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WORKING TOWARDS A SOLUTION TO THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC: A  
MARKETER'S PERSPECTIVE

by  
Elizabeth Ann Clippard

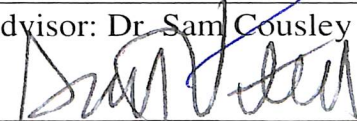
A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
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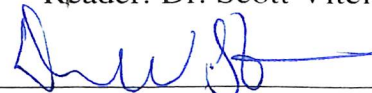
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## ABSTRACT

ELIZABETH ANN CLIPPARD: Working Towards A Solution to the Obesity Epidemic:  
A Marketer's Perspective  
(Under the direction of Dr. Sam Cousley)

The obesity epidemic is a social issue in that critics are quick to blame business and government for failing the consumers. The truth is that all three parties have failed each other by allowing such a cultural change to occur. The issue is similar to the tobacco public health crisis following the spike in lung cancer in the 1950s and 60s. The tobacco companies were blamed entirely for their unhealthy products and the government still spends millions today regulating their products. In order to improve upon this course of action, I believe that a more cooperative solution exists in order to decrease obesity and increase the position of all three parties. Businesses have a market opportunity to provide products and services that are appealing and conducive to a healthy lifestyle. Consumers have the ability to spur social change by preparing more foods inside the home and incorporating physical activity into daily routines. Governmental agencies have the ability to streamline their programs to create a more clear and efficient program that offers educational tools and resources to communities to support the social change. The solution to the obesity epidemic is social change from which all parties can literally and figuratively profit.

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## **Introduction**

The obesity epidemic in America is an issue that should be dealt with immediately, but it is not an issue with one party to blame. The rise in consumption of calories and the decrease of activity is a cultural change that has been intensifying for decades. Social changes such as women rejoining the work force, the rise of fast food, and an increase in technology in entertainment have all contributed to a surplus in average daily caloric intake. In my opinion, no one party created this problem and no one party should implement the solution. To solve the obesity epidemic, consumers, businesses, and regulatory agencies will have to cooperate to make a social change towards more active lifestyles and better nutrition.

From a marketer's perspective the obesity epidemic is a social issue, but it is also a major market opportunity. There is a great need for food that is satisfying, fresh, and of a reasonable portion that will be more appealing to consumers than calorie-dense processed goods. There is also a great need for entertainment that can keep consumers active and consequently happier in their leisure time that will be more appealing than staying sedentary to watch television or use the internet on a home computer. There are possible products and services that can satisfy these market needs. They have not been largely capitalized upon yet, and the businesses that do it well will reap great profits from their pioneering efforts.

Along with business' new efforts to capitalize on a desire to be healthier, consumers have to cooperate and take responsibility for their actions. They have the ability to choose products that are fresh and of reasonable proportions. One way to ensure

that this happens is increasing the amount of food prepared and consumed inside the home. This is a cultural change that may never reverse itself, but it is a challenge worth pursuing.

Finally, it is in the best interest of governmental regulatory agencies for Americans to be healthy and productive citizens. However, the numerous amounts of programs in effect today that are trying to regulate nutrition and activity levels in schools and communities are poorly managed, ineffective, and a huge waste of taxpayer dollars. It would be more efficient to have a single, nation-wide program that provides schools and communities with incentives and resources to lead healthier lifestyles. The money saved by streamlining the regulation of obesity would be better served in education of nutrition and physical activity.

The obesity epidemic is a social issue that is hurting America in many ways. The solution does not have to be a painful process. If all three sectors involved cooperate to work towards a healthier lifestyle, all of the parties can emerge in a better position than they were in before.

## **Chapter 1: The Obesity Epidemic**

The obesity epidemic is a public health crisis that is difficult to define, measure, and analyze. It is similar in many ways to the tobacco scare in America in the 1950s when research was published on the negative health effects of smoking cigarettes. However there are many more factors that concern this debate, and no one player can bear the whole blame of the weight increase in Americans. The only fact that everyone can agree upon is that more calories are being consumed than are being burned by the majority of consumers (ERS/USDA 2011). The number of daily calories created for the American Food supply rose from 3,300 per person in 1970 to 3,800 in the late 1990s (Nestle 2007).

The term “epidemic” is defined by Merriam-Webster as, “affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Some argue that obesity is not a new trend, nor is it an epidemic because it is not contagious (Boero, 2006). They are correct; it is not new. It has however, rapidly increased in the last five decades and shows no signs of slowing down. Excess weight is not contagious, but the habits that cause the disorder are observed and picked up easily by peers. Obesity is affecting the majority of the American population directly or indirectly and its severity is growing. Obesity is not usually considered a time-sensitive disease in that it does not bring about negative side effects until the disease has taken its toll on the body over a span of many years. This slow decline in health allows all sectors, consumers, businesses, and legislators, to take a



passive stance in offering a solution. No group is willing to take blame or make any corrective action quickly. If all sectors (consumers, businesses, and government regulatory agencies) would agree that obesity is the effect of a combination of poor eating and lifestyle habits, then we as a population could make strides towards a healthier and less-expensive lifestyle.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent study, 34.2% of adults (ages 20 and older) are classified as overweight, 33.8% are obese, and 5.7% are extremely obese (Ogden, 2010). The CDC and NHCS define the above classifications with the following formulas: "Body mass index (BMI), expressed as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ), is commonly used to classify overweight (BMI 25.0–29.9), obesity (BMI greater than or equal to 30.0), and extreme obesity (BMI greater than or equal to 40.0)," (Ogden, 2010). Combined almost 75% of American adults are classified as overweight or obese.

This staggering percentage is a massive increase from the numbers that were observed in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) that was first conducted from 1971-1974. The results of this survey classified only 32.3% of adults overweight, 14.5% as obese, and 1.3% as extremely obese, a combined percentage of 48.1% (NCHS, 2008). The definitions for what constitutes overweight, obese, and extremely obese has been changed over time; therefore the percentage increases could be even larger if the definitions had been held constant. Before year 2000, participants of the NHANES survey could be classified as marginally overweight (26.4-27.8), overweight (27.8-31.1), or very overweight or obese (greater than 31.1), (Halls, 2008).

