Food Industry Leaders Finding Ways to Help Solve Nation’s Obesity Epidemic

New studies show companies pledging to help reduce obesity have cut trillions of calories from U.S. market and are major contributors to declining caloric purchases among American families.

Princeton, N.J.—Sixteen major food and beverage companies acting together as part of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (HWCF) sold 6.4 trillion fewer calories in the United States in 2012 than they did in 2007, according to a study published today in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. The companies collectively pledged to remove 1 trillion calories from the marketplace by 2012, and 1.5 trillion by 2015. An independent evaluation funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) found that, thus far, the companies have exceeded their 2015 pledge by more than 400 percent.

The study examining HWCF’s pledge shows that the largest calorie cuts came from sweets and snacks; cereals, granolas and other grain products; fats, oils and dressings; and carbonated soft drinks. The companies participating in the pledge sold 60.4 trillion calories in 2007, the year defined as the baseline measurement for the pledge. In 2012, they sold 54 trillion calories. This 6.4 trillion calorie decline translates into a reduction of 78 calories per person in the United States per day.

“Having 16 companies make individual changes that collectively cut 6.4 trillion calories is beyond impressive,” said James S. Marks, MD, RWJF senior vice president. “Imagine the impact if other industry leaders stepped up to make similar—or bigger—commitments to make and market lower-calorie, healthier products for families.”

HWCF launched in October 2009 to help reduce obesity in America, especially childhood obesity, by 2015. Researchers funded by RWJF also published an accompanying study today that evaluated the impact of HWCF’s pledge to sell fewer calories on the number of calories purchased by families with children ages 2 to 18. The study found that American families with children bought 101 fewer calories from packaged goods per person per day in 2012 than they did in 2007. The largest calorie cuts came from sweets and snacks, grain products, and carbonated soft drinks, and HWCF
companies were responsible for more of the decline in caloric purchases than companies not participating in HWCF.

For the study on families with children, researchers tracked national purchases of snacks, cereals, breads, drinks, and other packaged goods from 2000 to 2007 (before the HWCF pledge) and 2008 to 2012 (during the HWCF pledge). Researchers found that families already were starting to buy fewer calories from packaged goods before the HWCF companies’ calorie-reduction pledge began and, based on those trends, expected a bigger drop in the number of calories families bought from HWCF brands during their actual pledge period.

Marks applauded the HWCF companies for their public commitment: “HWCF companies should be recognized for stepping forward with this commitment and being held publicly accountable for their progress. Because of the enormous scale of the childhood obesity problem, we still need them—together with others who shape the U.S. food supply, including food and beverage manufacturers, retailers, and restaurants—to do even more to ensure that healthier choices are the easy and affordable choices for families. The real bottom line for all of us is not total calories or sales, but the health of our children.”

To evaluate the HWCF’s efforts, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) had to build an unprecedented, thorough picture of the U.S. food system. They compiled data from many public and commercial sources that, for the first time, tracks the flow of foods and beverages that are sold, purchased, and consumed by Americans. This allows researchers to identify how different categories of foods and beverages contribute to American’s calorie intake.

“We’re now able to track how many calories families are buying, the source of those calories, and how both are changing over time,” said Barry Popkin, PhD, the W.R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor in the School of Public Health at UNC, who is leading the evaluation team. “This new source of big data on food production and purchasing opens unprecedented opportunities to collaborate with industry leaders to find far-reaching solutions that benefit both the health of Americans and companies’ bottom line.”

Future studies conducted by the UNC team and funded by RWJF will show how HWCF’s calorie-reduction pledge has affected trends related to packaged foods based on race, ethnicity, income, and age. Upcoming phases of this evaluation also will link food purchases to dietary intake among children ages 2 to 18 to examine how changes by the food industry may affect kids’ diets.

Popkin noted that HWCF’s pledge should be seen as a critical first step that inspires HWCF and other industry leaders, including retailers that control private-label or store brand products, to do more. “Ultimately we need to help kids have healthier diets and that goes beyond reformulating packaged foods. Leading food companies must shift their product lines and their marketing practices to encourage and make it easier for kids to consume more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and other nutritious foods and drinks.”

Other research has shown that, between 2007 and 2011, better-for-you, lower-calorie foods and beverages also drove financial performance for many of these same companies. Companies with a higher percentage of their sales coming from such products recorded
stronger sales growth, higher operating profits, superior shareholder returns, and better company reputations. “These findings indicate growing consumer demand for healthier food and beverage products,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, RWJF senior scientist.

To evaluate the HWCF’s calorie-reduction pledge, researchers determined which individual products were included as part of the pledge and tracked sales of those products over time. To calculate the number of calories purchased by families with children, researchers attributed individual products to the HWCF companies; food and beverage companies that were not part of the HWCF; or private label, store brand, or generic products that retailers control; and tracked purchases of those products over time. All data used were publicly or commercially available.

The 16 companies committed to the HWCF calorie-reduction pledge include:

- Bumble Bee Foods, LLC
- Campbell Soup Company
- ConAgra Foods (includes Ralston Foods)
- General Mills, Inc.
- Hillshire Brands (previously Sara Lee Corporation)
- Kellogg Company
- Kraft Foods Group/Mondelez
- Mars, Incorporated
- McCormick & Company, Inc.
- Nestlé USA
- PepsiCo, Inc.
- Post Foods
- The Coca-Cola Company
- The Hershey Company
- The J.M. Smucker Company
- Unilever

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