

Kraft touts efforts to skip corn syrup

By Emily Bryson York and Natalie Zmuda
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(Crain's) — First it was fat, then it was trans fat, and now it's corn syrup.

Consumers are asking manufacturers to remove ingredients they believe are harmful, and high-fructose corn syrup is near the top of many a mother's hit list. Some major manufacturers have responded by removing the offending syrup, and the Corn Refiners Association has staged a full-fledged media assault aimed at what it perceives to be "misinformation" in the media.

Kraft Foods Inc. has reformulated a handful of its most popular products in recent years, removing high-fructose corn syrup from Bulls-Eye barbecue sauce, Capri Sun Juice drinks with 25% less sugar, and the majority of its Kraft Salad Dressings line. The company is launching a campaign for Wheat Thins next week, from agency Draft FCB, Chicago. Kraft has reformulated the crackers, more than doubling their whole-grain content, and getting rid of HFCS.

"We saw some consumers were interested in products without high-fructose corn syrup, so we decided as part of this quality improvement to eliminate [it]," said Kraft spokesman Basil Maglaris. He added that Kraft isn't out to eliminate HFCS across the board. Marquee products such as Oreos, of course, still contain the sweetener.

Some beverage companies are also promoting their lack of HFCS. PepsiCo launched "throwback" versions of Pepsi and Mountain Dew, which are essentially HFCS-free formulations in retro cans. The products proved successful, leading the company to bring them back for another eight-week run, beginning Dec. 28. A third product, Pepsi Natural, launched this spring and is being positioned as a premium cola. Snapple, meanwhile, went a step further, revamping its entire line of premium juices and teas to eliminate HFCS.

CRA getting message out

Retailers are also climbing onboard the anti-corn bandwagon. Costco has been selling Mexican-made Coca-Cola in some markets, sweetened with sugar rather than syrup, apparently to rave reviews. Costco did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Starbucks removed HFCS and trans fat from products in its bakery case this summer.

But the Corn Refiners Association is fighting back. Its campaign, from agency DDB, Chicago, depicts people such as mothers in a kitchen, or a young couple on a picnic blanket, talking about whether corn sweeteners are bad for you. "It has the same amount of calories as sugar, honey, and it's fine in moderation," a woman says while handing her boyfriend a popsicle stick.

"It has really been a nationwide multimedia and advertising campaign targeted principally at moms, given the role they play in buying food," Corn Refiners Association President Audrae Erickson said of her group's effort. The association does an all-cable TV buy, focusing on female- and family-oriented networks, such as Lifetime, Bravo, TLC and the Food Network.

According to TNS Media Intelligence, the Corn Refiners Association spent \$12 million in measured media during the first half of 2009. Ms. Erickson declined to give the campaign's budget, but described it as "similar to that of a consumer-package-goods company."

The organization has also orchestrated a massive public-relations campaign through PR agency Weber Shandwick, also in Chicago. The team is reaching out to mommy bloggers to correct the impression that refined sugar is healthier than HFCS. Ms. Erickson said this effort has been different than the usual mommy-blogger outreach. Massive sampling in search of reviews, for instance, "wouldn't be appropriate," she said. It's all part of a "rapid response" function that also contacts media covering the industry, particularly if they describe a reformulation that removes HFCS as a "healthful" transformation.

Missing the point?

The association has also targeted "thought leaders" such as dieticians and physicians, possibly leading to statements from the American Medical Association and the American Dietetic Association that high-fructose corn syrup is about the same as refined sugar. Ms. Erickson, a former USDA economist, said that the current consumer backlash hasn't affected the corn refiners' wallets yet. Consumers' shift to bottled

water and diet sodas from full-calorie colas over the last decade has left the category flat to slightly down in recent years. But current sentiment did spark the campaign. Books such Michael Pollan's "Omnivore's Dilemma" got many consumers thinking about corn consumption for the first time.

Still, some advocates think they're missing the point.

"I don't know whether it's laughable or tragic that the corn refiners association is likening its product to sugar," Rory Freedman, co-author of "Skinny Bitch," wrote in an e-mail. "Neither HFCS or refined sugar is good for us. Our bodies simply do not like foods that have been highly processed, especially those which cause spikes in our blood-sugar levels."

Michelle Simon, author of "Appetite for Profit," said that the product is also much cheaper than sugar, and it has encouraged people to eat and drink more. "It's the reason why it's only 10 cents more for a large soda," she said.

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