

Industry not the scapegoat

Obesity: the blame

BY LUCIEN JOPPEN

Who is to blame for obesity? One might think that consumers would hold (parts of) the industry responsible for producing and aggressively marketing sugary and fatty foods. However, three recent surveys show that consumers mainly blame themselves. But they also expect a pro-active attitude from the industry to act up.

The recent CIAA (Confederation of the Food and Drink Industries of the EU) conference in Brussels featured the presentation of the 2004 European Food Survey by research agency GlobeScan. Admittedly, the term European does not quite cover the research population of 5,000 persons. The (telephone) survey was carried out during the summer of 2004 in five countries: Czech Republic, France, Germany, UK and Italy.

Apart from their perception of food safety, respondents were asked about their opinions about health risk factors and ways to improve one's diet and lifestyle (see table Britons more aware...).

Interestingly, overweight ranks relatively low on the risk scale. Stress and tobacco use are number one and two on the scale. Overweight and

alcohol abuse together occupy the third spot, closely followed by an inactive lifestyle. Note that almost 30 percent of all respondents view all the factors mentioned here as health risk factors.

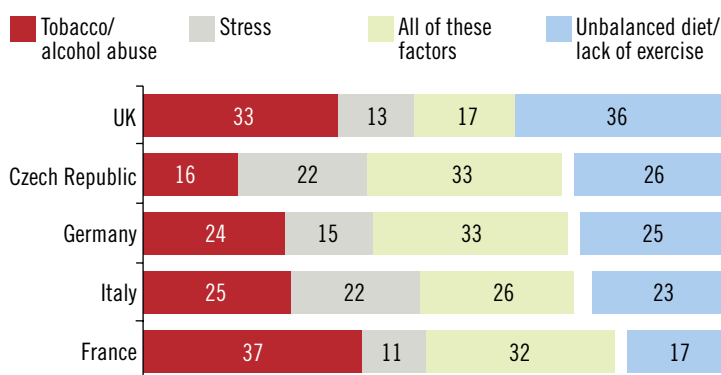
British are different

Taking all countries together, the 'unbalanced diet/lack of exercise' block is considered as important as tobacco/alcohol abuse throughout Europe. However, this balance shifts if one looks at the countries separately. Diet/exercise is rated higher as a health risk by the British consumers than by the French.

The Czechs, Germans and Italians – whose results are more or less comparable – tend to regard diet/exercise just as important for their health as the French do. However, they see tobacco/alcohol as not very important. Especially Czechs and Italians emphasise stress as a health hazard.

Overall, the British distinguish themselves from the other nations in that they tend to underrate the combination of stress, alcohol/tobacco, diet/exercise. Only 17 percent of UK consumers acknowledge this, compared to the average of 31 percent (of the other four nations).

Britons more aware of diet/exercise



Source: GlobeScan

British consumers seem to be more aware of the combination of an unbalanced diet and lack of exercise as a health hazard. For the French, this factor is far less 'acute'.

Well understood

The question how well health risks from obesity are understood, can be answered by a recent on-line survey from the youth communication agency Generation Europe (GE). Note that the research population differs from the GlobeScan survey. GE polled 455 young Europeans (aged 19 to 29) in 45 countries in August/September 2004 on the relationship between obesity and lifestyle.

The report concludes that a majority of the respondents link obesity to high cholesterol, hypertension and heart disease. However, other conditions such as liver and respiratory diseases and bladder problems do not get the same recognition.

Given the recent media attention to obesity (Dr. Phil's weight loss challenge, the British TV programme 'Fat Nation', the movie 'Supersize me' and numerous documentaries), these results were to be expected. Clearly, the awareness of obesity – and the diseases/medical conditions in its slipstream – is there (at least among young consumers).

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Photography: www.supersizeme.com

Movies like 'Super size me' have contributed to the awareness among consumers about the relationship between diet and health.

Poor knowledge on nutrition

Back to the GlobeScan survey. Respondents were asked about improvements in diet and lifestyle which would benefit public health in Europe. Overall, educational programmes, carried out either by governments or by schools, are considered to be most effective. This is quite remarkable, as numerous health education campaigns throughout Europe have not had the desired effect. However, consumers do not necessarily need to be aware of that.

The second option appeals directly to food manufacturers: to reduce salt, fat and sugar levels in existing food. Providing information on the nutritional content of food comes in third. Again, the effectiveness of

this measure might be questioned, as the consumer's knowledge of nutrition or nutritional content is generally poor.

