

## On a lean budget, 5 a Day should focus on fat

**S**IXTEEN YEARS AGO I FORESAW MY own funeral. It was my 40th birthday, and I realized, even assuming perfect health, my life was more than half over.

But my health wasn't perfect. I'd smoked two packs of cigarettes a day since I was 15. Nicotine was nailing my coffin shut more surely than any undertaker. At 40, the anti-smoking message finally hit home: Each pack of cigarettes was robbing me of a precious day of my life.

That epiphany moved me from awareness to action. Quitting smoking was the hardest thing I've ever done. Yet as a nonsmoker for 16 years now, I'm a living testament to the antitobacco crusade that reduced smoking from 42% of American adults in 1965 to 25% today.

**SIDING WITH LOSERS:** As an executive search consultant, I always look for winners. But, on one issue, I favor losers — losers of weight, that is.

Ever since I quit smoking, I've struggled with my weight. I work out three times a week and cut out burgers and fries. Nevertheless, five extra pounds have declared my waistline their semipermanent residence.

I'm not alone. Obesity is this country's fastest-growing disease. The statistics are grim: 190 million Americans are overweight, 31% of them are obese (30 or more pounds above a healthy weight). Worse yet, researchers predict a 40% obesity rate by 2010.

This brings me to the 5 a Day effort. As the Produce for Better Health Foundation celebrates its 13th anniversary in May, my hat's off to Elizabeth Pivonka and her staff. They've helped increase consumer awareness and produce consumption. More important, they've united the produce industry behind a common objective. I've never seen such a dedicated group accomplish more with less.

All that being said, I think my smoking story holds an analogy for PBH. As an industry, we're struggling to move the 5 a Day message from awareness to action. I believe overweight consumers need a food epiphany like the anti-smoking one I experienced on my 40th birthday. Perhaps this necessitates a different approach. I suggest we try sparking that epiphany by focusing PBH's resources exclusively on the obesity epidemic.

**FOCUSING ON THE PRESENT:** Historically, PBH has spotlighted produce's cancer-prevention benefits. However, the fact remains that most



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Americans fail to connect the dots between eating produce and avoiding cancer. Maybe that's why so few people meet the 5 a Day guidelines.

Cancer prevention through food is a far-off benefit the public understands hazily at best. People rationalize that cancer won't strike them. But they need only look at their own waistlines to acknowledge that, yes indeed, fat has struck them already.

The smoking statistics I cited are revealing. Despite 40 years of effort and hundreds of millions of dollars in public service announcements, we've reduced the rate of adult smoking by less than 50%.

In comparing the antitobacco crusade with the 5 a Day drive, it's no surprise why most Americans don't consume enough fruits and vegetables. PBH's budget pales in comparison with that of the antismoking campaign, and its message is far less dire. If after almost 40 years, the anti-smoking lobby's cancer-prevention message failed to connect with more than half of its intended audience, how can PBH's cancer-avoidance theme work any better given its budgetary constraints?

On the other hand, obesity presents a simpler, more instantaneous cause-and-effect relationship: Trim excess pounds by eating more fruits and vegetables. Unlike cancer prevention, increased produce consumption can offer immediate, tangible and noticeable weight loss.

Obesity causes nearly as much preventable disease and death as smoking, and it costs America more than \$100 billion a year. Giving obesity's prevalence and destructive toll, why aren't we as an industry positioning produce as the obvious weight-loss solution?

**TIPPING THE SCALES:** The 5 a Day message is broad and touches on various themes. My hypothesis is simple: Is it worth considering that we might be more effective by replacing PBH's multifaceted messages, slogans and logos with a united industry focus on obesity?

Americans care deeply about weight loss. Dieting is a \$60 billion

industry. Atkins, Dr. Phil and the South Beach diet are cultural phenomena. Unlike cancer prevention, slimming down is a topic that resonates with consumers. According to MSNBC, losing weight was the top New Year's resolution in 2002 and 2003.

Here's the key: The National Marketing Institute's 2003 Health and Wellness Trends study finds that vanity is a more powerful motivator than disease prevention for consumers to eat healthier.

Produce is an easy, affordable solution to America's weight crisis. FDA Commissioner Mark McClellan says his agency is receptive to research linking eating fruits and vegetables with a lower chance of obesity. Give it to him. Perhaps then we could brand fruits and vegetables as Mother Nature's diet.

**MESSAGE FUNDING:** Spreading this message seems daunting when you compare PBH's marketing budget with those of others in the food industry. The National Dairy Board spent \$73 million in 2001 on marketing the Got Milk? campaign domestically. PBH's total budget that year was just \$3 million.

Since it's unrealistic for the produce industry to fund a consumer campaign through a check-off system like the dairy board's, perhaps an effective solution to our cash-strapped status is threefold.

First, we must unite behind a single vision in order to initiate our campaign to fight obesity. We must then begin to raise the necessary resources to reach out directly to American consumers.

Second, we could brainstorm innovative ways to spotlight produce's weight-loss effectiveness. The Eat More Diet concept featuring fruits and vegetables is an excellent means to broadcast our message. Let's create our own diet craze and trend following.

Finally, like the antismoking campaign, we need to continue campaigning for significant governmental financial support.

Just imagine the positive impact on fresh produce consumption if we could apply all the necessary industry and government resources to a single and compelling objective: a trimmer America, and, in consequence, a healthier produce industry.

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