

Muzzling the Milk Maligners

by

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Milk and dairy food products are probably the most maligned foods on the market today. They are criticized unscientifically and unjustifiably. Such criticisms usually come from individuals desiring to mislead the consumer into believing that imitations and other such products are equal or even superior in quality to dairy food products in order to promote their products. These myths, regardless of the source, do tend to hurt the sales of dairy products. It has even been stated that milk is only for babies, that milk causes juvenile delinquency and that milk causes pimples. One of the more serious concerns of the industry involves the cholesterol issue. The fact is, however, that if a person could lower his serum blood cholesterol level that it would preclude a premature heart attack. Most people don't realize that only 20% of cholesterol comes directly from a person's diet, and that the body also manufactures cholesterol and the level can rise when a person is under stress. Current research indicates that other factors, such as heredity, gender and pollutants, may be much more important than diet in coronary heart disease.

On the positive side, research is finding strong evidence that the adequate intake of calcium may preclude the development of brittle bones, a condition particularly prevalent among older women. Also, there is strong evidence that higher calcium intake will lower blood pressure in select population groups. And as for teenagers worried about their complexion, there is no correlation between diet and pimples, which are related to hormonal changes in adolescents.

The dairy industry can and must take some positive steps to impede the marketing inroads of imitations, brunt and debunk the unsubstantiated and unscientific claims that its products may be injurious to health, and increase per capita consumption of its product mix. The following actions are suggested:

1. Eliminate "dairy product dropouts" - those with flavor and texture defects - using sound quality control principles. We can't afford to subject consumers to a quality gamble as the stakes are too high. All products must be at optimal palatability at the time of purchase and possess adequate shelf lives. Excellent raw milk quality coupled with good manufacturing, distribution, and storage practices will protect dairy foods from premature body and flavor degradations.
2. Support school feeding programs and assist foodservice personnel in their endeavors to increase student participation in the lunch program which will lead to greater consumption of milk and other dairy foods. Studies in the U.S. show that school lunch participants have higher intakes of calcium and other select nutrients than non-participants.

3. Increase investment in innovative advertising and promotion campaigns which will create greater consumer demand for milk and milk products. Studies have shown that one can expect a two dollar return for every dollar expended for promotion of select dairy foods.
4. Invest in and support new product development which will expand commodity lines that will appeal to more segments of the market.
5. Implement use of the "REAL" Seal. This identifying insignia for U.S. genuine dairy products provides a public service, cuts through the clutter of conflicting media messages, enhances the perceived value of milk and milk products, and provides for a multiplicity of advertising "tie-ins".
6. Eliminate the concerns held by confused consumers who have been bombarded with sensationalist and misleading claims that milk and dairy foods consumption can be allegedly detrimental to health.
7. Support "subtle sell" nutrition education programs which encourage the use of the basic four food group approach in meal planning. Additionally, the industry must go on the offensive against the food faddists and dietary hucksters who often demean dairy foods and promote eating plans which are more harmful than helpful.
8. Invest heavily in basic research pertaining to dairy foods. Relatively recently, for example, it has been discovered that consumption of certain cheeses may help protect against development of dental caries, increased use of calcium rich dairy products may lower blood pressure in select population groups and preclude the onset of osteoporosis, and certain cultured dairy food organisms may have anti-carcinogenic properties.

The dairy industry can take pride in the fact that it still offers consumers the most nutrient dense foods at reasonable costs. But, it must be understood that our products won't "sell themselves". Aggressive promotion and marketing of high quality dairy foods coupled with heavy monetary investment in basic research to validate the positive contributions they make to the nutritional integrity of all individuals is imperative; lest we perish.