



Marketing To Children

The produce industry is losing an important battle. Some may argue we are not even in the war. It's the battle for our children as our customers. Companies marketing high-calorie, low-nutrient "junk" foods have been in control of the terrain for years — with devastating impact.

According to the latest government studies, childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions. Only one in five children eats the minimum daily recommendations of fruits and vegetables. The majority of "vegetables" children consume are potatoes (french fries) and tomatoes (ketchup and pizza sauce). Children have especially low intakes of extra-nutrient leafy green vegetables, and they receive most of their fruit from fruit juice.

While we are seeing some progress, fresh fruits and vegetables are still not widely available where/when many of our children are most likely to eat — at school, as after-school snacks or in fast-food establishments. This is particularly true for low-income children who often live where supermarkets and fresh produce are hard to find, but inexpensive, high-fat, processed foods are on every corner. We're making some progress introducing fresh produce into fast-food restaurants and at schools, but we have a long, uphill climb ahead of us.

So why focus on children? If the rampant obesity epidemic and our obligation to future generations aren't reason enough, let's look at the business reasons. Children are an enormously profitable market across a wide range of industries. They are also major influencers of household purchases, particularly food.

Converting children with unhealthy eating habits into healthy produce customers also makes sense for the future. Taste preferences and eating patterns are formed in childhood. If we reach this market now, while they are still young, we are building a base for enormous revenue potential for the future — as well as much healthier adults in the future.

We have been marketing health and nutrition for years, albeit with woefully small budgets. But the only thing increasing is our children's waistlines, along with the incidences of diabetes and other chronic illnesses.

The solution isn't in making people feel guilty about eating too much unhealthy food. Adults already know what's bad for them. All our children know is that the junk-food experience is "cool," has fun promotional gimmicks, is conveniently available and consistently tastes good. In order to compete, fresh fruits and vegetables have to fit the same expectation and experience.

It's all about marketing a complete package of taste, convenience and nutrition. The first rule of marketing is to know what your customers are thinking.

PMA recently commissioned a survey conducted by Opinion Dynamics Corporation to gain a better understanding of what influences households with children to purchase more produce. Targeted segments included dual income families with children and single-head-of-household families with children.

An interesting profile emerged from the research, one that produce marketers can use to reach our youngest customers.

Taste topped the list, as an opportunity and a challenge. Majorities in all groups surveyed say taste is the most important purchase influencer. Direct experience with a fruit or vegetable rather than with brands was the most important factor in creating the perception that produce will satisfy taste requirements.

Inconsistent taste was cited as the primary barrier to increasing children's produce consumption. Children do not forgive and forget easily. The research shows the importance of delivering on consistent flavor experiences to delight these young customers. When we fail to deliver on the taste promise, we create a negative image, one that is hard to overcome.

Not surprisingly, dual income households with children are also more likely to seek convenience when shopping for produce. And while price is an important purchasing influencer, it is clearly subordinate to taste. Seasonal availability showed some surprising strength, particularly among dual-income families. Nutritional and health value was extremely important to both demographic groups. In both groups, at least a majority agrees that produce purchasing is planned

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rather than motivated by impulse.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the discovery that — in both groups — snacks are when children eat most of their fresh fruits and vegetables. Only among dual-income households is there even a close parity to any other eating opportunity (dinner).

The survey also revealed clear opportunities for savvy marketers to create more opportunities to move fruits and vegetables to the center of the breakfast and dinner plates. When asked what specific things the industry could do to encourage them to buy more produce, respondents answered better advertising, snack sizes or variety packs, interesting packaging and lower prices. This is consistent with other informal studies that have shown children will eat more fruits and vegetables if they are in manageable, kid-size portions.

So what do we do with all of this great information? We follow another marketing rule — develop products and marketing messages based on the unique needs of this "grab-&-go" generation.

The health/nutrition message is important, but it is time to broaden our focus. Let's stop bragging and start marketing produce to this powerful target audience! We need to do more to make produce "cool" and "fun" for our youngest customers. If sugary soft drinks are cool, why not carrots? If a fun cartoon character inspires children to choose broccoli over chocolate, then why aren't we doing more?

In the bestselling book, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, Al Ries and Jack Trout noted, "If you can, be first. If you can't be first, create a new category in which you can be first." We need to speed up the work already started by some produce category leaders in creating our own category — a category of fun, cool, healthful and convenient foods that taste good. The key is to remember there are lessons to be learned from all of our customers, regardless of age.

