

Corporate Responsibility for Fats and Oils

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Life can be carefree and beautiful. It can also be stern and demanding.

Unfair though it may seem, life is easiest for the blithe spirits of this world, those whose brows are untouched by human cares. Life's heaviest burdens are loaded on those who are specially gifted, who have been specially trained, and who time and circumstance have placed in the path of important events. From such people, because they are special, special responsibility is expected.

Now, I don't want you to think I'm indulging myself in fancy rhetoric. Your reaction might well be a cocked eyebrow and a quizzical "Who... me?" Perhaps you have been soaked in oil chemistry for so long that this respected profession has become predictable, comfortable, and rather "old shoe."

I've got news for you, then. Things are happening out there which will combine to produce fundamental changes in the way people eat and in the way food products are fabricated. Edible oils may be at the very center of what may be entirely new life styles. These developments will revolutionize the way we do business and in so doing, will reduce our comfort while elevating both the rate of our activity and the level of our responsibility.

I will mention only three factors which point to these changes. None of them seem very dramatic alone, but in combination they can be sociological dynamite.

First, there is increasing consumer awareness and concern about health, appearance, and general well-being. In some way, not as yet clearly defined in many product systems, people are aware that what they eat has a bearing on their present and future health. We have taken refuge in an alleged state of public diffidence on the matters of health and well-being, but we can no longer do so. Part of the inheritance of this neglect is that people have an unreasonable fear of food additives, and are being mass-seduced by the purveyors of so-called organic foods. Henceforth, therefore, it will be more difficult to change products and persuade people that changes can be for the best. But if we want to change, persuade we must, for people demand to know the facts and will be the judge. The day is long gone when alterations could be slipped in unknown and unexplained. And so, we must develop criteria and skills which were not heretofore part of our repertoire.

Second, related to consumer concern about health, appearance, and general well-being, but not the same thing, is food safety. The former is somewhat extrinsic in that it is partly if not wholly undefinable in a positive and quantitative sense. Safety, on the other hand, is entirely intrinsic, and often-times inscrutable. It is, to say the least, extremely difficult to prove a product safe, when that means disprov-

ing all the known hazards as well as making an assumption of safety for all the unknowns.

Notwithstanding the recent flap on the Delaney amendment, which was something more than a tempest in a Coke glass, the public will not permit us to be slovenly about safety or relax the commandment for absolute freedom from risk. That may be triggered as this one was only when there appears a threat as serious as the abridgement of our right to save calories that they may be spent on a candy bar. Otherwise the public demand for safety has lost none of its urgency or stridency.

Third is what I believe to be the inevitability of intervention by government in diet modification. We may look at this with some apprehension, worry that so great an insult to our personal freedom may be fatal for the body politic. But there is plenty of precedent for a government to act to protect its investment. And its investment in health care is already large and rapidly growing. As our population ages, and for other reasons too, a larger share of an increasing tax bill must be devoted to the provision of health care to older people. There will be enormous pressure to reduce health risks and consequently government health costs. The result could be either an indiscriminate reign of terror against alleged offending products, followed by a golden age of food-faddism, or if we do our homework, hopefully an enormous opportunity to link nutrition and health and put them jointly to work for a better quality of life.

These three developments carry a message for the entire food industry, but particularly so for those involved in fats and oils. It is in this particular segment of the food industry that much of concern about nutrition is concentrated, where medicine and diet meet, where options and modifications make possible new approaches to eating.

And so, if the message is to carry the hope of progress rather than the triple threat of confusion, compulsion, and calamity, we will have to get busy. We will have to develop new products which meet the public criteria for health and well-being. We will have to work with those who market these products to help them explain the advantages of these products visually and verbally. We will have to establish protocols for safety testing. We will have to dig deep to find the more subtle connections between diet and health. We will have to appreciate that all this calls for expanded research and an enlarged view of who it is that we must work in concert with. For if the products business sells are to be scientifically sound, more business people will have to be knowledgeable about science. If consumers are to make wise decisions, we must give them the wherewithal - information. If government is to be an arbiter, we must work with it to prevent its decisions from being arbitrary. We must bring together scientists from public interest groups, business, government, and academia and make their purposes more common, and we must connect the consumer, research, business, and regulatory strategies - or at least make sure that they are not working at cross purposes and that we have effective ways to resolve conflicts.

You have the opportunity to make a very important contribution to society and your own well-being. And if this, my friends, is the combination of rewards you seek, then your lives can indeed be beautiful. ●