



Marketers Use Salt Messaging Sparingly

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As sodium levels continue to drop in CPG food products, will reduced-sodium messaging become a crucial differentiator for food marketers? There may be a pinch of lower-salt messaging here and there, experts say, but for the most part, such marketing will remain off the table.

Sodium reduction is not new for packaged foods, but the concept has gained some newfound attention in the business press thanks to two recent high-profile announcements. Kraft Foods Inc. in Northfield, Ill., announced plans to cut salt by 10%, on average, in each of its 1,000-plus products over the next two years. Purchase, N.Y.-based PepsiCo Inc., announced plans to reduce sodium levels in all of its salty snack products by 25% in five years and even is creating a new designer salt for its Lay's potato chips. These announcements follow calls to action from the National Salt Reduction Initiative, led by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, as well as a healthy-eating push from Michelle Obama.

Despite the current media buzz around sodium, don't expect food marketers to make a big deal out of it, says Brian Wansink, director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and author of *Marketing Nutrition: Soy, Functional Foods, Biotechnology and Obesity*. "The problem in doing something like this is it lowers consumers' expectations of taste and reduces the likelihood of purchase," Wansink says.

Because these moves are occurring in the wake of public criticism, pronounced marketing about sodium reduction may seem opportunistic, adds Grace Leong, managing partner at Hunter Public Relations in New York, which represents major food clients such as Kraft and Campbell Soup Co. in Camden, N.J. "If you go out and pound your chest and say, 'We've reduced salt,' a lot of critics might say: 'You've only done that in response to what the [Obama] administration is saying. Don't take credit for that.'"

Leong acknowledges that there's a growing number of consumers who want less salt in their foods. "Salt is the new fat," she says. But Wansink says those consumers are more likely to read product labels and check Web sites, so food marketers don't need to reach out to them with mainstream marketing. "You don't want to gamble on gaining 10% of a potential market share if you stand to lose 90% of the market that does use a product," he says. Instead, "if this is done in a stealth health manner, it's not going to scare off anybody who likes the brand for what it is."

One exception to the rule is you could use sodium as a differentiator if you're able to promote a product that enhances taste while simultaneously lowering sodium levels, Leong suggests—which could account for a recent splash of sea salt messaging. For example, last year Campbell's ran print and TV ads promoting its new tomato soup formula with sea salt and 32% less sodium overall, says Juli Mandel Sloves, senior manager of nutrition and wellness communications for the company.

But without a supposed taste-boosting element like sea salt, it seems that explicit reduced-sodium messaging is scarce and usually only promoted on packages, which is what Campbell's is doing for its new lower-sodium but sea salt-free SpaghettiO's rolling out next month, Sloves says. And while Kraft is reducing salt in its products, the company doesn't plan to create marketing campaigns specifically promoting the sodium reductions, says Sydney Lindner, Kraft's associate director of corporate affairs.