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Even more disturbing are the statistics observed in children ages 2-19. The CDC classifies children as obese when their BMI is above the 95th percentile of the age-sex specific distribution. In the 2007-2008 NHANES, 16.9% of children were classified as obese, a percentage that has tripled from the first survey's findings of only 5% (Ogden, 2010 (2)).<sup>1</sup>

The CDC's survey, which is widely referred to as the expert source, uses a combination of personal interviews and physical examinations to make sure participants are honest. Different researchers use alternate techniques in measuring obesity. For example, the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) states that BMI is the most common measure, but researchers also utilize waist and hip circumference. Additionally, children are placed on a scale and obesity is defined as a BMI-for-age percentile (OAC, 2011). All research agrees that the general size of Americans has been trending upwards since weight and size has been worthy of concern.

Body weight is an issue discussed between doctors and patients, but it is becoming a more and more pressing issue for the American public. Medical experts link excessive body weight to diseases including coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, liver and gallbladder disease, cancer, stroke, sleep apnea, infertility, and joint deterioration (OAC, 2011). Why are these diseases of public concern? Medical costs alone are costing taxpayers millions of dollars. Famed nutritionist, Marion Nestle, states, "diet related medical costs for just six health conditions- coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity- exceeded \$70 billion in 1995" (Nestle, 2007). Inflation alone causes this number to be well over \$100 billion

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<sup>1</sup> The Sampling Methodology for the NHANES can be found at the following address: [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes/nhanes2007-2008/sampling\\_0708.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes/nhanes2007-2008/sampling_0708.htm)

today. These medical costs are comprised of additional physicians visits, hospital stays, and medication costs. Not factored into this number is the indirect cost of lost wages by those who are unable to work due to their weight and resulting health issues.

Increased medical costs that are imposed upon taxpayers are not the only externality of spreading obesity. As Americans' waistlines grow, we are becoming increasingly accepting of overweight as a natural size. Organizations have formed in recent years defending overweight people as natural and healthy such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). The lifestyle that the average American is living is detrimental to our health. If businesses, consumers, and government do not collaborate on how to raise awareness and make an improvement, our poor health will continue to decline, and we will pay for it.

Obesity began to rapidly rise in the 1970s when many cultural trends came together. Women began to rapidly rejoin the work force after having children; televisions were in the majority of households; and the availability of fast, inexpensive, and highly caloric foods increased the amount of meals prepared outside the home. In the last 40 plus years, these factors have only grown and amplified each other to extremes.

Today, women make up almost exactly 50% of the workforce. Additionally, 80% of mothers with children ages 6-18 have rejoined the work force and are spending their time away from home (Strober, 2003). This often means that food consumed in the home is prepared outside of the home by a restaurant or manufacturer. And consequently, more calories on average are consumed. In a recent study, each additional meal or snack eaten away from home adds an extra 134 calories to that day's intake (Todd, 2010).

Restaurants' main concern is not to serve healthy portions but to gain customer

satisfaction and loyalty. Restaurants serve what they think to be the tastiest option so that customers will return to their establishment. The growing amount of food prepared outside of the home is a large contributing factor to the excess amount of calories Americans are consuming.

Technology is another factor that is contributing to our unhealthy lifestyle. Televisions are so common that it is not rare to find one in every room of a household. In fact, the majority of Americans have more than one television in the household. According to A.C. Nielson Media Research, there are approximately 2.75 televisions in each home for every 2.55 persons living in that home (Nielson, 2009). Additionally, Americans spend approximately 153 hours a month watching TV and being sedentary. The amount of sedentary time has also increased over the last few decades due to the rise of the home computers and video game consoles. Nielson's *Three Screen Report*, shows that Americans who watch video online and through mobile phones consume an additional 3 and 3.5 hours of video each month. The newest contributing technological factor, social networking, has made intrapersonal communication an almost zero calorie expenditure process. Television, home computers, gaming consoles, and social networks provide outlets for Americans to be entertained without expending a significant amount of calories. As our technology improves, innovators should keep in mind the need to be active in our time outside of school and work.

Finally, the availability of convenient, inexpensive, and calorie-dense foods is at an all time high. The amount that we spend on fast food has increased from \$6 million to \$110 million since 1970. Eric Schlosser of *Fast Food Nation* points out, "Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers,

computer software, or new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music - combined” (Schlosser, 2001). This is alarming not only because the majority of products are unhealthy, but because it cuts out many normal processes that would cause one to be active. Food prepared outside of the home eliminates at least some amount of shopping, preparing, cooking, and cleaning. These processes eliminate calories and prolong the positive experience of having a meal.

The technological advancements that have given us laptops, gaming consoles, and smart phones have enabled us to be more sedentary in our leisure time. For example, one can read an entire book on his or her tablet without having to go to a location, find a book, purchase it, and return home to read it. Not to say this would be a significant expenditure of calories, but small shortcuts like the above example are causing Americans to have a surplus of daily calories. These inventions are progress, but they may be hindering us as productive individuals in the long run. As consumers, Americans need to realize that technology is not an excuse for a life of sitting on the couch. Additionally, good businesses should have the best interests of their consumers in mind when they design new products. A wonderful example of this relationship working harmoniously is the Wii gaming console released in 2006 by Nintendo games. It allows consumers to play simulated sports with a wireless controller and burn calories at the same time. In fact it encourages physical activity with built in health features that measure weight, fitness, and calorie-burns.

In the same realm, consumers should be able to realize that overeating is not acceptable just because a restaurant serves you a portion that is oversized. Food service businesses should not offer consumers a food product that could be harmful to his or her

diet (i.e. too high in calories, fat, sodium). A great way to measure this is the nutrition labels on the side of retail food products. Companies are required to disclose nutritional information and often include a “daily value” or a percentage of what a portion of this food should be of a consumer’s daily intake. However, in a recent study, 39% of consumers reported not using the nutrition panel as a purchasing decision factor (Ollberding et. al. 2010).

Consumers need to take responsibility for their actions (or lack there of).

