

Increase Consumption One Item At A Time

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The globe is awash with various promotional programs designed to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables. In the United States, *5 A Day The Color Way*, *Fruits & Veggies More Matters*, *Eat Brighter!*, and more have all served in this role.

It is fair to say that the premise, spoken or unspoken, behind these kinds of promotional programs is some combination of education and affiliation with beloved characters will lead to increased produce consumption.

Unfortunately, the evidence for any rise in produce consumption is thin. Despite decades of efforts, we can't point to an increase in consumption that has been prompted by this approach.

Now, the Mushroom Council offers the industry a different approach. Is it possible that money invested in product development could be more effective in boosting consumption than generic promotional efforts? It is a big change in approach.

The traditional approach "blames" the consumer; it assumes they need to be educated or inspired. With this new approach, the Mushroom Council suggests people do things for rational reasons, and current consumption patterns reflect the known utility of our products.

If our industry wants to change consumption patterns, a good way to do so is to change the known utility of our products.

In pursuit of this goal, the Mushroom Council worked hard with The Culinary Institute of America, among other organizations, to create, perfect and identify uses for "The Blend." In other words, rather than just urging people to consume more mushrooms, the focus shifts to creating usage opportunities that did not exist before.

The idea is to take mushrooms, chop them up, and mix them with ground meat to create burgers, meatballs, meatloaf, etc. — which are essentially *mushroom-meats*. The advantages are obvious: The blended products are lower in calories, less expensive,

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place less strain on the environment, etc. In addition, the blended product (depending on the ratios used) can maintain or even enhance the flavor and mouthfeel of the entrée.

This author has personally sampled the blended product and can attest that it is delicious. Indeed, the mushroom seems to make most ground meat dishes more juicy than straight ground meat. We would say that, in many applications, we find the mushroom-blended product to taste superior to the meat alone.

We noted great enthusiasm for the product in the school foodservice market. In primary and secondary schools, price seems to be a strong driver, as budgets are so thin.

In college and university foodservice, environmental concerns seem to drive a general push toward more plant-based foods, and thus, more interest in blends.

Of course, even if "The Blend" is a fantastic product, marketing still poses big problems. What is "The Blend"? It is neither meat, nor a mushroom. Can we change consumer perceptions to accept such a hybrid? We all know what a hamburger is or a veggie burger. What do you call, and how do you market, a hybrid?

New products can create utility. Think of pomegranate arils and how easy it is to

add them to fruit cups and salads when consumers or restaurants don't have to cut up pomegranates.

New techniques create sales. Think of the enormous volume of protein-inclusive salads, such as Ready Pac's Bistro Bowls, that are now sold in produce. Think of demand built by new varieties of grapes and berries or any of a dozen apples that superseded Red Delicious in growth.

What all these products share, and what the Mushroom Council pioneered, is the idea that each organization in the industry should accept individual responsibility for boosting consumption.

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Then, the products must be marketed, and using paths such as school foodservice and retail dieticians can only help. But we need to have innovative, game-changing items to market. "The Blend" is an example for the entire industry. Kudos go to Bart Minor, president and chief executive at the Mushroom Council, and to the entire mushroom industry for having the vision to support the initiative.