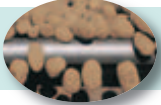


Obesity: a new marketing challenge



Potato Focus

By T.J. BURNHAM

STARTLING changes in food awareness are altering the way products must be marketed, a former McDonald's official told the World Potato Congress in Boise, Idaho.

"The consumer today is better informed than at any time in history," said Raymond Cesca, CEO of Global Alliances for Economic Advancement, based in Oak Brook, Ill. Cesca is the former managing director of McDonald's world trade.

Consumer demands are "clearer and more pronounced than ever," he added. This helps the food industry strengthen its competitive muscle, Cesca said, and "should deliver fortuitous benefits and unanticipated efficiencies as we move deeper into the 21st century.

"Food in general and the potato industry in particular are no exceptions to this promise," he added. In recent years, strong consumer preferences "gave us a wake-up call that pushed food companies to act more quickly and sometimes erratically about repositioning their current line and in new product introductions," Cesca said.

"The trans-fat issue is one such case where restaurants and food suppliers have been asked to ban partially hydrogenated oils to make them trans-fat free.

"The primary products hit by this move are french fries, margarine, shortening, potato chips, doughnuts, cookies, candy and cake."

The way consumers view their food has opened some important considerations for the food industry, noted Cesca, including:

- What the consumer decides to eat will ultimately shape food consumption today and into the future. "They hold our destiny in their hands, and that destiny is being altered every day."

- Globalization is impacting on consumer perception of the food they eat.

- The sheer volume of information sound bites that consumers are ex-

Key Points

- A former McDonald's executive warns of a changing consumer market.
- Obesity and diet issues won't go away, he says.
- Potato growers must work hard to meet new consumer concerns.

posed to subliminally influences their behavior and eventually their food choices.

Issues in food consumption today such as obesity can offer glimmers of opportunities to expand the potato business, Cesca believes.

Obesity driving industry

The obesity issue has become a "key driver" in food marketing decisions today, he said. "The food industry as a whole continues to wrestle with the issue of obesity. Do not expect this issue to just go away anytime soon. We are still only seeing the tip of the ice-

berg and the momentum continues to build."

Industry is responding with the likes of McDonald's Balanced Lifestyles, which promotes nutritional balance and includes new food choices, he said. Most fast-food restaurants, including KFC, Subway and Burger King, have altered their marketing approach similarly. Big food service conglomerates like Kraft and Coca Cola are also changing.

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FAT FOOD? Potatoes are getting a bad press in today's diet-conscious society, but industry exponents feel positive spud nutritional information isn't getting to the public.