Cutting Calories
Trillions at a Time

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In this issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Ng, Popkin, and Slining1,2 present findings from their independent evaluation of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation’s (HWCF’s) pledge to reduce calories sold in the U.S. marketplace by 1.5 trillion. The HWCF is a coalition of leading food and beverage manufacturers and other organizations, including many of the world’s largest corporations. Together, the 16 companies participating in the HWCF pledge account for approximately one third of all calories in the domestic food supply.1

Evaluations of obesity prevention programs are always important, but may be especially critical for industry-led initiatives, given public skepticism about industry commitment to their public pledges and doubts about their underlying motivations for such initiatives. Evaluations also highlight the tremendous influence of the food and beverage industry on nutrition trends and eating habits.

Completing this evaluation is itself an impressive achievement. Ng and colleagues1–3 developed an unprecedented system for tracking trends in consumer packaged goods nutrition by linking Nielsen Scantrack (sales) and Homescan (purchase) data with the familiar Nutrition Facts Label. This linkage across tens of thousands of products allowed researchers to track consumer trends more thoroughly than ever before, demonstrating (for the first time) that the cumulative impact of these trends can be credibly tracked and measured.

The change in overall caloric footprint of the 16 HWCF companies is impressive. Together, they far exceeded their original 1.5 trillion calorie goal, several years ahead of their target date. Participating companies ultimately sold 6.4 trillion fewer calories in 2012 than they had in 2007—a reduction of approximately 78 calories per person, per day. These caloric reductions were concentrated in the product categories that include many of the top sources of excess calories from solid fats and added sugars in the diets of U.S. children and teens,4 including sweets and snacks, fats and oils, and sugary beverages and soft drinks.

The daily caloric reduction documented from HWCF companies is significant, but not sufficient to reverse the youth obesity epidemic. Wang et al.5 estimated that reducing the current energy gap—the excess of calories consumed over calories expended—by an average of 161 calories per day among U.S. children aged 2–19 years would be necessary to reduce current childhood obesity rates to pre-epidemic levels, with smaller reductions needed for 2–5-year-olds (50 calories) overall, and larger reductions needed among non-Hispanic black youth (242 calories) and youth in lower-income populations (219 calories) overall. Thus, from a population perspective, the changes reported by Ng and colleagues1,2 are highly encouraging.

HWCF pledge results mirror positive news on childhood obesity from communities around the nation, particularly reports of progress among young children.6,7 However, such early victories are fragile and must be bolstered and expanded to ensure continued progress. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that obesity prevention initiatives are failing to reach communities of color and low-income communities equitably and thereby risk exacerbating existing obesity and health disparities.8 Future phases of the HWCF pledge evaluation will assess effects on purchases in lower-income and minority households specifically, as well as on the foods and nutrients children consume and their estimated effects on weight.

Through the HWCF and similar initiatives, industry is demonstrating that it can be part of the solution. Therefore, we both congratulate these companies and call upon them and other industry leaders to join together with the health community to go even further to help all children achieve a healthy weight. We urge consumer packaged goods manufacturers that are not a part of the HWCF to join the movement and launch similar initiatives to increase their lower-calorie offerings and strongly promote healthier options. In addition to improving the public’s health, such changes make solid business sense.

Two recent Hudson Institute studies9,10 found that packaged goods companies emphasizing so-called “better for you” lower-calorie products demonstrated superior...
sales growth, operating profits, and operating profit growth. HWCF companies were prescient to get out ahead of their competitors, and we hope will continue to build on their momentum. Several restaurant chains, seeing similar market opportunity, are adding healthier choices to their menus and making those options the default choice in combination meals, especially kids’ meals. However, their lower-calorie options remain only a small percentage of total offerings—notwithstanding evidence that these changes make good business sense for restaurants as well.  

Finally, it is essential to address marketing practices. Recent scans12,13 show that food marketing to U.S. children and adolescents continues to heavily promote products high in sugar, fat, and sodium. Simply offering healthier options is unlikely to change consumer preference without a major shift in food marketing on TV, in stores, and over the Internet. A few industry leaders have taken strong steps to promote healthier products in their marketing and advertising, and a growing number of retailers are strongly promoting reduced-calorie “better for you” food and beverage products on store shelves, through couponing, and in targeted Women, Infants, and Children and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program promotions.14,15 However, far more needs to be done, including voluntary efforts to curb unhealthy food marketing to children—especially to children in communities of color and others at increased risk for obesity.12,13,16

The example of the HWCF indicates that substantial healthy changes within the food industry are possible and that consumers are likely to welcome them. HWCF evaluation results coupled with growing evidence that concerted caloric reductions make good business sense are quite promising—long-term progress toward achieving a healthy weight for children and adults will be far easier to attain and sustain if the food and beverage industry senses market readiness and business opportunity in a nation that values the healthfulness of its foods and beverages.

If industry leaders continue to build on the success documented by Ng et al. in this issue, our nation will continue to make progress not only toward reversing the obesity epidemic but also toward building a lasting culture of health—a culture in which getting healthy and staying healthy are leading societal goals, and where all communities offer a wealth of opportunities for all people to make healthy choices, no matter where they live, learn, work, or play.

References