Businesses at the same time need to work diligently to provide nutritional food products with their consumers’ best interests in mind. And finally, the government needs to take a cohesive stance on obesity. They should not spend millions on ineffective healthy living initiatives only to have public schools serving fried foods 3 out of 5 days of the week. As a society, America can lead the way out of the unhealthy rut the world has found itself in. It will not be a single initiative that makes a difference, but a joined collaborative effort.

Robert Pool of *Fat: Fighting the Obesity Epidemic* says:

The trick will be to move toward this attitude without killing the sense of personal responsibility for one’s weight. If people interpret the message that the environment is the culprit as meaning that they are powerless in the face of that environment, they may stop trying to control their weight, and the epidemic will get even worse. The message is not that individuals cannot make a difference in their own weight. They can, and they do. The message is that society as a whole has created the problem by constructing an environment that is unhealthy for many of us, and society as a whole must do something to fix it. (Pool 2001).

## **Chapter 2: Parallels to the Tobacco Crisis**

In many ways the battle over how to improve obesity rates and consequential health care issues mirrors the tobacco industry's struggle after incriminating research on cigarettes was published in the 1950s and the increase of lung cancer. Certainly there are vital differences, but the arguments are eerily similar. How the obesity epidemic is handled can improve upon the successes and failures of the tobacco industry's battle with the public health outcry linking smoking to cancer.

There are differences that make smoking cigarettes a simpler issue to solve, but the framework and the outcome can be paralleled. The main difference is the fact that consuming food is a vital life function whereas smoking cigarettes is a voluntary and unnecessary choice. The second major difference is that nicotine found in cigarettes is an addictive chemical; research on food being addictive is not yet conclusive. Many researchers are in the race to peg high fructose corn syrup with the label addictive, as it may not trigger the hormone, leptin that notifies the brain that you are full (Bray, 2004). A final major difference is the regulation of sale to children. Cigarettes are banned for sale from children under 18. Conversely, there are no restrictions on what children can consume except for alcoholic beverages.

Cigarettes much like indulgent foods can be harmful but extremely desirable. They can fill an emotional void and give the consumer an instant feeling of gratification. Consumption of these products is often social, and consumers can rarely recall how much they have consumed: a pack of cigarettes, a whole bag of potato chips, etc. The average



consumer is aware that cigarettes are dangerous to health; likewise, they are aware that overconsumption can lead to excess body weight.

People make imprudent consumption decisions for many reasons but mostly because the products are readily available, affordable, and too good to pass up. If there were equally enticing products that did not negatively affect our health, we might consume those as alternatives. The problem is that manufacturers and food service companies are only giving consumers what they ask for, products that are satisfying and appealing. Similar to the tobacco companies, many large food companies are aware that the majority of their products are not healthy and that the serving size/usage recommendation will not be followed. It is easy for them to claim innocence while blaming the consumer's irresponsibility.

Tobacco companies have stood behind this veil of consumer irresponsibility for decades with little success. The major cigarette companies are still profitable because groups of people are still addicted smokers, but their image is in ruins. Some major food companies are earning a similar negative reputation, and they should learn from big tobacco companies' mistakes (Mello, 2003).

*Reader's Digest* published "Cancer by the Carton" in 1952, a study linking smoking directly to lung cancer (Norr, 1952). This led to markedly decreased cigarette sales and prompted tobacco executives to take action. As former FDA commissioner, David Kessler wrote, "The tobacco industry's strategy was embodied in a script written by the lawyers. Every tobacco company executive in the public eye was told to learn the script backwards and forwards, no deviation was allowed," (Kessler, 2001). The food industry has adopted a similar strategy in that all advocates and allies advocate for the

same things. They emphasize consumer responsibility, physical activity over diet, and claim that no foods can be called good or bad (Nestle, 2002).

One would think solving the tobacco health crisis would be simple. Make people stop smoking cigarettes, and health concerns will decrease. This is no easy feat to accomplish just as decreasing calorie consumption in America will be difficult. In the tobacco public health crisis, there were few identifiable stakeholders to consider. Even in the 1950s a few major companies dominated sales of cigarettes- Phillip Morris Co., American Tobacco Company, RJ Reynolds, and P. Lorillard. This fact made the issue easier to contain and regulate. In the case of the obesity epidemic, countless players have to be taken into account including major food companies such as Kraft, Nestle, Pepsi-Co and Coca-Cola, restaurants like McDonald's and all Yum! Brands (Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, KFC, etc.). The list of businesses that media and health advocates repeatedly blame for serving excess calories goes on forever, so one cannot draw a line where accusations end.

Consumers and activists cannot point the finger of blame at the food industry without looking in the mirror first. The solution to the obesity epidemic can veer away from the tobacco crisis solution by taking a more multi-faceted approach. This is where all problem solvers need to realize that the issue does not have a clear culprit; therefore, the solution needs to include all parties: consumers, businesses, and regulatory agencies.

The tobacco industry handled the negative research on cigarette smoking like any business concerned with their image would have done so. They hired lawyers and public relations specialists and dug in their heels. When they could no longer refute that their products were causing bodily harm, they turned to research and development. The companies created "light" cigarettes and developed the filter that is popular today.

Consumers perceived this change as positive and adopted the light cigarette as a healthier alternative. The negative side to this change is that consumers inadvertently made up for lost nicotine by smoking additional cigarettes daily (Parker-Pope, 2001). Additionally, the industry enlisted countless Political Action Committees (PACs) and lobbyists to fight for their cause with legislators. A 1998 statistic showed that lobbyist spent \$67 million on tobacco and a combined \$52 million on all other issues (Nestle, 2002).

The food industry has attained all of the same allies and is following a similar path. They are turning to research and development while fighting the negative press on their current products. For example, fast-food restaurants nationwide have adopted a much improved side item menu that includes sliced apples, yogurt, granola, skim milk, and fruit juices (Talty, 2011).

The food industry is facing large negative effects of overconsumption. The costs to society of obesity are massive; lower estimates state that \$70 billion is spent on medical costs for coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity (Nestle, 2002). This does not include lost wages or the effects of obesity that are intangible. Excess body weight and poor body image is often a cause of depression and life-long psychological damage, especially in those who are overweight or obese as children or adolescents.

