

## Food industry and health: mostly promises, little action

Food-policy analysts at City University, London, UK, recently fired off another salvo in the food wars with an exhaustive—and depressing—report on what food companies are doing to address obesity, improve the nutritional quality of their products, and market products more responsibly. Not much, write Tim Lang and colleagues.<sup>1</sup> According to them, giant food corporations publicly state that they bear some responsibility for health (table), but most do not seem to meet this responsibility. The majority of food companies, the report concludes, “are not yet fully engaged with the seriousness and urgency” of today’s health challenges. Indeed, “in failing fully to respond... companies appear to be distancing themselves from their responsibility for unhealthy consumer choices.”<sup>1</sup>

Lang and colleagues arrived at this dismal conclusion by scrutiny of statements about diet, physical activity, and prevention of obesity that appear in publicly available

reports and websites produced by the world’s 25 largest (by sales) food corporations—ten manufacturing, ten retailing, and five food service—ranging in annual sales from US\$11 billion (Burger King) to \$256 billion (Walmart). The report tabulates these companies’ positions on 28 questions, among them: “Is there a policy specifically focused on children and food marketing?”; “Is there a commitment on sugar?”; “Is there a commitment on portion size?”; and “Is there a specific policy on nutrition claims?” The answers to these and the rest, alas, are mostly “No”.

The questions are anything but random. They were drawn up following a review of the WHO Global Strategy documentation. Lang was commissioned by WHO to assess food-company compliance with recommendations of that agency’s report on Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity, and Health, but City University published his report independently.<sup>2</sup> Alarmed by the sharp rise in rates of non-communicable diseases, especially in developing countries,<sup>3</sup> the 2004 WHO World Health Assembly approved the Global Strategy to stimulate governments, non-governmental organisations, and the food industry to promote better diets and more physical activity through education, research, and policy. The Assembly advised food companies to make healthier products and to practise “responsible marketing that supports the Strategy, particularly with regard to the promotion and marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt, especially to children.”<sup>2</sup>

*Lancet* readers might recall the fuss generated by this last statement.<sup>4</sup> Advice to restrict any food invariably distresses its producers and sellers; these lobby relentlessly—and often successfully—for retraction.<sup>5</sup> The Global Strategy proved no exception. Those “eat less” recommendations were based on a WHO review published in 2003, the now infamous “916 Report”, which suggested restricting intake of free (added) sugars to 10% or less of energy.<sup>6</sup> Although this percentage has been included in international dietary guidelines for decades,<sup>7</sup> sugar industries protested to the governments of the USA and other WHO member states that 10% was too restrictive.<sup>8,9</sup> Sugary foods are big business; the combined advertising spend in 2004 of just two companies mentioned in this report, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, was more than the entire budget of WHO for 2002–03 (table).

Company	Sales (US\$ billion)	Advertising (US\$ \$ billion)	Statements
Coca-Cola (USA)	21	2.2	The company exists to benefit and refresh everyone it touches.
ConAgra (USA)	14.5	..	We touch the lives of many, many people. This brings with it a special sense of responsibility, one we take to heart.
Danone (France)	18	1.2*	Helps people around the world grow, live better and get more out of life through tastier, more varied and healthier food products—every day.
Kraft (USA)	32	1.6	Our vision is about meeting consumers’ needs and making food an easier, healthier, more enjoyable part of life.
PepsiCo (USA)	29.3	1.7	Our health and wellness initiatives...strengthen our commitment to contribute to the well-being of our consumers.
Unilever (UK, Netherlands)	29.7*	7.2 (includes non-food)*	We meet everyday needs for nutrition, hygiene and personal care with brands that help people feel good, look good and get more out of life.
Ahold (Netherlands)	65.8*	0.456*	As we see the focus on health and well-being to be a major, sustained consumer trend, we want to be a leader in this area, or even have a genuine impact on the overweight/obesity issue going forward.
Carrefour (France)	12.1*	..	Aims to set the benchmark in modern retailing for the protection of health, consumer safety and the environment.
Kroger (USA)	51.1	0.667*	Our mission is to be a leader in the distribution and merchandising of food, health, personal care and related consumable products and services.
McDonald’s (USA)	51.3 (includes franchises)	0.723	McDonald’s cares about the well-being issues that are so important to many of our customers.

All figures are from reference 1 for 2002–04. \*US\$ converted from Euros in original report.

**Table: Statements by leading food companies about corporate responsibility for health of consumers**

As approved, the Global Strategy document omitted the offending 10% figure along with any reference—not even a footnote—to its 916 Report research basis. Given this level of opposition, advocates for stronger obesity policies viewed the retention of the mild recommendation to “restrict free sugars” as a victory.<sup>10</sup>

Although one can only speculate about City University’s independent publication of the WHO-sponsored monitoring project, avoidance of the consequences of food-industry wrath is one possible explanation. The Global Strategy places new and costly demands on food companies; these might reduce profits and pose challenges that no corporation wants to assume. Hence the conclusion: “only a small minority of companies are engaging with the [health] agenda and rethinking their business strategy accordingly.”<sup>11</sup>

The City University group did not submit its findings to food companies in advance of publication, but states that doing so would be a desirable feature of future studies. In response to the report, the Food and Drink Federation, which represents the UK food-manufacturing industry, stated that “FDF’s Food and Health Manifesto is a clear demonstration of [the food] industry’s commitment to help tackle the problems surrounding food and health” and that “industry has long recognised its responsibility in this area.”<sup>11</sup> It also stated that the industry had made a “tremendous amount of changes” and that, by the end of 2005, “products worth £7.4bn had a lower level of salt and products worth £2.2bn had a lower level of fat than in the previous year”.

Perhaps because asking food corporations to act against their self-interest seems futile, Lang and colleagues’ policy recommendations are exceptionally cautious: WHO should encourage, invite, and guide; governments should monitor and collaborate; and food companies should give higher priority, report, and improve voluntary codes.

Despite its compelling observations that food companies will do little voluntarily, this study does not recommend regulatory or legislative interventions.<sup>12</sup> Yet many believe that these more forceful actions are essential to induce companies to improve their products and market them more responsibly, especially to children.<sup>13</sup> The City University’s report provides more than enough evidence to support that view.

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I received a grant of US\$5000 from WHO to produce case studies on food-corporation policies versus practices related to obesity; these were submitted to WHO but are unpublished. I declare that I have no other conflict of interest.

- 1 Lang T, Rayner G, Kaelin E. The food industry, diet, physical activity and health: a review of reported commitments and practice of 25 of the world’s largest food companies. April, 2006: <http://www.city.ac.uk/press/The%20Food%20Industry%20Diet%20Physical%20Activity%20and%20Health.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2006).
- 2 Fifty-Seventh World Health Assembly. Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health. May 22, 2004: [http://www.sge-ssn.ch/science/scientific\\_publications/who\\_publications/documents/global\\_strategy\\_on\\_diet\\_physical\\_activity\\_and\\_health.pdf](http://www.sge-ssn.ch/science/scientific_publications/who_publications/documents/global_strategy_on_diet_physical_activity_and_health.pdf) (accessed July 4, 2006).
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