way

In those far-away days when I was at college studying bakery management, the course director, who taught us about “industrial relations,” used to observe that, when it came to human interactions and industrial relations, “common sense was the least common of the human senses.” I am reminded of those days as I sit in front of the keyboard contemplating the subject of diet and health; I have come to the conclusion that there is no difference between industrial relations problems and people pontificating about diet and health—in both cases, a little common sense would go a long way in identifying practical solutions for seemingly intractable problems.

Lost in Translation

In all human interactions, clear and effective communication is important; however, often the messages that are received by the listeners are different than those intended by the speaker. This is bad news for industrial relations when (usually) a common language is used. What is more, when it comes to diet and health, it appears that there are many different languages being used. This increases the challenge for all of us who give and receive messages regarding diet and health. Further complications arise because the concepts of diet and health are highly individualized and, as time passes, our dietary and health needs change. Add to this the various life-style factors and we have the most complicated set of relationships that I have ever encountered as a scientist.

The major challenge to effective communication is translating the generic messages generated by doctors and dieticians into specific messages that can be understood and used by individuals. Often, the recipients of the information don’t talk the same language as the senders, so individuals turn to “interpreters” for translation, such as the nontechnical media, and this is when common sense leaves the building. It’s not that I have anything against nontechnical media per se, but I am concerned with the potential impact that they can have on getting the wrong message to consumers. Actually, I also have the same concern about many of the agencies involved in the diet and health debate; my plea for a common-sense approach applies equally to them.

Salt

Let’s look at a few examples involving the cereal foods industry. First on the list has to be salt. As I start my tirade, let me state up front that I have not used discretionary salt at the table or for cooking for more than 25 years. This exclusion was not for any specific personal health reason, it was simply a matter of personal choice.

For those consumers with certain medical conditions, the need for reducing salt in the diet is not disputed. The campaign for reducing salt levels in the average U.K. diet has been going on since the 1980s, with a strong focus on the contribution (right or wrong) from bread and other cereals. The U.K. baking industry launched the message and has gradually reduced salt levels in its products. This action was purely voluntary. There was increasing pressure from U.K. government-backed sources in the late 1990s to make further changes and the bakers worked together to continue the process of gradual reduction. The gradual reductions were used to “educate” consumer palates to less salty bread. It has been acknowledged that U.K. bakers have made significant progress and salt levels in bread are now 30% lower than in the 1980s.

You might think that U.K. bakers deserve a pat on the back, but no, common sense leaves the building and the U.K. Food Standards Agency and its lobbyists want greater reductions. Therefore, a series of government-sponsored adverts is advising consumers to seek out reduced-salt breads because some bread products are “full of it”—salt that is. It’s the “name-and-shame” game. Not really a good way to retain the goodwill of U.K. bread bakers. My personal concern is that this approach to reducing salt intake by “demonizing” bread risks losing the positive health benefits of bread consumption, including the valuable contributions of calcium and fiber in the diet, especially in the case of whole grain breads. The risks of losing positive health benefits if people eat less will become even greater now that the mandatory fortification of bread with folic acid has been recommended in the United Kingdom.

Saturated Fat

Next in sight for the U.K. Food Standards Agency is saturated fat in baked goods. This is after the industry voluntarily eliminated trans fats from their products. In addition to wanting a reduction in saturated fats, the agency started talking about a reduction of 10% of calories in products as well. This is when things became confusing since replacing saturated fat with other fats is one thing; however, reducing calories as well is another, as any good bakery technologist will recognize. It will be interesting to see how the recent “consultation” might affect the eventual “targets” that will be set.

There are a lot of anomalies associated with the discussions on saturated fat. For example, “all-butter” and “chocolate” cakes and cookies will probably be exempt from the targets because the legal definitions of such products require the use of ingredients with saturated fats. Ironically, all-butter products are more

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popular than ever with consumers because butter is seen as “natural” with limited negative health implications. Confused? I am.

It is also evident that the manufacturers of cakes and cookies will not be allowed to make any “health” claims for their new healthier products with less saturated fat and 10% fewer calories since the levels of change involved do not meet the current E.U. guidelines for health claims: so, currently, no carrot on offer, but always the big stick available to “name and shame,” using government-sponsored advertising.

Negative Messages

By the time that all of this information hits the nontechnical press, the fun really starts. Now, a common breakfast comprised of a bowl of cereal, bacon, and toast is classified as the “killer meal of the day.” Too much salt from all three components, too much saturated fat from the bacon, and too much sugar in the cereal—collectively guaranteed to give you high blood pressure, strokes, heart disease, and (provided you live long enough), diabetes and obesity. The positive message of fiber from cereal products and the concept of eating only a small portion of bacon just never made it into the article.

This sensationalizing of negative facts related to diet and health is not confined to the nontechnical press. I was reminded of a presentation made some years ago by one eminent advocate of a high-fiber diet. He was talking about a well-known breakfast cereal based on maize and proclaimed (with no evidence presented) that consumers would be better off throwing the contents away and eating the cardboard box that the cereal came in!

My final example of uncoupled (maybe even unhinged) communication between government departments (with an interest in diet and health) and the media left me speechless. We are being encouraged to eat fewer calories in order to tackle global obesity so nutrition experts in the United Kingdom decide to revise upwards the recommended daily allowance (RDA) for men and women. By the time the story hits prime-time TV, the punch line is that “the 600 extra calories you can now eat means that you can now have an extra slice of pizza”—a cue for raising the blood pressure of your columnist! (No offense intended to pizza makers—I eat pizza.) The practical effect of increasing the RDA is that foods which carry front-of-package labeling, based on the percent of RDAs and the U.K. Food Standards Agency’s proposed “traffic-light” scheme, will now need to be relabeled to maintain their relevance to consumers.

Please, please, please, can we get some common sense into our communications about diet and health? Please, please, please, can we get some clear coordination of the messages that we send out? In the cereals industry, we have great opportunities for delivering messages about the positive contributions to diet and health; we are great at innovating and finding new ways of delivering those positive benefits. We need to get our message out loud and clear to the decision makers and opinion formers. After all, if we want our customers to live long and healthy lives so that they will eat more of our products, we need to get some common sense into the current diet and health debates.

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