The food industry needs to learn from the tobacco crisis multiple things: a unified front, better image management, more rigorous research and development, and more gracious customer service. When cigarette manufacturers joined to draft and publish the “Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers” they emitted a unified and caring image. The food industry and all of its political allies need to join together to emit a unified front. No

one is publicly addressing the possibility that better products could and should be developed. If all of the major food manufacturers took an active role in decreasing obesity, competition in healthier foods would increase and consumers would benefit. Further, this effort would create a more favorable image of the food industry. Their current title is “Big Food” just as cigarette manufacturers were deemed “Big Tobacco.” This title could change with a more customer-friendly and focused approach. Finally, these major food companies have the opportunity to emerge from the obesity public health crisis as leaders if they want to. Cigarette companies accepted small defeats in healthier cigarette releases and ceased all efforts to minimize the effects of their products.

The food industry looks like a negative force in today’s market capitalizing on nutritionally uneducated consumers. They have the ability and the resources to change this image with increased efforts just as tobacco once did. It may be less profitable in the short term for a particular company to be the first to take an active role in fighting obesity. But in the long run, I believe it will put them ahead of their competition in the food service industry.

### **Chapter 3: The Role of Big Business**

Businesses are experts at capitalizing on consumers' most imprudent behaviors such as smoking, gambling, drinking alcohol, and many other indulgent activities. Consumers assume all of the responsibility for their behavior, but the producer is often left unscathed. Their goal is to make as much profit as they can no matter what the consequences to the consumer may be. Major agribusinesses, food companies, and restaurants are no different. In the process, Americans' perceptions of a normal diet have changed for the worse over the last few decades (Nestle, 2002).

American consumers have become accustomed to sugary, over processed, fat-filled foods that contribute to an unnecessarily large portion of their daily calories. According to the CDC, portion sizes directly affect how many calories are consumed in one sitting (CDC, 2006). The bigger portion people are served, the more they will eat. This is a worrisome fact, knowing that portion sizes in America have been growing for decades. In a 2008 study, it was found that the average serving of pizza once contained around 500 calories. Today a serving of pizza from a similar establishment contains 850 calories, an increase of 70%. Likewise, the average bagel contained only 140 calories compared to today's bagels weighing in around 350 calories, a 150% increase (Monte, 2008). These are just a couple of examples that show that our culture has changed along with our habits and expectations.

Americans are not conscious of how many calories they are eating; instead, they decide how much is reasonable to consume with their eyes. Businesses are using this fact to promote their latest products. Major restaurant chains are competing by flaunting their gastric portion sizes for a similar price. For example, in 2004 Hardee's released their "Monster Thickburger" containing 1,410 calories, twice the recommended amount of daily saturated fat, and a whole day's worth of sodium for \$5.49 (Finkelstein, 2008). Hardee's CEO, Andrew Puzder, was quoted saying, "I hope our competitors keep promoting those healthy products, and we will keep promoting our big, juicy delicious burgers," (Wolk, 2004).

Puzder is correct in that many fast-food restaurants have made strides in incorporating healthy options into their menus. For example, Wendy's and McDonald's offer salads around 300 calories, as well as side items such as apple slices, fruit, and yogurt parfaits. Further, Taco Bell recently introduced a line of "Fresco Style" products sans cheese and heavy sauces and is promoting them as a "Drive-thru Diet". The effectiveness of this diet as a weight loss tool is not proven, but their efforts should be appreciated by consumers. It is difficult for the majority of customers to choose the healthy options when the most popular items on fast-food menus are usually considered tastier. The majority of fast food is making an effort to promote good nutrition, but the industry has a long way to go before their products are not viewed as a major contributor to the obesity epidemic in America.

Similar to these efforts are those of major packaged-foods companies such as Kraft, Nestle, General Mills, and PepsiCo. In the past few years, most food retailers have caught on to the diet craze. Consumers are looking for a quick fix to their weight issues.

The easiest way for companies to capitalize on this desire is to promote items claiming to be low-calorie, low-fat, low-carb, as well as high in fiber and vitamins. For example, Kellogg's top selling snack, Cheeze-it, carries a reduced fat version and a whole grain version. Consumers take these slogans as absolute truths and feel comfortable buying these products without reading the nutritional label. Many of these fortified and modified foods are not any healthier than their original version. In fact, studies show that consumers often compensate for the decrease in fat or calories by consuming more (NHLBI, 2011).

One of the largest criticisms of America's food companies is their manner of combating recent negative press and research. Lobbyists for food trade organizations spend millions of dollars each year combating the health regulations and labels proposed by the FDA and the USDA. For example, the American Meat Institute hired lobbyists to fight the USDA on revisions to the Food Pyramid in the early 1990s. They claimed that the pyramid would influence Americans to eat less red meat. In fact, the panel formed to create the food pyramid includes multiple members with a vested interest in many varying food groups; therefore, the recommended dietary guidelines are more of an economically balanced way of eating than a healthy one. The USDA is first and foremost the United States Department of Agriculture, and their allegiance lies with the farmers and businesses that make up American agriculture. For this reason, it is worrisome that the USDA is also responsible for the nutritional guidance of Americans.

Another criticism of large food companies and agricultural businesses is their ability to persuade politicians. Political Action Committees (PACs) are able to donate large sums of campaign funds to candidates they think can help their cause. This

relationship rides a fine line between fair and corrupt. During President Clinton's administration, Vice-President Gore announced a Florida sugar tax and a possible phasing out of sugar subsidies. A major campaign contributor, Alfonso Fanjul (controller of one-third of Florida's sugarcane production) called the president the next day, and the tax was never passed. The Fanjul Corporation also continues to receive around \$60 million annually in government farming subsidies. As Marion Nestle states, "now, that's access," (Nestle, 2007). Regulatory agencies and political leaders have an obligation to make the business environment friendly to both businesses and consumers. In the food industry, those in power often favor the business side more than the consumers' needs.