A third consumer survey on diet, health and obesity, carried out by Leatherhead among roughly 200 English citizens and various focus groups, at least shows that English consumers need to polish up their knowledge on nutrition. Only seven percent of the respondents knew the correct answer on what the current recommended percentages of fat, protein and carbohydrates are in England.

Advertising ban

Other appeals to the food industry to improve public health, as mentioned in the GlobeScan survey, are the development of new products that reduce disease risks or contribute to better nutrition, and the restriction of advertising for food products with a low nutritional value. Surprisingly, the latter measure is ranked as being the least effective way.

Given the attention of the media, politicians, industry associations and NGOs to children's advertising, one would expect a higher place on the agenda. However, the survey did not specifically address advertising to children but advertising in general. A country-by-country analysis of the GlobeScan survey shows that British consumers value advertising restrictions more than their counterparts in other countries.

The Leatherhead survey, which was directed solely at English consumers, shows that 15 percent advocate a total ban on children's advertising, whereas 30 percent think that advertising should be moderated. This attitude more or less reflects the current 'turmoil' in Britain, in which the health secretary John Reid has spoken on a personal basis in favour of a ban on children's advertising of junk food.

Blame yourself

Two of the surveys, Leatherhead's and Generation Europe's, touch the issue about who is to blame for obesity. In the GE survey, the majority of the respondents say the ultimate responsibility rests with the individual. In declining order of responsibility, the individual consumer, parents, school, supermarkets, food and beverage manufacturers and the government are responsible for what is essentially a public health issue.

The respondents apparently do not recognise the role of national governments in this issue. This might reflect the tendency towards deregulation in some countries in Europe.

The F&D industry seems to get off lightly. On the question why people might be consuming more fast food and ready meals, the decreasing time spent on cooking is seen as the main reason, ranking before tasty and convenient product offering and growth in single-person households.

The respondents point out the aggressive marketing campaigns by multinationals, both manufacturers and retailers, as a driver of overconsumption of fast food and ready meals. However, this factor ranks relatively low in importance.

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Consumer research overview

Report name	Agency	Mode	Respondents	Period	Websites
2004 European Food Survey	GlobeScan	5,000 phone calls (1,000 per nation)	France, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, UK	2004	www.globescan.com
Young Europeans, obesity & lifestyle	Generation Europe	On-line survey (455)	45 European countries	2004	www.generation-europe.eu.com
Diet, health & obesity: consumer attitudes and perceptions	Leatherhead	Face-to-face interviews with 210 respondents/focus groups/postal and desk research	England	2004	www.lfra.co.uk

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Surprisingly mild

Leatherhead noted a similar attitude in its English survey. Despite criticism from various sides (press, NGOs, politicians etc.) on the food industry for producing foods that are high in fat and sugar, respondents were surprisingly mild for food manufacturers.

Respondents feel that people like to eat tasty food, and manufacturers are only responding to the demand. They have a choice between healthy and unhealthy food. Therefore, it is up to them which items they choose.

This view, however, which is justified by market mechanisms, does not prevent respondents from making recommendations which affect the marketing practices of F&D companies. With regard to vending machines in schools, 83 percent of respondents feel that confectionery should be removed, followed by crisps and carbonated soft drinks.

Education most effective

	France	Czech Republic	UK	Germany	Italy
Public/school education programmes promoting a healthy lifestyle	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st
Adapt existing foods to contain less salt, fat or sugar	2nd	2nd	2nd	3rd	3rd
Provide information on nutritional content of food	3rd	3rd	4th	2nd	2nd
Restrict advertising of food products with low nutritional value	4th	5th	3rd	4th	4th
Develop new foods that reduce diseases and contribute to better nutrition	5th	4th	5th	5th	3rd

Source: GlobeScan

Consumers see public education as the most effective way to improve diets and lifestyles in Europe. Only the British seem to be more keen on restricting advertising of food products with low nutritional value.

Tax on food?

The GlobeScan survey does not address the ‘who is to blame’ question. Instead it tackles the highly controversial issue of tax being imposed on foods with a low nutritional content, which would affect a significant part of the F&D industry.

Apparently, the support for such a measure among consumers is decreasing, as statistics from 2002 and 2004 show. Even so, 36 percent agree (strongly or somewhat) that governments should tax these foods.

Although the above surveys differ in population, geography and research methodology, they paint an interesting picture on how consumers throughout Europe see obesity, its causes and what can be done to prevent or reduce the problem.

The industry’s role as scapegoat – which could be expected given the negative publicity around obesity – has not materialised. This does not mean that the industry can lean back. Advertising to children remains a critical issue. Furthermore, the reformulation of existing products and development of new product should remain high on the agenda. ■

