

# SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Improving Public Health Through Better  
Nutrition Policy: We All Have a Role to Play

National Consumers League

March 3, 2005



# What Is the National Consumers League?

NCL is the nation's oldest private, non-profit consumer advocacy organization.

- Founded in 1899, NCL is active in numerous policy arenas, including health care, food safety and nutrition.
- Our mission is to identify, protect, represent, and advance the economic and social interests of consumers.



# The Context for Intervention

- **The Social/Built Environment**
- We live in an increasingly fast-paced, time-crunched, and automated society.
- Access to healthy and affordable food is difficult for many populations.
- **The Food Environment**
- Calorie dense and nutrient poor foods are usually much cheaper, faster, and easier to buy and prepare.
- “Whole” or “non-processed” foods that tend to be more nutritious present few opportunities for marketing and advertising.



# The Context for Intervention

- **The Communications Environment**
- Marketing and advertising don't just respond to the free market; they are very effective means of stimulating consumer demand, especially with kids.
- Consumers have relatively little access to unfiltered, unbiased food/nutrition information – even less at the point of sale or consumption.
- The food label is one of the most important tools available to consumers, but it is not always available.
- Messages from the government and other nutrition sources often get drowned out, or are not available through the most popular media.



# The Field of Play

- In the last year, multiple parties have taken steps to help address the obesity epidemic and broader issues of nutrition.
  - Private Sector Response
  - Federal Agency Response
  - Legislative Response
  - Academic Research/Foundation Response
  - Consumer / Consumer Advocacy Response



# The Field of Play

- All of these parties (and probably others) will need to take significant action if true progress is to be made.
- Such action can either be voluntary or compelled – so long as it happens.
- Here's a look at what we've seen so far...



# The Private Sector Response

## 1. Retail Initiatives

### a. Menu modifications

- i. Addition of “healthy” alternatives
- ii. Portion size reductions
- iii. Reduction / Elimination of trans fats

### b. Nutrient disclosure

- i. Availability of calorie and fat (and sometimes carbohydrates and sodium) content via posters, web sites, napkins, etc...

### c. Promotion – add campaigns linking consumption of certain products to a “healthy lifestyle”



# The Private Sector Response

## 2. Manufacturer Initiatives

### a. Reformulation of products

- i. Reduced carbohydrate/sugar products
- ii. Fortified/enriched products (General Mills)
- iii. Reduction / Elimination of trans fats

### b. Voluntary label and packaging modifications

- i. Labeling collaboration with FDA (pilot)
- ii. Reduced size of “individual consumption” containers

### c. Promotion – add campaigns linking consumption of certain products to a “healthy lifestyle”

### d. “Voluntary” Advertising Restrictions (e.g., Kraft)



# The Government Response

- ❑ HHS, FDA, USDA, CDC, NIH, HUD, FTC, EPA and other Federal and State Agencies are supporting research and identifying policy solutions to help address this issue.
  - Obesity working group report
  - New Dietary Guidelines
  - FDA Proposed Rulemaking:
    - Labels
    - Claims
    - Reference amounts (customarily consumed)
    - Enforcement



# The Legislative Response

- Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act (H.R. 339) would bar obesity lawsuits against manufacturers, distributors and sellers of foods and non-alcoholic beverages.
- Menu Education and Labeling Act would require restaurant chains with 20 or more locations to provide some nutrition information on menus.
- Other state-level efforts to restrict or restructure school vending.



# Research & Advocacy Response

- Private Institutions are conducting/funding numerous research projects to evaluate the effectiveness of various weight loss interventions:
  - Relationship between obesity and the built environment
  - Relationship between obesity and television



# Consumer Advocacy Response

- Consumer groups continue to pressure both industry and government to do more.
  - We are not calling for paternalism, but recognize that reliance on the free market alone will not work.
  - There are no “bad guys” per se, but the fact remains that consumer welfare (long term best interest) is often at odds with corporate welfare.
    - It’s not a matter of restricting choice, or telling people what they can or can’t do.
    - It is a matter of ensuring a balance in the information available to – and actively promoted to – consumers
- The price of inaction is one that we all will pay



# What's Wrong with the Current Model?

- The stakes are too high,
- The interests are divergent,
- There's no carrot, and
- The stick is either...
  - The wrong - or too blunt - an instrument, or
  - Too small



# So How Do We Move Forward?

- Enable Federal agencies to make evidence-based policy changes
  - Restrict food advertising to young children,
  - Require public meal programs to comply with new dietary guidelines (and provide state and local entities with the resources to do so), and
  - Enhance and enforce labeling requirements
- Re-focus Congressional action on identifying incentives for companies to adopt and promote healthier product lines
- Increase education and social marketing

