

The Industry's Role in Food and Health

Melanie Leech: Director General Food and Drink Federation

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk to you about our industry's role in food and health.

It seems quite apt to be talking to you at the beginning of the year about food and health, when many people's new year's resolutions will no doubt include one on dieting or shedding a few pounds for the new year. And another one on taking more exercise – my local gym is always unnaturally busy at this time of the year

I'd like in the next few minutes to give you a perspective on food and health from the industry I represent – food and drink manufacturers – but first let me tell you a bit more about the Federation and the industry.

The Food and Drink Federation is the voice of the UK food and drink manufacturing industry, the largest manufacturing sector in the UK. We communicate our industry's values and concerns to a range of audiences in the UK and abroad, including Government, a range of opinion formers, consumers and the media.

The UK food and drink manufacturing industry:

- has a turnover of over £66 billion, accounting for 14.8% of the UK's total manufacturing sector
- exports about £10 billion of food and drink, of which 65% goes to EU countries
- imports about £22 billion of food and drink, of which 68% comes from EU countries,
- buys some two-thirds of all the UK's agricultural produce, and
- employs some 500,000 people, around 13% of the UK manufacturing workforce.

So we are a sector of huge importance to the economy – in fact the largest manufacturing sector in the UK. The industry contains some of this country's best known and loved brand names – part of the fabric of our society.

Notwithstanding this, over the past couple of years, the industry has appeared to be pilloried by everyone from government downwards as if it alone were responsible for the complex challenges thrown up by our modern, more sedentary lifestyle and as if there is a need to apologise for the massive improvements in farming, manufacturing and retailing which mean that in this country food is now more plentiful, more available and cheaper than ever.

Despite this, if you track consumption data back to the end of the war, the British, as a nation, are NOT taking in as many calories in 2005 as they did in 1945. The big difference between now and then is that we are expending far fewer calories. Why this should be so is obvious. In the 1950's and 60's our lifestyles were much more active. Back then most people walked to work or school; manual labourers outnumbered office workers; T.V. was for the privileged few; car ownership was low; hopscotch and street soccer rather than Tomb Raider were our children's games of choice.

To its credit the Government, through its Choosing Health White Paper, takes on board that there are two sides to this equation – diet and physical activity. As an industry our role is to address the diet side of the equation, whilst at the same time gently prompting government to tackle the problem of our dangerously inactive lifestyles.

FDF runs two substantial information programmes that provide schools with science-based information and a range of activities to help pupils make informed decisions about food and lifestyle choices.

FDF's **foodfitness** programme promotes enjoyable healthy eating combined with increased physical activity. A range of printed and web-based resources are provided free for schools including the acclaimed *Join the Activators* interactive education programme for primary school pupils that can help schools achieve the national healthy schools standard.

You may have noticed on your way through to dinner tonight our exhibition stand on foodfitness, and I would encourage you to go back if you have a chance to have a look at the resources available to you....and if you happen to be wearing a pedometer it will add towards your 10 000 steps a day!

Our second consumer campaign is FDF's food safety programme - **foodlink** – which has been running for 14 years with the objective of raising awareness amongst consumers of all ages about the simple steps that they can take to keep their food safe at home. It contains several strands of activity:

- National Food Safety Week providing a UK-wide focus each June for communicating food safety messages: 12-18 June 2006
- The annual food safety poster competition for schools - entry deadline end April 2006
- A website providing regular updates on foodlink activities, with information for teachers, event organisers, the media and consumers, and
- Food safety resources providing the tools for awareness raising activities and for teachers to support classwork.

In addition to these two consumer programmes the food and drink industry in September 2004, published a ground-breaking document – the Food and Health Manifesto - setting out 7 commitments on food and health including improved nutritional labelling, reductions in salt, sugar and fat, action on portion sizes and vending, advertising to children and a campaign of consumer education and information.

Last September - almost exactly one year on - the industry was able to publish detailed results of the progress made. Our ‘Delivering On Our Commitments’ report based on a survey of 20 leading food companies, assessed the extent to which they have delivered on their Manifesto commitments. The findings show big changes.

On salt we have worked closely with the Food Standards Agency to produce massive reductions in across the whole range of processed foods. By the end of 2005 36% of products surveyed – worth £7.4bn at retail value – had less salt compared to 2004.

To take one example: over the last couple of years salt levels in Heinz Baked Beans have been cut, first by 15% and then again last year by a further 14%. Heinz has also launched a reduced sugar and salt recipe of Heinz Baked Beans with 50% less salt than their standard variety. The Heinz kids pasta shapes in tomato sauce, have all been redeveloped with the latest cuts in salt of 34%.

On fat there have been extensive efforts to eliminate trans fats from our products and to reduce saturated fats. In this respect it is worth noting that the government’s own data shows that the population target for total fat intake has been met. Our survey also showed that compared to 2004, 15% of products contain less fat with a further 10% showing less sugar. As consumers, we also have increased choice: for example both Flora margarine and Hellmann's Mayonnaise offer a choice of three fat levels: Standard, Light and Extra Light.