The food industry is actively combatting their image as the main contributor to the obesity epidemic. They deny fault and place all blame onto the irresponsible consumer. One cannot say that the food industry as a whole is corrupt and conspiring to hurt the American consumer. They are not. Their desire to gain great profits greatly outweighs their desire to keep their consumers healthy. For this reason, one could call them immoral. Vitell demonstrates the 5 denials of responsibility of immoral companies (Vitell and Grove, 1987). The first, denial of responsibility, is obvious in the food industry; food companies see themselves as part of a capitalist industry that has no social impact. It is just business. The second, denial of injury, is also very visible. Food companies claim that you cannot directly link obesity alone to heart disease and other weight-related illnesses. The third, denial of victim, would be that consumers are gluttons and are not in the wrong at all. This is the most prominent argument for the food industry. They claim that their products do nothing to fuel excess weight gain; instead the consumer is abusing their products. The fourth, condemning the condemners, is a way of



shedding light on the agencies that criticize them. The food industries can question the researchers' motives in finding them guilty of providing inadequate products to consumers. And finally, they appeal to higher loyalties; in order to stay in business they must make the highest profits in order to please all stakeholders and be an active part of the economy. Their ability to make a profit is great, but their ability to satisfy customers' in the long term is insufficient. Once consumers realize what processed products can do to their health, they will forego the products in search of healthier, fresher options, and the major food companies will lose this category as customers.

The big food companies in America are operating in the same manner that a toy company operates. The company gets their product up to safety standards and sells as many of the toys as possible. The food industry has defined their businesses too narrowly; they are not just serving calories to customers. They have the opportunity to contribute to a positive lifestyle. Food companies are not realizing that they have a massive opportunity in today's market. If they can create products that are delicious and nutritional, they will be the premier food business. The popular line of frozen foods, Amy's Kitchen, Inc. has been extremely successful with their retail products. They are barely marketed and charge a premium price, but remain among the list of top selling frozen health foods. This is a prime example of consumers looking for alternatives to the incumbent unhealthy favorites. Frozen food is only one sector of this issue. The restaurant business is changing more on a local level. Major cities are producing more organic, vegetarian, and wholesome restaurants, but no one healthy alternative restaurant has capitalized on this desire on a national level.

Public health professionals and nutritional groups are not the only ones targeting the food industry for their externalities on the population. In 2007, the Better Business Bureau raised eyebrows at the industry's child targeting practices. Children are an extremely attractive target market for their large purchasing power, but regulations are less lenient when dealing with children. The industry agreed to make changes in their marketing practices towards children, according to the BBB, but significant changes have yet to make an impact.

The large role of food business in America's obesity epidemic has the potential to be a leading force in reducing obesity rates. Just as their products helped Americans gain weight and develop sedentary lifestyles, they can fuel weight loss and activity. Their cooperation could mean more business for everyone and an improved image. If the consumers and regulatory agencies will work with them to make improvements, everyone can benefit from changes in the food service industry in a profitable way.

## **Chapter 4: Food Advertising**

Food and beverage companies aggressively market their products through many means of advertising. Their most promising consumers are children that they can turn into lifelong customers. For this reason, the companies understandably want to have access to younger potential customers. Food and beverage advertising is often targeted towards children, a segment that is subject to more ethical criticism. Children are exposed to a number of food advertisements per hour of television. There is a great opportunity to change the way food and beverage products are marketed in America that could help decrease obesity rates and contribute to the solution to the obesity epidemic especially in younger age segments.

The overwhelming amount of food and beverage advertising is a matter of concern. According to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission report on food marketing to children, food and beverage companies now spend around \$1.6 billion annually, (Marr, 2008). Furthermore, these advertisements were shown to affect the foods that children choose to consume, (Borzekowski, 2001). With this knowledge, it would be ideal for companies to promote healthy products to children to create lifelong customers and increase brand equity while instilling positive dietary habits via television.

To be declared deceptive by the FTC, advertising must first make a representation, omission or practice that is likely to mislead the consumer; second it must affect or be directed primarily towards a particular group. Lastly, the representation or practice must be a material one. When companies cast unhealthy products in a positive light that

encourages regular consumption of these products, they are deceiving the audience. Parent and consumer advocacy groups such as Children Now, are asking for improvements in food advertising to children and they are not pleased with recent self-regulation tactics, (Kunkel, 2009).

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies published a report recommending that food companies, “Work through the Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU) to revise, expand, apply, enforce, and evaluate explicit industry self-regulatory guidelines beyond traditional advertising to include evolving vehicles and venues for marketing communication (e.g., the Internet, advergames, branded product placement across multiple media)” (McGinnis, 2005). The Better Business Bureau interceded to promote self-regulation in the place of national advertising restrictions. The Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative of 2006 included a pledge from major food companies to advertise products that are “better-for-you” and promote healthy lifestyles. The following major companies pledged with the BBB: Burger King Corporation, Campbell Soup Company, Coca-Cola Company, ConAgra Foods, Inc., General Mills, Inc., Hershey Company, Kellogg Company, Kraft Foods, Inc., McDonald’s USA, Nestle USA, and PepsiCo, Inc. (Kolish, 2008).

The initiative has yet to yield major improvements because the guidelines for what constitutes a healthier product are subject to different opinions. Today, the initiative holds pledges from 17 companies and boasts a specific calorie, fat, sugar, and sodium decrease from previously promoted items to go into effect December 13, 2013.

Studies show the changes have done little to improve the quality of food and beverage marketing that is a contributing factor to the obesity epidemic especially in

children. The amount of food advertising children (under the age of 12) are viewing per hour has decreased from 10.9 in 2005 to 7.6 in 2009. However, the nutritional quality of the products advertised has not improved in the least, (Powell, 2011). The BBB will enforce its new uniform nutritional criteria in December of 2013 in hopes of improving the content of food and beverage marketing.

