

Presentation by Helen Munday at an Advance Workshop of the Pacific Health Summit 'Obesity, Associated Diseases and Personal Health: Addressing the Global Nutrition Challenge' 6-7, April 2008, Wellcome Collection London

About the presentation

Helen was part of a panel consisting of herself, Rhona Applebaum, Coca Cola, Claire Hughes, M&S and Derek Yach, PepsiCo.

The presentation took the form of a verbal presentation, along with those of other panel members, followed by a Q&A session.

A number of specific questions were posed which are highlighted here as subtitles. Helen did not use a detailed script but this is a general overview of what she said in her allocated five minutes.

Introduction

The FDF is eyes, ears and most importantly to its members, the voice of the UK food and drink industry – the largest manufacturing industry in the UK (14%) with some 470,000 employees.

Our membership comprises manufacturers of all shapes and sizes as well as sector trade associations.

The food and drink industry is incredibly diverse and in the UK comprises some 6500 food companies from the well known multi-nationals to the numerically much more significant SMEs and micro- enterprises.

What is the sector currently doing?

The world is changing; we only have to look around us to see this is true. The food industry faces completely different challenges to what it did post war, for example. The percentage of our wealth spent on food has shrunk considerably whilst the real value has risen. In the UK a third of what we spend on food is now spent on out of home eating, this would have been unthinkable only a decade ago. And we are now challenged more by malnutrition in terms of over indulgence than we are by classical definitions of under nutrition.

To prosper the industry must be fit and nimble enough to adapt. The most successful companies don't just respond to trends but anticipate change and adopt leadership positions.

It goes without saying that innovation is important.

As an example of innovation in the food and drink industry, since 2004 £15bn worth of products have been reformulated to lower levels of salt, fat or sugar. Plus £11.5 bn worth of new products have been launched.

Salt was an earlier initiative and shoppers are now purchasing equivalent of 2000t less salt than 12 months ago. In many respects the UK is leading the way.

Saturated fat is now a target for change and this will be more difficult, given its impact on the physical nature of foods and the impact on the wider food chain.

Industry wants to encourage consumers to make informed choices about food.

The industry along with retailer partners and in collaboration with nutrition experts in academia, have developed the GDA (Guideline Daily Amount) Scheme – allowing consumers to assess calories, sugars, fat, saturates and salt that are suggested for a balanced diet. This approach has recently been endorsed by the Food Information Regulation proposal from the EU and we have good data to suggest that consumers are finding the information very helpful in making these informed choices.

The food industry is also supporting workplace wellbeing in our own sectors helping members of our own industry recognise how healthy eating fits into a healthy lifestyle.

Learning from research in industry

Industry understands huge amount about the properties of food that make it enjoyable to consume, and less so! It also understands that foods that are high in fat and/or high salt are generally safe and stable! Finding the balance between health attributes and food safety is always going to a careful balance that the industry must understand too.

Industry also understands about “consumer insights” and what drives trends. Companies want to produce food that is highly demanded whether it be for health, taste convenience or other reasons. Consumers need to know what are the right foods to fit there needs and that’s where factors such as education and labelling come into play so they can make these informed choices. Industry also understands what people choose and why.

Strengthening relationships

Partnerships are important in generating health outcomes and Health and Wellbeing is at the top of the industries priorities (77% of companies say it is on their priority list).

We're working actively with government, the FSA, consumer groups and other sectors of industry. A good example of this currently is portion guidance.

Partnerships could be further strengthened by recognising that food, at its core, is essential and health giving, rather than the more adversarial approach, where food and its producers are demonised. Food is clearly not in the same category as a cigarettes/anti-smoking campaign, where clearly any level of intake is bad. The story can never be simplified in this way and therefore finding the balance and getting the communication right is tough. After all everyone needs a certain amount to survive the many healthy foods will indeed help you live a longer higher quality life.

We also need to recognise that nutrition is part of complex picture of safety, affordability and the need to be fit for purpose (which includes the ever increasing area of convenience). Great strides have been made in provision of all of the above and health and obesity is making a later introduction into the picture, which now adds a level of complexity that has yet to fully play out.

I believe there are key questions that need addressing, such as why don't we behave as we know we should, (we know what we should do i.e. stay slim, but somehow we can't) and why as a society we look for instant gratification and tend to overindulge and have a lack of self discipline.

At its core, the food industry is a responsible and responsive industry. It recognises that individual companies and products are competing for a "share of the stomach" and is not simply in the business of selling calories. As health needs become "higher order", I am confident the food industry will show leadership.