On portion sizes we have seen big initiatives from the fast food industry and we have seen confectioners withdrawing and/or reformatting kingsize products, Cadbury's and Masterfoods (known for its Mars products) being just two.

In addition to the food**fitness** programme I mentioned earlier, our companies are also acting as trailblazers to promote healthy lifestyle both in their workforces and the community: a full 80% of our survey respondents run, or plan to run, a healthy lifestyle workplace scheme - that's in excess of 100,000 employees and in many cases, their families too!

On all of these areas there is still plenty of work to do. But there are four areas in particular - all of which are major elements on the government's Choosing Health whitepaper - where industry certainly has an important role to play but where we are still engaged in (what I hope is a healthy) debate as to the best way forward.

These are:

- Labelling
- Advertising to children
- Food in schools
- Public education

Labelling

Our survey last year found that the vast majority of products (£33billion worth) will have full nutrition information on pack by the end of this year. The industry has reached agreement on a common format for displaying Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs) on the back of packs as a ready reckoner for consumers and almost two thirds of products will display this information by the end of the year. A number of manufacturers are also taking the initiative in considering ways in which to supplement back of pack GDAs with at-a-glance information prominently displayed on the front of the pack.

In parallel the Food Standards Agency is currently consulting on two ideas for a voluntary scheme for front of pack - one a system of multiple traffic lights, the second an approach based on Guideline Daily Amounts. Both have some merit. But in my view only one has a chance of gaining traction and getting adopted. That is the one based on GDAs.

Why? There are two main reasons:

- First as I have already said, the food industry (both manufacturing and retail) have worked their socks off over the past year to develop a system of GDAs for back of packs. So if government wants to establish a *voluntary* system for the front of the pack then the FSA would be wise to go with the grain of the work already done.
- Second the GDA approach plays directly to the agenda shared by the FSA, the Department of Health and the industry – that of empowering consumers to make informed choices by providing better information and supporting this through education. The alternative traffic light system, with its “stop/go” instructions for consumers takes the dumbed down route and delivers virtually no useful information to help people balance their diet.

Advertising to children.

Here there is a difference of opinion between government and industry.

Advertising to children - whether its toys, food or leisure products - is an emotional issue. And as far as food is concerned there are clearly strong societal and political pressures for change.

The food industry recognises these and has put forward a range of proposals to the broadcasting regulator OFCOM,

These include tightening up our self regulatory codes, imposing age restrictions and accepting some rationing. To be clear:

- We are prepared to re-examine our own self regulatory codes governing areas such as the use of celebrities and cartoon characters. We would also look again at promotional offers and the way that these are used.
- Secondly many manufacturers are prepared to accept a ban on advertising of any food products to children under six.
- Thirdly we are prepared to accept some limitations on the amount of food advertising shown in peak children’s viewing hours.

Paradoxically the FSA’s approach is based on a narrower targeting. They only want to restrict the advertising to children of foods high in sugar, fat and salt. The problem with this approach

is that it condemns the agency to develop a model – based on nutritional profiling – that will allow them to identify and define such foodstuffs.

The model that the FSA has come up with is, we believe, scientifically flawed, subjective and potentially unsafe. For example, some of the foods which are deemed less healthy are valuable sources of nutrients for many children. Foods which have a high energy density, and therefore defined by the model as a poor nutritional choice, include dairy foods, cereal foods and meat dishes which provide valuable nutrients for growing children.

We have already seen the derision directed at the suggestion that cheese would be deemed an unhealthy food: if OFCOM are forced to accept this model it will almost certainly prove to be an embarrassment both to them and to the government. Why not instead, give serious considerations to the food industry's more broad based initiatives and proposals?

It is worth noting incidentally, that food advertising's share of total advertising spend has fallen by half – from around 15% of all spend in 1989 to around 8% of all spend in 2003, and that the total amount of expenditure on food, soft drink and fast food retail advertising has fallen from £973m in 1991 to £737m in 2003. Those are not industry figures – they come from Nielsen Media Research.

School food.

Here it is unquestionably right for Government to intervene. Right because it is important to instil good nutritional habits at an early age. Right because as the provider of meals in schools government has a duty to specify the nutritional standards that it wishes to deliver (almost irrespective of the cost!). As suppliers of these foods we will meet the prescribed specification, in the same way that we do for our retail customers.

But my advice to the DFES is to be cautious and pragmatic in introducing this policy. Long experience has shown that you can't go faster than your consumer is ready to tolerate and that children will vote with their feet.

Beyond the food served in school canteens, the area of most interest to our industry is vending and tuck shops. This is not because it is either large or profitable. In fact it is very small. No: we are interested because draconian action here will bring all kinds of unintended

consequences. There is a legitimate debate to be had about the appropriateness of products and their place in the school day.

It could understandably have escaped most people's notice in the rhetoric from government to date, but food and drink manufacturers do not place vending machines in primary schools. In secondary schools they may do so - at the invitation of the school. Where they do they are rapidly increasing the range of choice to pupils for example by offering water and juice as well as carbonated drinks. And to take one specific company - Coca-Cola has had a set of guidelines in place governing its relationship with schools for a number of years.