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Eat Your Veggies!

What, exactly, could it mean when parents report that, as Bryan relates in his piece, “Inconsistent taste was cited as the primary barrier to increasing children’s produce consumption”? Surely it is nonsensical to think this means that the broccoli we would like children to eat is inconsistent in its flavor or that fluctuations in the taste of spinach is what is holding kids back from demanding spinach salad.

One of the things to beware of in evaluating consumer research is that often the mental framework of the responder conditions the answers we get. So, when asked about the barriers to increasing produce consumption by their children, perhaps parents might report some recent experience, such as a memory that their child, who used to love oranges, was turned off by a dry one or that their child, who generally enjoys blueberries, rejected a recent purchase because the fruit was more tart.

One critique of this point is that the research, in fact, does not establish that children are any more influenced by this fluctuating quality than are adults. Another reasonable point is that it seems highly likely that parents have absolutely no idea that anything they or the produce industry can do would get their children to eat cauliflower or eggplant, and so they report on those items that seem plausible to them.

It is probably true that delivering a better taste experience would make children enjoy produce more. The same is true with regard to price and convenience. If we could get McDonald’s to throw a banana in each Happy Meal, both banana sales and banana consumption by children would probably rise. If we get schools to give out free snack fruit, both sales and consumption will probably rise. The same, by the way, is true of adults. If we get offices to give away free fruit as a snack every day, sales and consumption will probably increase.

Convenient package sizes certainly can help, especially with fresh-cuts. If parents can buy little packages of fruits and vegetables

their children enjoy and include them in a school lunch, they are more likely to do so than if they have to buy large-size packages, divide the items, cut them and repackage the items into lunch-size portions.

Effective marketing, including fun cartoon character tie-ins, is doubtless appealing to children. Produce vendors should be looking at all these things, and the produce industry associations and commodity boards should be encouraging them.

But when it comes to health and nutrition and justifying these efforts in terms of reducing childhood obesity, the situation is much more difficult.

The truth is that fruit is delicious and loved by children and adults because it is sweet and filled with sugar. Yes, there are various nutrients in fruits and, certainly, all nutritionists would agree that it is better for children to eat fruit than cookies. However, if we are really interested in focusing on health and reducing childhood obesity, a big focus has to be on increasing *vegetable* consumption. And there are many problems here.

In the National Cancer Institute’s *5-A-Day for Better Health Program Evaluation Report*, the following dilemma was identified: “. . . the potentially undesirable sensory qualities of some vegetables and fruit (e.g., bitterness, sourness, pungency, astringency) may act as significant barriers to the adoption of a diet that is high in vegetables and fruit, especially among children. The dilemma here is that the strong-tasting compounds as a group overlap extensively with the compounds that are potentially protective against cancer; therefore, removing strong-tasting compounds may reduce the protective effect.”

Put another way, all produce is not created equal when it comes to health effects, and the produce items that may be easiest to get people to increase consumption of, namely sweet-tasting fruits, are probably the least valuable health-wise. That is why the USDA’s latest food pyramid for kids urges the consumption of 1½ cups of fruit each day and 2½ cups of vegetables — 67 percent more vegetables than fruit.

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And although marketing is important, it is very doubtful that putting SpongeBob on cauliflower will do much to increase consumption, and having Brussels sprouts in the school vending machines probably won’t make a big difference in eating habits.

Almost certainly the most proximate cause of childhood obesity can be found in the same causes of adult obesity. Changes in society have resulted in a lack of physically demanding work. Combine this with the growth of auto-centric suburban lifestyles and you have behavioral changes that account for a tremendous decline in the amount of calories consumed by daily life. Urban planning and a radical redesign of our living environments to encourage physical activity may be the only real hope for substantial improvements in the physical condition of the populace.

This is not to say that the produce industry and the broader public health interests shouldn’t work to increase produce consumption. It is still in the interest of the trade and, on the margin, it will help a bit, which is a good thing. But we shouldn’t kid ourselves as an industry either: The issue is not simply poor marketing by produce companies.

If, as an industry, we really want to play a positive and significant role in reducing obesity, preventing cancer and, in general, contributing to the better health of the populace, there is much more work to do than is generally recognized.

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