



MASTERS OF PERSUASION School Nutrition Program Spotlights Media Messages to Tout Healthful Eating

By David Yeager

Teenage clients probably have heard their parents say time and again, “Eat your vegetables.” While this message is as important today as it’s ever been, it’s lost its wow factor. Powerful advertising messages from fast-food restaurants and processed food manufacturers have captured teenagers’ attention. Parents whisper in one ear “eat your veggies,” while advertisers whisper in the other “order the triple-size bacon cheeseburger with fries.”

Despite their parents’ nudging to eat more veggies, teens usually find a way to eat what they want and choose when they want to eat it. Why? They simply don’t like to be told what to do. But there’s one thing teens dislike even more than being told what to do, and that’s being manipulated into doing it.

Knowing this simple truth about teenagers prompted Carolyn Cohen, MEd, a teacher at the Institute for Collaborative Education, a small public middle and high school in New York City, to develop a curriculum called FoodFight (www.foodfight.org) to teach teens about nutrition and how the media influences their food choices. She developed FoodFight in conjunction with Teachers College, Columbia University.

Cohen was concerned about what her students were eating. She believed that if they knew how food was produced and marketed, they’d be more inclined to change their eating habits. Her expertise in developing curriculum, mentoring teachers, and working with students enabled her to write a curriculum that put healthful food choices in a new light.

“My incentive came from seeing what my students were eating and seeing how little they knew about nutrition but, more importantly, seeing how little of a connection they made between what they ate and how they felt and, ultimately, how they did in school,” Cohen says.

Cohen cofounded FoodFight with her partner Deborah Lewison-Grant, MA, MEd, and they serve as coexecutive directors. The organization offers training programs to teach public high school teachers best practices for implementing the curriculum. FoodFight is now in its third year, and it’s expanding at a rapid pace. The curriculum has been implemented in 20 schools in four New York City boroughs. It doubled its participation rate between 2010 and 2011, and Cohen hopes the rate will double again in 2012.

Deciphering the Subliminal

The FoodFight curriculum is divided into two parts. First, students examine the social, political, and economic underpinnings of the U.S. food system. Then they gain the necessary tools to evaluate and adjust their own eating habits. Cohen believes traditional nutrition education doesn’t engage kids—or adults—in a way that encourages them to change their eating behaviors. On the other hand, teaching them how marketing and advertising influence their food choices and purchases grabs their attention and motivates them to change.

“We’ve found that lifting the veil off the mechanism behind the advertising and marketing industry speaks to our students because they see that they’re being manipulated,” Cohen says. “And if you know teens, that’s the last thing they want to feel, that someone is influencing them to buy and eat certain things.”

Before the students learn anything about nutrition, they’re taught how marketing and advertising affect their buying decisions. The goal for them is to recognize they’re bombarded daily with media messages, and that advertisers often use sex, beauty, famous people, or what’s hip to capture their attention. Marketing consultants visit the classrooms to explain how ads are developed and marketing campaigns are conceived.

With lessons called “The Hunt for Cool,” “This Program Is Brought to You By...,” “Risky Business: The Flip Side of a Burger,” and “This Land Is Your Land—But Not for Long,” the students explore not only the techniques advertisers use to influence them but also the politics behind the food system. More importantly, they learn that, as a demographic group, they wield real economic power. Advertisers spend millions of dollars to learn what teens like because that information generates billions of dollars in revenue. During the course, students create their own ads using the techniques they’ve studied.

A couple of weeks into the program, the conversations begin to include food. Nutritionists teach the basics of healthful

eating, and doctors from Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City explain the benefits of eating well and the risks of eating poorly. The presentations typically include detailed slides of diseases and complications related to a poor diet. Cohen says the presentations never fail to make an impression.

There's also a cooking component. Last year, the program lasted two days, but this year, due to its popularity and a grant from Chefs Move to Schools, part of Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign, it's been extended to one week. FoodFight is still finalizing the cooking curriculum, but chefs will plan to come to the schools and teach students how to make a range of healthful, great-tasting dishes.

Does the Curriculum Work?

Cohen says response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive. Survey responses from a small sample showed statistically significant increases in students' consumption of water, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and statistically significant decreases in their consumption of soda and processed snacks. One result that wasn't anticipated was the program's positive effect on teachers' attitudes about food. While the teachers were in the process of learning and teaching the curriculum, several of them decided to reexamine their own food choices. Many realized they could benefit from eating more healthfully.

"Educating teachers has become a critical piece of the program," Cohen says. "It's really a wellness program for teachers as much as it is for students." As a result of the teachers' response, FoodFight piloted a wellness program designed for all teachers and staff of participating schools.

What's more, Cohen and Lewison-Grant are working on ways to evaluate FoodFight that will provide a more in-depth look at the program. They're also considering developing a curriculum for middle school students in response to strong interest. FoodFight has received inquiries from schools in various cities. Cohen says the curriculum is designed to be scalable and replicable, and she welcomes an opportunity to take FoodFight nationwide.

"We see this as one of the most pressing issues of our time. We're faced with a dire health crisis, and our students need to be educated so they can make lasting changes in their eating habits," Cohen explains. "Students are a captive audience so FoodFight is able to reach the people who need it most."

** If you're a dietitian or chef and are interested in working with FoodFight, contact Cohen at carolyn@foodfight.org or 917-628-8277.*

— David Yeager is a freelance writer and editor based in Royersford, Pa.



The advertisement features a central image of the Robot Coupe R301U Series D Combination Food Processor, a white and black machine with a stainless steel bowl. To the left of the machine are four bowls containing sliced tomatoes, shredded carrots, sliced oranges, and shredded green beans. The background is white with the Robot Coupe logo in red and black. The word "SAVE" is repeated in large, colorful letters (green, orange, red, green) across the top. Below the machine, the text reads "With the R301U Series D Combination Food Processor Bowl Unit and Vegetable Prep Unit". To the right of the machine, there are two bullet points describing the product's capabilities. At the bottom, contact information is provided.

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