

The Fruit and Vegolution--Completing the Transformation

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Mid-Atlantic Fruit & Vegetable Convention

Something big is happening in the world of Fruits and Vegetables: “Vegolution.” Whether it suggests revolution or evolution, it can simply mean change for the better.

“Completing the Transformation” means that we finish what we have started—complete the change.

The key questions are: “Is real change for the better taking place?” and, “How do we take advantage of this opportunity as an industry and as individual members of the industry?”

History Repeats Itself

Throughout history there have been periods of time in which society has focused on eating certain foods for good health. In some societies, especially in Asia, the dietary philosophies have continued unabated from generation to generation. One must eat and drink certain combinations of foods to effect positive health. Although eating almonds for good health has just become popular in the Western world in the last 10 years, in India the practice of eating 7-9 almonds a day is hundreds of years old. While the modern Mediterranean Diet has only been selling books in the US for the last 5 years, it has been practiced around the Mediterranean since Roman times.

In the “New World”, dietary fads have come in with “boom times” or when people have had more leisure time to obsess on personal improvement. One of those periods was in the 1830’s when folks could ‘join’ Thoreau at Walden’s pond and also seek a diet to match their spiritual journey.

Around the turn of the 20th century, before World War I, Americans experienced dietary obsessions. Social commentator, Hector Munro (Saki), wrote of the “Food Reformers” who in spite of all the adorable things there are to eat in the world, “go through life munching sawdust and being proud of it.” The US government started to promote increased meat consumption to address perceived nutritional deficiencies.

In the Roaring 20’s there was big concern that people were eating too much red meat and not enough fruits and vegetables. The meat industry responded by creating the National Livestock and Meat Board to keep from losing its ‘share of stomach’ to plant food. The President of the Wilson Packing Company, Tom Wilson, became the first leader of the

Board. It was the first voluntary 'check-off' program that collected money from packers and farmers on an 'implied consent' basis with the blessing of the USDA's Packers and Stock Yards Administration.

During the depression and World War II, food consumption was by necessity back to the basics. The non-fighters at home were encouraged to cut their own fat consumption so there would be more fat for the soldiers.

With the birth of baby boomers after the war came suburbs, supermarkets and a national craving for convenience. There was less dependence on home canning and freezing to extend the fresh food season. The farms were emptying and the cities were filling up with families who wanted TV dinners and "Fast" food. "Eat your vegetables" was hard advice to swallow when the alternatives were mass produced, convenient, breaded, deep fried, delicious stuff. The ever-efficient American market established that no matter what was "said", what "sold" was grease, sugar and salt. Billions of dollars were spent to exploit a national appetite for unhealthy foods. Unfortunately, this period of time also marked a major decline in physical exercise due to a shift from physical work. The century started with a large percentage of folks doing physical labor and ended with a small percentage burning extra calories in their work.

The Difference

What's different about the latest trend towards interest in healthy foods from all of the other times is that the United States and the 'developed' world in general have become extremely unhealthy from less exercise and poor food choices. The aggressively promoted and abundant unhealthy food choices have led to an epidemic in health issues ranging from Type 2 diabetes in children to certain cancers.

Convenience has always sold: There are cake mixes to make baking easier and TV dinners to make dinner easier. It takes extra time to cook vegetables or to make a healthy salad. Many teenagers or adults simply do not eat vegetables because it is more convenient to eat take-out or grab a yogurt or a cookie. However, now there are products that make it easier to steam vegetables using a bag in the microwave, as well as pre-washed lettuce packages to make it more convenient to make a salad and snack fruit and veggie snack packs. Food prices are an issue for some. On the other hand compare fruit and vegetable prices per ounce to that of bottled water or dog food.

We always knew that fruits and vegetables were good for us, we just had no idea how good they actually are.

Yet poor diets prevail. **Shockingly the United States may be raising the first generation of children whose life expectancy may be lower than their parents.**

Recognition of these facts are more accepted than ‘global warming’, but are still met with a relative indifference. Vanity rather than health/wellness still plays a big role in dietary improvement. A recent survey showed that a significant percentage of women would give up 10 years of their life to be at their ideal weight. The headlines on the cover of Men’s magazine prove diet for vanity is a factor for both sexes.

