

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

The Trouble With the Trans Fat Tirade

Every other year there's a new villain in the wars against heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. After watching the severe '90s beating big tobacco took in the form of financial penalties, fast-food chains swung into action with real and hyped initiatives to trim fat, slim portions, and add healthy fare to their menus. It's worked. Not that they actually had an effect on health, but (along with mammoth marketing and lobbying efforts) the do-good steps have taken the pressure off the golden arches and others.

Soda and snack food manufacturers have also committed significant resources to good-for-you product lines as well as supporting health-related causes to parade their commitment as corporate citizens. It's worked for them too. When government food police or national nannies like CSPI deride the sinister products and marketing ploys, the accused can point to all their wonderful initiatives and "healthy" products.

The transparency is almost laughable, and can be summed up in this "Health Facts" quote from a national soft drink producer: *Don't forget, teen bodies are growing bodies, and they need food and beverages as fuel.* You don't say?

The newest enemy in the bad-for-you war on what you put in your mouth is trans fat. New York City recently announced a trans fat ban in restaurant food. Other cities aren't far behind — Chicago city council members have called for a ban, and the Boston Public Health Commission is thinking it over.

If you've read the literature on trans fat, it's clear we would all be better off if it weren't in the food supply. The irony is just 20-some years ago it was marketed as a healthier alternative to saturated fat found in animal products. And while no one is saying saturated fat is good for you, it appears to be the lesser of 2 evils (at least for now... who knows what we'll be saying in another 20 years).

Missing the Mark

Here's the problem with picking new villains: it shifts the focus away from what would *really* make a difference in people's lives — taking personal responsibility for their own health.

When the government or national nonprofits attack restaurants, convenience food manufacturers, and others, it may have a tiny incremental effect on what they offer, but it has zero impact on the public health crises we face with obesity and diabetes. It gives individuals an "out" by suggesting we have limited control over what we eat and drink, that we're powerless against the mighty marketing muscle behind sugar water in a can or deep fried chicken.

For most Americans, healthy food is literally across the street from junk food. Never has there been a greater abundance of, and access to, fresh produce, lean protein sources, whole-grain foods, and high-quality low-fat dairy products. As adults, our daily decision to eat less healthy foods is a personal choice.

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Making a Difference in 2007

If all your energy and resources go into creating a healthy work environment — with fitness facilities, nutritious vending and cafeteria items, etc., you've done well. But you haven't done enough. Work consumes less than a third of an individual's life. Your job as health promoter, first and foremost, is to reinforce the message that individuals do have control of their health habits — at work and throughout the rest of their lives.

It's time to put back responsibility for health squarely where it belongs — the individual. Not the doctor or health plan. Not the spouse. Not the government. Not the food manufacturers or restaurants.

No, not even the employer. The health of the population will improve when individuals in the population embrace "it's up to me."

As you roll out your 2007 programs and services, consider all the ways you can convey that health is a personal responsibility. You provide resources that support the decision to live healthy, but they're just tools, not magic bullets. You're there to facilitate health improvement efforts, but the individual is the one who will ultimately determine his or her success.

When everyone in your population internalizes this message you'll have no problem recruiting wellness program participants — and they'll be more likely to improve their health. 



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