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Take the fat out of your food (just don't tell anyone about it)

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A GENERATION AGO, air bags and antilock brakes were pricey extras. Wealthy folks bought 'em; the rest of us just prayed we wouldn't crash into anybody. (We especially prayed we wouldn't crash into the wealthy folks and end up having to watch their happy, unscratched lives from heaven.)

Today those safety features are commonplace, even in cheap cars. We expect the auto companies to provide them. And pretty soon food is going to provide them too.

Not antilock brakes, of course, but built-in, life-saving properties. These will be standard. Those of us who cannot afford a locally grown, organic pear for dessert—or actually prefer a Hostess Cupcake—will no longer find our health thrown to the winds, even as the Whole Foods crowd enjoys longer, skinnier lives. The package-food industry is going to save us.

It has to.

That is the message of Hank Cardello, a former marketing director at Coke and General

Mills turned brand consultant. Recently, he was host of the Global Obesity Forum in Chapel Hill, N.C., a two-day affair attended by execs from Kraft, Kellogg's, McDonald's, Coke and 10 other mega-marketers. The fact that they all met to discuss how to make their products less fattening is not that surprising. What is surprising is the message Cardello was preaching: Do it on the QT.

"'Stealth health' is what I call it," said Cardello over a diner breakfast. "If you tell somebody, 'Here's a healthy fry,' what are they going to say?" he asked, pointing to the lovely, crunchy ones on my plate.

"Ew."

"Exactly. The consumer wants taste, and when they hear the word 'health,' they run away," he said. The McLean Deluxe debacle is a perfect example. As much as we Americans bemoan junk food's unhealthfulness, we sure don't trust it when it tries to reform.

And yet, if the industry does

not reform, it is not doing itself any favors, either. Today, 64% of Americans are either overweight or obese. Twenty years ago, it was 20%. We hear these numbers over and over, but when you add up the diabetes and heart disease they cause, it becomes pretty obvious: The food industry is killing off its heavy users. That's bad for the bottom line. (And bad for the dead customers, too, of course.) It's also making the industry a target for government regulation.

The solution lies in doing on a grand scale what some proactive companies have begun doing on a smaller scale. Without fanfare, says Cardello, both Tropicana and Minute Maid have added cholesterol-lowering sterols to some of their juices. At General Mills, managers' bonuses are based, in part, on their coming up with more-healthful versions of their products that still look and taste the same. Unilever pulled 17,000 tons of sugar out of its product lineup, and you didn't hear a peep.

And take a look at Coke.

Back when Cardello was there in the '80s, diet drinks were for folks who wanted to be skinny, like the Tab gal.

Keen to the new reality, Coke has been acquiring drinks such as Glaceau Water and developing others, such as Coke Zero. "Coke tends to get demonized," says the old cola pusher. "But hidden from view, they've moved more of their portfolio into these lower-calorie beverages." He estimates they make up two-thirds of Coke's portfolio now.

In this way, the stealth-health movement mirrors the greening of America. Packaging waste that was once a given is being re-examined, same as fats and calories. And some of them are coming out.

Eventually, an unhealthy fry may seem as old-fashioned as a Styrofoam burger box or a car without airbags. As a fry addict myself, I can't wait.

Crunch.

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