Advertisers have more access than ever to consumers through changing technologies, and with this increased opportunity comes responsibility. Freedom of commercial speech is protected in America, but this luxury has not always been available. Court systems have many times ruled against businesses trying to promote their products and services. For example, in *Bigelow vs. the State of Virginia* the court placed a ban on advertising abortion services because, “women could be unduly influenced,” according to Justice William Rehnquist, (Glantz, 1997). Additionally, tobacco companies have endured advertising and promotion bans from television and radio since the late 1960s. Many products and services that are viewed as vices such as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and abortion have been subject to more harsh commercial speech rulings. In 1996, Justice Harry Blackmon ruled a ban on liquor prices unconstitutional and stated, “that all attempts to dissuade legal choices by citizens by keeping them ignorant are impossible,” (Glantz, 1997).

Many large food companies are under pressure to act more concerned with the physical health of their customers, and self-regulation has not yet proved to be effective in decreasing obesity rates. That being said, the regulation of food marketing altogether is not the answer for any age segment. Justice Blackmon is correct in that keeping consumers ignorant is impossible. If consumers want to know where they can reap the

largest amount of unhealthy product for the least cost, they will be motivated to find answers one way or another. American consumers should be educated by advertisements on what products contain and can offer their bodies. Companies should be proud to divulge what their products' nutrients can do as fuel to the consumers' systems.

Instead of sheltering the American public, we should encourage advertisers to spend their advertising dollars in cooperation with recommended dietary guidelines. Their messages can yield profits as well as generate positive educational lessons to Americans of all ages. The Better Business Bureau is making a valiant effort to keep legislators out of the food and beverage marketing departments, but it will only be able to hold off anti-obesity groups for so long. If the new uniform criteria does not improve the quality of products advertised during children's programming, in my opinion they will face strict advertising bans from the federal government.

Food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing practices are a contributing factor to the obesity epidemic. Companies are promoting products that are harmful for regular use. These companies have an opportunity to improve product offering as well as promotional efforts while maintaining a large degree freedom of commercial speech for food and beverage companies of the future.

## **Chapter 5: Government Regulation**

The U.S. federal government has an active role and a vested interest in preventing obesity among its citizens. The population of our country suffers from this disease in many ways that cripple us all in the ways of lower productivity, higher healthcare costs, and diminishing birth rates. In order to keep us healthy and productive, legislators appointed the United States Department of Agriculture in charge of our nutritional materials taught across the nation. Later, the Department of Health and Human Services was created in order to monitor the health and well being of Americans. There are a wide variety of institutions funded by the government with objectives to increase the level of health and fitness, but there is a lack of a unified front to make significant change. The various departments within these agencies create and recreate programs to emphasize the importance of nutrition, but its impact is often lost in the ambiguity between different publications. The legislation and regulation inflicted upon schools and food providers have the best intentions, but they are not always as effective as they could be if there was a clear leader in the fight against obesity.

Abraham Lincoln formed the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862 to increase crop production and make new strides in crop research and development. At that time, they regulated all of the nations farms with a budget of around \$90,000; today the USDA employs over 100,000 Americans with a budget of \$95 billion. It consists of 17 smaller agencies each assigned their own objective. The white house defines the USDA

duties as, “The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) develops and executes policy on farming, agriculture, and food. Its aims include meeting the needs of farmers and ranchers, promoting agricultural trade and production, assuring food safety, protecting natural resources, fostering rural communities, and ending hunger in America and abroad,” (*White House*, 2011). The USDA’s main point is to promote food production and aid farmers and ranchers, not to monitor Americans’ intake of these foods. However, the USDA houses an agency, the Food Nutrition Services (FNS), which aims to provide nutrition to those less fortunate. Their mission is “to provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet through its food assistance programs and comprehensive nutrition education efforts,” (FNS, 2012).

The agency that is charged with overseeing the health of Americans is the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The department houses the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that oversees and regulates all required food labeling, as well as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that conducts research and operates programs in order to prevent the most plaguing diseases of the American population. The DHHS is allotted \$700 billion and 65,000 employees to carry out their duties, while the Department of Education is allotted \$65 billion and 4,200 employees (*White House*, 2011).

All of the agencies above are given billions of dollars each year from the Federal government’s budget in order to carry out their tasks, but no one agency has taken over complete responsibility for the inadequacies in Americans’ typical diet. Each agency promotes and funds various programs aimed at education and awareness, but none provide a concerted effort or logical plan to prevent the prevalence of obesity. Without



the cooperation from all sides, the different agencies are wasting their billions of dollars on a fragmented stab at decreasing obesity.

There are many routes in which the federal agencies attempt to make their dent on the American obesity issue. Education, meal providing, funding or other incentives for physical activity, research, and promotional efforts are ways in which the USDA, CDC, and FDA try to hold back the spread of obesity. The largest portion of these efforts is in some way targeted towards children in public schools. The department of education often consents to programs of this type in order to increase funding as a whole and invite nutritional education into the classrooms. However, the decision to allow such material into the classroom is often made on a state or local level. One of the largest of these efforts is the recent, "Let's Move!" campaign against childhood obesity headed by Michelle Obama. It calls for lower calories, less fat, and higher fruit and vegetable content in school cafeterias and creates incentives for children to log their physical activity in order to reach goals. This program has only been in action for one full year and no research has been conducted to measure its success. Its goal is to reduce the childhood obesity rate to just 5% by 2030, (Barnes, 2011).

Other similar campaigns have attempted to chip away at this percentage such as ChooseMyPlate.gov, an interactive educational tool available for educators provided by the USDA. As well as, the Kids Walk to School program, which asks communities to foster an environment in which children can walk and bike to school in a safe way. All of the aforementioned programs are well-intentioned and well funded projects, but the consolidation of funds, efforts, and a unifying strategic plan could offer a faster and more efficient solution that does not waste government funds.

Another federal agency that plays into the government side of obesity is the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), responsible for regulating advertising. After the Nutrition Labeling and Education act of 1990, the FTC began to enforce claims that could be false or misleading about food products. Most significantly, they joined with FDA to create standard definitions and rules for claiming certain products to be “low” in fat or calories, and “high” in vitamins and minerals (FTC, 1994). This is a vital regulation that attempts to deflect the potential confusion these claims could cause consumers.