There are a few real governmental policy changes underway to affect what Americans eat. In California and other states, restrictions on ‘junk’ food in schools are being established. School menus are being re-worked to include more fruits and vegetables. Promotion of fruit and vegetable consumption was subject of much attention in the recently passed Farm Bill.

Government has actively promoted healthier diets with the periodic publication of Dietary Guidelines and the use of websites and graphic designs like the Food Guide Pyramid. Consumers can log on to Mypyramid.com and create a personalized diet plan. Of course it should be no surprise that critics claim that recommendations are manipulated by ‘politics.’ But in spite of the critics these programs are reaching consumers. My Pyramid has had over 4 billion hits and and 4 to 5 million school children log in every day!

Agencies of the government were instrumental in the launching of the 5 a Day campaign as a way of fighting Cancer. That campaign has since shifted first to 5-9 a Day and now “More is Better”. (According to <http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/> men, women, boys and girl need different amount of fruits and vegetables, varying from 1-2 cups to 1-4 cups depending on age, sex, and activity level. Though you may only need 1-2 cups it is a common opinion among experts that more is always better). The private side of the 5-9 a day campaign is handled by the non-profit Produce for Better Health. The responsible government agency has shifted from the Cancer Institute to the Center for Disease Control. The budget is low and few people are working on the program, but it remains a policy of the United States that more fruits and vegetables need to be part of the diet to reduce the incidence of cancer.

Science

The results of clinical trials continue to support eating fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables but not their extracted components. In other words you need to eat the food not the pill that contains an extract of the food.

Several studies found that when cancer patients were fed certain antioxidant supplements their cancer got worse. The cancer cells seemed to grow from the supplement. Consumers get confused from reports like these and can conclude “why even bother”.

The American Institute of Cancer Research is helping clear this up. Its panel of international experts, after reviewing thousands of clinical trials, concluded that fruits and vegetable consumption helped prevent several types of cancer. It also concluded that “it is unwise to recommend widespread supplement use as a means of cancer prevention.” And that “in general, for otherwise healthy people, inadequacy of intake of nutrients is best resolved by nutrient-dense diets and not by supplements as these do not increase consumption of other potentially beneficial food constituents.”

As Jane Brody of the New York Times pointed out in her story about the AICR report, “So get your lycopene from the sauce on your spaghetti, not a pill.”

The Science showing a positive relationship between fruit and vegetable consumption and reduced cancer risk is extensive, solid, deep and convincing.

Heart health also is beginning to be connected with fruit and vegetable consumption. A number of studies are showing that some fruits and vegetables can cause the blood vessels to relax and keep blood platelets from becoming sticky.

Again, we find fruits and vegetables rising when faith in pills is waning. After millions of people have spent billions of dollars taking pills for cholesterol a couple of studies are creating some doubts. A popular combination of drugs is not successfully preventing heart disease. Another report even questions the generally accepted link between high cholesterol and heart disease. Some people may benefit from taking the pills, but many do not. In the ad for one of the most popular statin drugs, the details confirm results of three heart attacks from a group of 100 who did not take the drug compared to two heart attacks among the group who were on the drug.

In a range of other health conditions from dementia to emphysema, fruit and vegetable consumption show positive correlations.

Market Measures

Consumers are hearing these positive messages on Oprah, hundreds of health letters, health and wellness magazines and Internet ‘buzz’. The ever-popular top ten list of power or healthiest foods always is well represented with fruits and vegetables. They are not hearing it much from advertising, because the big money is busy selling what has always sold, overly processed, convenience foods with high profit margins. Even the commodity board advertising is heavily weighted to animal products over plant products. The dairy industry alone spends several hundred million dollars on promoting the positive health messages of their industry. It is expensive to preserve ‘share of stomach’.

But there is even good news on this front with such successful marketers of High Fructose Corn Syrup as Pepsi and Coca Cola purchasing fruit juice companies to upgrade their product mix. McDonald's failed to find any consumer demand 15 years ago when it launched the Lean Deluxe healthy hamburger. Now the golden arches have several 'better for you' items including some fruits and vegetables. Today no one sells more apples than McDonalds. The lists of new food product introductions are heavily skewed to "better for you", healthy foods and drinks.

