Potatoes—Turnaround In Consumer Attitudes

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Since 1972, the National Potato Promotion Board has been educating consumers on the high nutritional value and low calorie count of potatoes—with the goal of increasing per capita consumption while improving returns to the grower. We have experienced considerable success in meeting this goal. In 1972, per capita consumption of potatoes in the United States was 115 pounds a year. Most recent figures show annual consumption to be 120 pounds per person.

A major reason for this turnaround in consumption was a change in consumer attitudes toward potatoes. When the Board was formed, the image of the potato was not a good one. Sure, everyone loved the taste, but many thought the potato's nutritional value was low, and most were convinced that potatoes were fattening.

Nutrition Education

The first thing we did was to document the true nutritional value of the potato. Our experts conducted extensive tests and discovered an amazingly good nutrition story. Almost everyone was surprised. A medium-size potato contains only 110 calories, yet has 50 percent of USDA's recommended daily allowance (RDA) for vitamin C, high levels of potassium and fiber, and numerous other vitamins and minerals—resulting in a high nutrition/calorie ratio. In time, the potato became the first produce item with an approved nutrition label.

The Board's advertisements began telling the potato nutrition story to consumers. The initial ads were direct in combating the misconceptions about the potato's calorie count. Then, as the public began to get the message, the ads took on a different, softer tone. They also contained both calorie and nutrition information.

Our two most recent ads underscore the nutritional value of potatoes. One, with a variety of potatoes in an apothecary jar, states that potatoes contain a significant percentage of the RDA of many vitamins and minerals. The other shows a potato being painted green to remind consumers that it is, indeed, a vegetable.

Jane Brody, a syndicated columnist for the New York Times, has written about the nutritional value of the potato in her Good Food Book. Brody stated that the potato has "fewer calories than many foods people turn to when trying to lose weight." In addition, she pointed out that the potato is "low in sodium" and stated that "the potato is a nutrient bargain."

Public Relations

After developing the nutrition label and starting the ad campaign, we began working with dietitians, nutritionists, and teachers. These important groups were told the potato's story through ads in professional journals, presentations at conventions, and educational materials.

In addition, the potato's story was taken to newspapers and major national magazines. Articles on the
potato’s good nutrition, along with new (and fun) recipes, were regularly sent to newspaper food editors. And twice a year, Potato Board representatives met with key food editors to keep them thinking about potatoes.

On a segment of “Good Morning America,” food commodity advertising was analyzed by consumer reporter John Stossel. “Three cheers for the potato industry,” remarked Stossel. “They’re nutritious, low in calories, and fat free. So, if those ads get us to eat more potatoes, good for the industry, and good for us.”

Next Step—Retail Merchandising

To ensure that shoppers found an attractively displayed product in grocery stores, we started our merchandising program. We currently have four merchandisers who assist retailers in promoting and marketing potatoes around the country.

Potato Lover’s Month

Along the way, we decided to add some fun to the promotion of potatoes and created Potato Lover’s Month. Celebrated every February since 1978, Potato Lover’s Month is observed in schools, retail stores, and the media.

Potato Lover’s Month kits are used in schools to teach nutrition in an entertaining fashion. An annual contest provides cash awards for the most creative cafeteria promotions, and judging is not easy. Entries have involved entire communities—parents, newspapers, and sometimes even mayors have taken part. Some schools have held special potato days, put on plays about nutrition, and dressed everyone up as vegetables.

In grocery stores, potatoes are displayed and advertised around the Potato Lover’s Month theme. The growing participation of major retail chains in the campaign has turned what was once a rather slow month for potato sales into one of the best.

In the media, hundreds of radio and television interviews are given—telling the potato’s nutrition story in a light tone. Some television stations hold cooking demonstrations, some television crews visit potato farms, and everyone seems to have fun.

Kraft Salad Days

The first major retail push each potato crop year takes place in the fall when the largest percentage of the crop is harvested. The next big push comes in February, with Potato Lover’s Month, and the third is Salad Days, from May through July.

The Salad Days commercial tie-in with Kraft Co. gives the Board an expanded advertising program, and keeps potatoes (and low-calorie potato salads) on consumers’ minds through the summer months. The Kraft sales force, working with the Board’s merchandisers, distributes beautiful materials and encourages their use in produce department displays.

Exports to Southeast Asia

The Board is always looking for new markets and new consumers for potatoes, and a search for export markets determined that Southeast Asia had the best potential. Reasons for the area’s suitability include its increasing standard of living, the growing popularity of Western foods there, and its large tourist trade.

Currently, Japan is the largest importer of U.S. frozen potato products, but other Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan, are also rapidly growing markets for U.S. fries. The effort to develop these markets
Japan is the largest importer of U.S. frozen potato products, but other Asian countries are rapidly growing markets for U.S. fries too. This Japanese girl is enjoying U.S. fries from a fast food restaurant in Japan. (FAS)

received a shot in the arm in 1986 when USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service allocated $2 million to the Board's efforts. Since that time, this expanded program has resulted in significant sales increases.

In Japan, the Board launched a television advertising campaign stressing the high quality of the U.S. potato. Tie-ins at restaurants and in grocery stores reached millions more, and awareness of U.S. potatoes and potato products soared. The other countries in the plan (Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan) also are receiving increased promotional attention, resulting in creative tie-ins and increased sales. The expanded
program is now in its third year, and is creating a large, loyal market for U.S. potatoes.

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**Gymnastic Sponsorship**

One exciting new project is Potato Board sponsorship of the U.S. Women's National Gymnastic Team—the young women who are representing the United States at the 1988 Summer Olympics in South Korea.

This is a public relations sponsorship which involves working with the gymnasts to teach them about nutrition and have them become spokespeople for potatoes. The funds the Board is putting into the Gymnastics Federation allow the gymnasts to train as a team more frequently and to attend more international competitions.

The gymnasts give frequent media interviews where they discuss potatoes, making the point that potatoes are nutritious complex carbohydrates containing few calories. National magazines run feature stories on the gymnasts and their training program (including, of course, how they eat). A shopping mall exhibit with the gymnastics theme will be displayed in 20 major cities—calling consumers' attention to the Board's sponsorship and the potato's good nutrition.

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**What's Next**

In 1987, we started working on what we call our "position paper," a blueprint for the future. We had made great strides in improving public awareness of the potato's nutritional value and felt we needed to evaluate our position. The question was, should we continue with what we were doing or look for new challenges?

This process involved a thorough review of the past and an evaluation of our best promotion options. It later included consumer research on several possible campaign strategies: convenience, nutrition, taste, and fun. Also considered were the recommendations of industry leaders. The result of this study and introspection was the recommendation that future advertising stress the convenience of potatoes.

Today's lifestyles, with most household members working and everyone in a hurry, demand convenience foods. Our research indicated that a strategy highlighting convenience would be effective. And the need is there, as many consumers do not consider potatoes convenient.

So we believe we are only beginning our efforts to bring the good qualities of the potato to light. When we started 15 years ago, few thought we could make the potato a popular health food. In the 1990's we also intend to make it one of the most contemporary foods—in terms of convenience and trendiness.