Grantmakers In Health Supplement
The Power of Business to Change Food Culture for the Better
By Nancy E. Roman
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The key to getting people to adopt healthier eating habits may lie in leveraging the power of the private sector.

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By the time Tom chooses the cheese-curd bacon burger, he has internalized so much commercial influence on that decision that almost no amount of nutrition education will change his mind. That single decision will cost him 1,950 calories, 53 grams of saturated fat, and 4,700 milligrams of sodium. It will be difficult for Tom to change his behavior, and over time, a habit of fast food will predispose him to a life with obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and/or cancer.

Tom has also been exposed to thousands of tempting ads for burgers, fries, and soda, and his neighborhood store has been stocked with processed foods. Packaged goods companies have invested millions in marketing products that appeal primarily to his cravings for sugar, salt, and fat. In other words, Tom turns to the cheese-curd bacon burger in a food culture that has made it tasty, convenient, affordable, and desirable.

So are we surprised that poor food habits stubbornly persist as obesity rates rise? Four in 10 Americans now live with obesity, putting the United States on the precipice of a public and economic health crisis. Like many other NGO leaders, I spent a lot of my time, and my various teams’ energy, getting people to adopt healthier eating behaviors. Why aren’t we having more impact? Culture overwhelms some of our best programmatic work in nutrition and health, and we fail to appreciate the power of business and marketing to shape it. Programs designed to help people choose healthier foods must overcome this problem.

The power of culture isn’t new to most of us. However, we who promote nutrition tend to respond by doubling down on efforts to shift individual human behavior without working on the business practices and offerings that shape that behavior. Improving food culture will require changes in inventory, pricing, and marketing. And those reforms cannot happen without collaboration with the private sector—specifically, the consumer packaged goods industry, the restaurant industry, and the beverage industry.

SUSTAINABLE REFORM

The private sector has the power to sustain the changes it makes. Every grant application I’ve reviewed has asked how the program we seek funding for will be “sustainable.” Yet we know that donor-funded programs are inherently unsustainable unless they are embedded into ongoing business practices or they permanently shift human behavior.

Not every issue lends itself to sustainable results achieved through voluntary changes in business practices. But food’s connection to health does. Food companies, restaurants, and retailers have a real opportunity to reformulate and innovate healthier products, embrace reasonable portion sizes, and employ behavioral economics in food marketing to shift behavior toward food habits that will build health and prevent disease. Their challenge is to do it while continuing to make a profit—so that the new normal is sustained.

The Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA)—a Washington, D.C.-based NGO that works to leverage the power of the private sector to improve food and increase physical activity—has helped food companies remove six trillion calories, not to mention tons of fat and sugar, from their products.

Our work with convenience stores illustrates the model. PHA partnered with the National Association of Convenience Stores and nine convenience store chains selling food at more than 2,000 locations. The partners agreed to increase the availability of fruits and vegetables, and to offer healthier prepared food items and snacks, and zero- and low-calorie beverages. PHA worked with the stores to identify foods that would meet daily nutritional requirements, audited and verified the inventory changes through a third party, and then celebrated the success of the retail chains at a national summit with hopes that other businesses would follow the model.

As we worked on this partnership, convenience stores complained that their suppliers weren’t offering enough healthy choices. So PHA moved further upstream, partnering with six distributors to help them identify and source a broader supply of healthier convenience foods, and increase their supply in low-income areas. About 75 percent of PHA-partner convenience stores operate in areas with poor food access, and they are influencing the culture of their shoppers. If bottled water rather than soda gets prime positioning, or if packaged almonds or walnuts replace—or even sit alongside—greasy pizza slices, people’s expectations gradually begin to shift.

REBOOTING FAST FOOD

The next big sector to tackle in the effort to promote healthier eating is fast food. About half of the money Americans spend on food is spent eating out. Although the days of supersizing are over, major chains still offer calorie-laden meals, and new offerings tend to result in more calories, salt, and fat.

McDonald’s took a bold step in removing soda from the kids’ menu. Now, for the first time, more than 50 percent of Happy Meals sold come with healthier beverages. And soda consumption by children eating at McDonald’s has dropped 15 percent. That improvement merely scratches the surface of possibility for the industry. Restaurants nationwide could revamp kids’ menus, shrink the size of cups dispensing soda, reduce portion sizes, and develop lower calorie meals that taste good.

At some point in our social evolution, we hope to live in a food culture dominated by delicious food that will help us live well and disease-free. Until then, business has an opportunity to lead—not follow—the consumer toward sustainable health.

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