The government agencies’ regulation of marketing efforts is not ideal nor is it cost-efficient, but the audience is vulnerable and the message they send is important. The Better Business Bureau many times in the debate has reiterated the idea of self-regulation over food marketing to children. In May of 2011, The FTC published a report co-authored with the USDA, CDC, and FDA stating that all foods marketed towards children by 2016 should follow these two guidelines, “offer a ‘meaningful contribution to a healthy diet;’ and second, that said foods should not exceed given limits of saturated fat, sodium, trans fat, or added sugars,” (Clark et. al, 2011). If food providers can follow closer to these guidelines, there should be no reason that federal government has to pass legislation regulating the companies. This effort to limit impactful food marketing towards children is the marketing side of the agencies’ campaign to decrease obesity.

The federal government’s involvement in the fight against childhood obesity is wide, expensive, and for the most part, ineffective. The various agencies have differing objectives and goals, as well as ideas about how it is best to go about education, marketing, and regulation. The amount of money and man power spent on all of the proactive campaigns together should be sufficient to decrease weight in Americans. The

weight-loss industry reportedly earned around \$60.9 billion in revenue last year, (LaRòsa, 2011). The combined budget of the CDC, USDA, and FDA from last reported figures is a sum of over \$110 billion. [ (*White House*, 2011);(CDC.gov, 2011);(FDA.gov, 2011)].

The potential impact that the government could have by simplifying its agencies' roles in nutrition and fitness and food regulation without any further legislation or costs is enormous. The power just needs to be organized and refocused into a single objective: decreasing obesity in Americans to improve overall health.

## **Chapter 6: Proposed Changes for Business and Consumers**

Business-owners and consumers play a large part in the solution to changing the social environment. If Americans have no desire to change, then nothing will change at all. The issue of growing obesity rates is widely recognized as an issue worth working on as the weight loss industry has grown to be a \$60 billion industry in the U.S. and Canada (LaRosa, 2011). This includes the sale of high-promising pills and supplements aimed at blocking fat production and suppressing appetites. Pills, supplements, and diet drinks may or may not help many Americans shed the excess weight they are carrying, but changing their lifestyles certainly will. In order change the norm, Americans need to change the way they see food and businesses need to change the way they sell it.

Americans are now storing more calories than ever before because of one of two reasons. They are consuming more, and they are moving less. To remedy this, consumers need to view food as a fuel source and not an entertaining activity equivalent to reading the newspaper. Eating a meal is a social activity that many people like to view as an enjoyable experience to be shared with friends and family over a period of hours. That perception is not the problem. The thought that could change our waistlines is, “Do I need to eat this? What am I going to do today?” If the answer is yes because of the level of physical exertion necessary for the day’s activities, then it is a good choice to consume. Our thought process has shifted towards the opposite question, “What can I do to get rid

of these calories later if I eat them now?” This is a sad outlook on our caloric balance and it is too often not answered with physical activity.

If the social environment fostered the belief that food is a fuel source for the body, children and adults alike would be more encouraged to eat what will make them perform at their very best level and seek out activities to utilize their healthy food choices. Eating a bag of chips in order to watch over an hour of television does not make any sense if one adopts the fuel over food perception. In order to make this thought more common, businesses and consumers will have to work together over long periods of time.

Many business segments have a direct and important impact on the social environment of food and physical activity. For example, farmers, grocers, restaurants, parks, schools, gyms, and weight loss centers have the ability to influence perceptions about food and exercise that should be carefully crafted. Understandably, these businesses have to create a profit in order to survive and that may not mean marketing the very best healthy food options. However, all of these segments can take part in a movement that will make Americans healthier. Obviously, educational institutes can inform students about healthy foods and activities, but other businesses can act as teachers as well.

Fitness and health club memberships account for \$25 billion in revenue each year with annual growth of almost 1% (IBISworld, 2011). It would be in their very best interest to draw people into the business by teaching them what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. In my opinion, a great way to market its products and reach out to the community would be for local gyms and health clubs to sponsor free nutritional and exercise classes to community members. This could have a great impact on a community,

foster good publicity and public image, as well as boost sales for the club. Health clubs should capitalize on Americans' need to learn about health and fitness in a way that is beneficial for all parties.

In the same way, groceries have a great opportunity to help change the social environment with their practices. Local groceries and chains could host and promote free healthy cooking and nutrition classes with all ingredients available for sale with limited-time incentives. Whole Foods Market has begun to offer free classes on healthy cooking open to the public in many larger cities. This is an opportunity to teach consumers healthy habits, as well as promote the regular sale of healthy food products that will generate more revenue for the stores than processed goods. This is a market opportunity that should be taken advantage of for everyone's sake.

Restaurants have less of an opportunity to teach consumers, but more an opportunity to lead their patrons towards better foods. As a business, they have to respond to consumers' strongest needs, but they can also offer alternatives that may spark some interest. Restaurants across the nation are offering all-natural, organic, vegetarian, vegan, low-carb, low-cal, low-sodium, etc. options. In a time where health is increasingly a concern of Americans, restaurateurs would be well-advised to satisfy this desire by developing an additional healthy menu item or two boasting its ingredients and calorie-content next to the regular offerings. A more risky approach would be to redesign the entire menu to include more produce, less processed foods, and entrees with overall lower calorie count. This could be a part of a strategic marketing plan aimed towards newly health-conscious consumers who are looking for simple solutions.

The problem of obesity is a health concern that has created a major market for businesses to capitalize on. Consumers need help learning, purchasing, cooking and consuming foods that are good for them in the correct portions. They also need help learning and experiencing the effects of physical exercise. In my opinion, businesses that strive to satisfy this need will benefit in increased revenues as well as public image and reputation.

Increased availability of nutritional education and advocacy could change one community at a time to create major social change. This is an optimistic goal, but it is possible and could be extremely lucrative if marketed correctly. American consumers have a desire to change and be healthy, but they cannot do it alone. Business owners along with government-run entities can work together to make healthy living popular and attractive so that the social norm is to consume fuel and not just food.

