

Pg. 12

Understanding the USDA's  
new dietary guidelines.

Pg. 35

Rankings of top food &  
beverage PR firms.

# O'Dwyer's

Communications & new media

March 2011 | Vol. 25 No. 3

## WHAT'S STILL SAFE TO EAT?

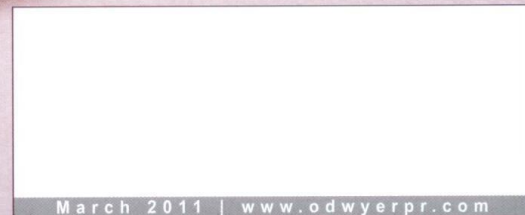
THE POLITICS BEHIND AMERICA'S  
FOOD LABELING SYSTEM. Pg. 18



GLUTEN-FREE: SUSTAINABLE  
MARKET OR DIET FAD? Pg. 9

FOOD INDUSTRY REACTS TO  
Pg. 10 "LET'S MOVE" CAMPAIGN.

HOLD THE SALT: THE USDA'S  
WAR ON SODIUM. Pg. 14



March 2011 | [www.odwyerpr.com](http://www.odwyerpr.com)

O'DWYER'S GUIDE TO FOOD &  
Pg. 20 BEVERAGE PR FIRMS

## New dietary rules require PR messages worth their salt

**A survey of registered dietitians offers insight regarding how food makers can escape a sodium PR minefield.**

By Louise Pollock

If you have a client in the food industry, you may be feeling the “pinch” when it comes to salt.

Health experts have been raising alarms about excess salt in processed and restaurant foods for years, but the January release of the federal government’s 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans put the issue in clear terms: Americans should eat more whole foods and significantly limit the amount of sodium in their diet.

The guidelines reinforce the concerns of America’s Registered Dietitians, who strongly believe the food industry must respond to the overwhelming data, suggesting that diets high in sodium increase the risk for hypertension and stroke, and contribute to premature death.

In fact, dietitians believe only trans fats and excess calories pose greater health risks than excess salt. A full 65% of Registered Dietitians believe excess sodium is as harmful, or more harmful than high fructose corn syrup. And many say they recommend avoiding processed foods as the most effective way to reduce sodium intake.

These findings emerged from a national survey of 100 Registered Dietitians conducted recently by Pollock Communications. We investigated the opinions of Registered Dietitians because they’re key influencers in food and nutrition; they help shape consumer food shopping decisions, guide health policy, impact nutrition trends in the media with statistical recommendations.

Our survey results also found:

- Nearly 90% of respondents say the food industry is not doing enough to reduce sodium levels in their products.
- Only a minority believes the answer should come from new lower-sodium food options; nearly half say the primary solution should be widespread sodium reductions in available foods.
- A majority of the respondents (54%) want to see the government take some type of action to encourage manufacturers to make sodium reductions in their products.

Meanwhile, the national media has kept up a steady drumbeat of hard-hitting coverage about the risks of excess sodium. Since last April, there were more than 300

national and regional news stories about salt, far exceeding the level of media attention on many other dietary risks, including sugar-sweetened beverages.

Faced with this assault on salt, companies that produce foods Americans love to eat — snacks, soups, prepared entrees, pizza, fast food, chain restaurant meals and more — may find themselves in the public relations cooker. After all, no food manufacturer can afford to ignore the proven health risks of excess sodium, but reducing salt in processed foods without affecting consumer acceptance of the products is a difficult, costly and lengthy process. The good news is the sodium minefield can be navigated successfully.

Let’s start with a deeper analysis of results from the Pollock survey. While we found that the vast majority of respondents believe sodium is a real health threat at the amounts normally consumed by Americans, (3,400 mg/day), most also believe that the current guideline for sodium (2,300 mg/day) among healthy individuals is adequate, and nearly 50% believe this guideline can be achieved with wise food choices. In other words, most dietitians believe healthy Americans can meet established sodium guidelines with reasonable moderation of their diet.

The survey also found that dietitians don’t think Americans can reduce sodium intake to 1,500 mg/day, which the Dietary Guidelines recommends for people over 51 years of age, African Americans, and those with hypertension, diabetes and chronic kidney disease — a group that collectively makes up about half of the U.S. population. In addition, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines Committee Report and the Institute of Medicine’s Strategies to Reduce Sodium Intake in the United States Report both recommend a gradual reduction in dietary sodium. Thus, while some in the media may be demanding fast, dramatic sodium reductions, dietitians and other experts appear to understand the need for gradual reductions to avoid negative effects on product flavor, taste, texture and consumer acceptance.

Also, while our survey respondents felt that some kind of government action on sodium is warranted, very few backed increased taxes or an outright ban on high-sodium foods. For now, at least, dietitians

appear open to industry-led initiatives for reducing sodium in food.

This point was reinforced in our survey’s questions on brand recognition, in which respondents were asked which companies are doing a good job helping consumers meet sodium guidelines. The most frequently cited brand was Campbell’s, with 21% mentioning the soup maker. More than 10% cited Progresso, and 9.5% identified Healthy Choice. In all three cases, it appears dietitians recognize the well-publicized efforts of these brands to reduce sodium levels in their products.

The brand recognition findings are significant from a public relations perspective. Registered Dietitians are on the front lines of the salt issue, playing a key role in translating and communicating product label and nutrition profile information to confused but knowledge-hungry consumers. They are emerging as the trusted source in the conversation about sodium, providing perspective via influential blogs, media appearances and one-on-one educational engagements.

The lesson to the food industry is clear: if you want to influence public awareness of your brand’s approach to sodium reduction, you must find ways to engage with Registered Dietitians. If they believe you are taking meaningful, effective steps toward reducing salt in your products, they will help lead you out of the sodium minefield.

Companies and brands that take proactive steps to reduce the salt content of their products will shine in a broader media spotlight as well. With the recent issuing of the Dietary Guidelines, 2011 will likely be a year of heightened media coverage of dietary health, including sodium content. Companies can seize the opportunity to get out in front of this issue through innovation. Then they should convey their success stories through credible, third-party experts — such as Registered Dietitians — who appear in the media as well as engage with consumers directly.

Food manufacturers need to affirm their commitment to lowering the sodium content of their products, demonstrate their progress in that endeavor through credible spokespersons, and give consumers the information they need to make smart choices. Such communication will go far to enhance brand loyalty and reputation in consumers’ hearts and minds.

*Louise Pollock is President of Pollock Communications in New York City.* ●