It's not just in restaurants where the demand for healthier foods is leading change. We have seen a huge growth in Farmer's Markets and health focused Supermarkets. Even traditional Supermarkets are creating systems in their stores to identify "better for you family foods." Some are tracking family food purchases from their frequent shopper data bases and then emailing their customers suggestions for healthier food choices for their families. A friend received an email from his store saying that his family was not eating a very healthy diet, but they could help. The lists of new food product introductions are heavily skewed to "better for you", healthy foods and beverages.

But up until now per capita consumption of fruits and vegetables has been flat. Last year, even with all of the media "buzz", total fruit and vegetable consumption per person actually declined.

Completing the Transformation

With 1) science supporting increased consumption, 2) government policy promoting increased consumption, 3) marketers believing a buck can be made, 4) the media covering the stories, 5) the need for diet improvement generally accepted and 6) consumers wanting good health for themselves and their families, WHY ISN'T IT BETTER?

Competition

Fruits and Vegetables in all their forms are engaged in a pitched battle for the consumer's ear, shelf space, menu placement, share of plate, share of stomach and share of the food dollar.

Even in government policy there is competition. Whether a pyramid or another graphic is used by Government agencies to promote healthy food, if there is more space given to dairy, meat and grains, what's left for fruits and vegetables?

If fruits and vegetables were running for President, they might be Senator Joe Biden or Fred Thompson: a reasonable choice but not competitive due to lack of money, organization, excitement or recognition.

Answers

To be sure your industries, your companies and your products don't fizzle off to the side as just another example of good potential that failed, some steps must be taken.

It goes without saying that your individual businesses have to cover the basics, especially defining and meeting or exceeding customer expectations. For hundreds of years a successful seller (later marketer) of food has needed to offer flavor, convenience and/or price. (The right price is not always the lowest price.) With a more globalized food system, food safety has become increasingly important. This issue will cause consumers to weigh in on controversial issues like Country of Origin Labeling. Consumers, who have grown to trust American food protection agencies, rightfully suspect standards might not be quite as good in China. This is not simply about "costs for Supermarkets" or whether cheese from New Zealand is on a par with cheese from Wisconsin (it probably is). This issue is about trust. Countries and importers have to meet the burden of proof; just like American exporters face when they enter foreign markets.

However, beyond Business 101, the most important opportunity for Fruits and Vegetables is successfully competing for an increased share of the American and Global diet.

At this time, it will best be accomplished by engaging individually and as an industry in the health and wellness arena. There are many ways to go down this road, but let me point out a few that I think are critical.

- Know the nutritional benefits and weaknesses of your products.
- Market: Have what will sell to your dream customer list.
- Take leadership in industry-wide efforts to research, promote and publicly advocate in behalf of your industry's products.
- Fund Science and support scientists who can be influential on the public stage.
- Insist that your company, your association and your industry engages, develops and sustains a voice in the public forum.
- Appealingly and convincingly communicate your key messages.
- Collaborate with allied industries and companies who share the vision.
- Define success and measure results.
- Engage in food policy politics.
- Transformation will fail unless you Fix the Future with Focus.

Several of this year's presidential candidates have been claiming that they should be elected for "change." A foreign reporter observed that for most of the world that would not be the way to get elected, because 'most' don't really want things to change much. That might be true for many people in Agriculture too. It isn't easy to be the one in your business or your industry to promote shaking things up; however, what is the alternative?

There are products, ranging from extracted food supplements to cheeseburgers, that will do everything they can to diminish your standing and limit your success. This isn't paranoia; this is the law of the jungle.

One example of competition with another industry is the Dairy industry coming out with a 3-A Day campaign. Although the 5-A-Day for Fruits and Vegetables had been out for years before, the Fruit and Vegetable groups could not stop Dairy from stealing their thunder. Although fruits and vegetables are a tremendous source of fiber, the bread and cereal people snatched the public conversation by creating a government endorsed marketing statement, "Whole Grains". Other industries have muscled themselves into the public limelight and yours gets pushed aside.

Is this a Fruit and Vegolution? Will there be a completed transformation? You decide.

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