## **Chapter 7: Proposed Changes in Regulation**

Finding the cure to any disease is a complicated and coordinated effort. The process to research and create a cure includes the interest of parties willing to fund the process, scientists and doctors with the knowledge to develop a cure, time for testing and results to be confirmed, and finally those who are brave enough to use the proposed solution. In the case of obesity, the cure lies in one of the most difficult and ambiguous things to change, the social environment. Our culture has developed norms that justify overconsumption and inactivity. Subsequently, our producing companies cater to this social norm or desire. Schools, companies, government, and families are influenced by these changes in the social environment and bend to its will.

The best cure that we can implement as a cultural group is not a magic diet pill or a costly ad campaign. It is an effort to change the social environment and create new norms for Americans in nutrition and activity. One group or organization cannot lead the effort, but someone has to be brave enough to implement meaningful influence on the social environment to spur the process. The government at every level is charged with looking out for the well being of its citizens and they have a massive opportunity to initiate the change of a culture with their actions. In my opinion, government efforts in the past to regulate obesity as a disease have been scattered, uncoordinated, and unsuccessful. In order to make widespread influence on the nutritional health of



Americans, the federal government needs to concentrate the authority to regulate obesity and ensure that all other governmental agencies and parties will support their efforts.

The federal government has funded and developed themselves numerous programs that seek out solutions to obesity in Americans. The only problem with these programs is that they are marginalized by the fact that there are competing forces and messages by the sheer number of initiative programs. If one department were in charge of decreasing obesity by spurring social change and all other programs were phased out, the amount of funding available for a concerted effort would be outstanding. Major programs in action today include efforts from organizations such as the Let's Move Initiative, the CDC's state-based funding program, the National Association of State Boards of Education's Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn program, etc.

One study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin evaluated programs targeted at decreasing obesity and concluded that, "Although numerous prevention programs have been evaluated, most (79%) did not produce statistically reliable weight gain prevention effects. Indeed, the average intervention effect size was an  $r$  of .04, which would be considered trivial by most researchers and clinicians," (Stice et. al, 2007). This regression analysis reviewed 64 intervention-type programs (governmental and non-governmental) all aimed at increasing physical activity and decreasing overconsumption in one way or another.

The most coordinated effort to date is the Let's Move Initiative led by First Lady, Michelle Obama. She has recognized the need to coordinate efforts across governmental agencies and the private sector in order to reach the maximum number of Americans possible. The initiative is targeted towards children and adolescents only, but its efforts

seam to target widespread social change. In the report for the president generated by the Task Force on Childhood Obesity, policy makers and agency leaders developed 70 specific recommendations for federal government, state and local government, and private organizations. Ideally, this task force and its 12 contributing agencies should be implementing these recommendations as soon as possible in order to reach their goal of decreasing childhood obesity to the rate of the 1970s within one generation. The flaw is that there are no empowered authorities to control and evaluate efforts.

The report calls for future research and development on physical activity and nutrition in school. Meanwhile, government-funded programs such as Head Start and the Child and Adult Care Food Program will continue to operate in the way they were told to do so upon their creation, ("Solving the Problem", 2010). Overall, Let's Move is a program that has the ability to be successful and make meaningful change as the government's role in solving the problem. If it is implemented aggressively and controlled efficiently, it could shake up the social environment among school children attending public schools. This affects around 50,000 children out of 307,000,000 Americans recorded in the census of 2009, (NCES, 2011).

Childhood obesity is particularly disturbing to most Americans because their age group is regularly fit, healthy, and energetic with high metabolisms. Today's children are more lethargic due to their changing lifestyles. The Let's Move Campaign certainly has potential to make a change in this demographic, but it will not solve the obesity epidemic, because it will only seek to make social change in such a small number of Americans. Their parents, teachers, and surroundings will not be impacted in the least. In order to

make a social change a wider range of age groups must shift towards healthier habits as well.

Government has a very limited role in the lives of the remaining Americans (not enrolled in public schools). It would be unconstitutional and radical to regulate what, when, and how much we consume as well as when and how we exercise. The only ability the federal, state, and local governments have to instigate social change in their communities is to make a healthier lifestyle easy to access and implement.

In the area of nutrition, government should promote the production and sale of fruits and vegetables by their support of large and small farmers. A major difficulty of overweight families is their inability to consistently purchase fresh produce due to high costs. Subsidies are a huge factor in what crops a farmer will choose to grow in any particular season. Making stabilizing funds available to those farmers willing to sell whole fruits and vegetables directly to a retailer would greatly decrease the cost of fresh produce in grocery stores and markets across the country.

In the area of physical activity, the government has limited access to what they can control. The only way to inspire physical activity is to make it accessible, safe, and affordable. State and local-level governments have the ability to inspire change by providing sidewalks and bike lanes for pedestrians and cyclists, as well as ensure their safety with monitoring traffic controls. Additionally, communities can provide recreational centers with indoor and outdoor sporting facilities for athletes and participants of all ages at a minimal cost. Infrastructure like paths, recreation centers, and parks can be expensive, but its existence can increase the area's attractiveness and spur growth of all kinds for the community.

The federal government has the funds and power to regulate the contributors to obesity, but citizens will not accept it until the social environment shifts towards a healthier norm. The government's role will be most significant on decreasing obesity at a state and local level by supporting farmers' of healthy foods and the availability of physical activity spaces. As Americans grow in their desire to live a healthier lifestyle, they will be able to take advantage of the healthy options provided by their communities with the full support of their local, state, and federal governments.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are numerous ways and opportunities for consumers, businesses, and government to change their operations in order to create a healthier environment for all involved. The solution to the obesity epidemic will not be a quick or easy plan to implement. Much like the problem itself, it is hard to define and describe as a cohesive course of action. As Americans become increasingly concerned with their health, businesses should increasingly cater to their desires. Additionally, local and state governments should support active lifestyles through schools and outdoor infrastructure that will enable their constituents to exercise and eat well. The social change that enabled obesity was a change over a long period of time, and the change that will make Americans healthier will take time as well. If all three sectors cooperate efficiently, all parties should profit. From a marketer's standpoint, the obesity epidemic is the most interesting challenge and opportunity to face America in decades.

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