Nestlé has also recently launched a new range of vending machines, REFUEL, which provide healthier options. These were developed by working closely with schools and local education authorities. The new machines do not carry any product branding and offer products from six key nutritional areas designed to help with growth, development and concentration.

The industry comes from the basis that a whole school approach needs to be taken on foods in schools – involving children, teachers and parents developing a school's food policy. Balance is important, but should not mean that certain foods are demonised, and informed choice from a wide variety of products should be the fundamental approach within the school environment and beyond. We are prepared to work with the government's approach of treating the school environment as more protected than the high street – particularly for younger children. But surely the ultimate goal must be – as in other areas – to equip children and young people to cope with society as it is today, and deal with the range of information and choices available to them.

I can't help feeling – and some of you may look back at your own schooldays and share this view - that if we ban chocolate and crisps from school premises a black market will develop overnight. In fact I brought with me some of the products you won't be seeing much more of in your working lives if government has its way. Let's get real here: this might well produce some great candidates for the TV programme *Dragon's Den*, but would not help towards educating children about food choices.

The law of unintended consequences casts a heavy shadow across this proposal. As head teachers, who are not short of problems in just trying to deliver the curriculum, you risk either

being accused of being the Gauleiters of the Nanny State or creating fertile conditions for the new Al Capones of the play ground peddling contraband Kit Kats.

Public Education

The final issue, and to my mind the single element most likely to enable us to deliver lasting results, is that of public education.

With food so cheap, so plentiful and so tempting the only way of addressing the problems of poor nutrition and obesity in an enduring fashion is with education. People need to understand the consequences of the every day choices that they make in terms of diet and exercise (i.e. Do I have that pudding? Do I drive to the shops or walk? Does the family spend Sunday bicycling in the park or watching a DVD?).

To create this level of understanding and awareness will require a major programme of public education sustained over a long period of time.

The Food Industry's vision for this idea would include:

- a joint government/industry programme of public information designed to raise consumer awareness and understanding about diet, nutrition and physical activity
- it would focus on the need for balance – balance in terms of what we eat and balance in terms of the lifestyles we lead, and
- it would be jointly funded.

The key features of such a campaign might be:

- one simple overarching message/slogan and one clearly identifiable logo or icon – like the current “think!” campaign on road safety
- a series of different communications (perhaps targeted at different audiences) could be incorporated in this framework but all would be linked together and identified either by the campaign slogan or the logo
- conceptually therefore one could imagine a number of existing government advertising campaigns – Five a Day, 6 grams of salt, Everyday Sport – all being brought together under this umbrella.

The campaign would be genuinely multi-media in nature. Aside from mainstream channels like T.V, Press, posters, cinema etc the messages could appear on:

- billions of food packs
- millions of leaflets and shelf barkers in supermarkets aisles
- these same leaflets and posters could be tailored for use in schools, doctors surgeries, mother and baby clinics, leisure centres etc.
- leaflets could also be distributed by the government inside the billions of envelopes that are sent out each year by institutions such as the Benefits Agency, the Child Support Agency, HM Revenue and Customs
- all of this material could provide links to company, brand and government web sites where consumers could find much more detailed information. You could even imagine food advertisements on television directing people to press the red button on their remote controls to find out more about the nutritional profile of the product being promoted.

We think this is a truly ‘big idea’ and it represents a huge commitment on behalf of the industry. It is an idea that we have been discussing in Whitehall for 18 months. It is now being seriously considered by the Department of Health and we hope that we can make substantial progress in the first half of this year.

So as an industry, we do believe that we have responsibilities and I hope I have managed to demonstrate that we take them seriously and are delivering massive changes, without adverse impact on the bottom line – the competitiveness of the UK food and drink manufacturing sector - as I said at the start, the biggest manufacturing sector in the UK.

There’s just one other thought I’d like to leave you with. As a major employer, over the next decade around 150,000 skilled workers need to be recruited into the food and drink manufacturing sector. There are a range of factors - an ageing workforce, the loss of experienced workers to other sectors and business growth within the industry. This is a huge challenge for the industry, and we are already seeing specifically since young people leaving education don’t have the understanding nor scientific and technical qualifications needed by our sector.

The industry is not being complacent on this issue. Our sector skills council, Improve Ltd, is establishing a diploma in manufacturing. Targeting young people between the ages of 14 – 19 years old, the diploma aims to provide a real flavour of the breadth and depth of jobs available in the industry – which believe it or not are much more varied than the production

line role of packing bars of chocolate or packets of crisps which many commonly perceive as the only job in food manufacturing.

The food industry often seems to get a bad press, but I have to say that I have been hugely impressed:

- by the sheer scale of the operations in the big manufacturing companies
- by the high professional standards in companies of all sizes across the sector
- and by the commitment of the people working in those companies –who are committed – in many cases even passionately – to the work they do.

So for those of you advising young people about their career choices, I would say please – look at the food and drink manufacturing sector. It's a vibrant exciting and highly skilled place to work – and it needs some of our brightest and best to sustain the innovation and growth of which the industry is – in my view rightly – proud.

Thank you for inviting me here tonight – and for listening so generously. Whether you are planning excess or restraint in the next two hours, I am sure I have kept you from that choice for long enough !