

Saying No to Low-Carb

By Carol Culhane, PHEc., MBA

Never in recent memory has something gripped the food industry like the current low-carb obsession. Retailers of every description are building low-carb kiosks while health food stores post signs of 'low-carb section available here' in their windows. Low-carb stories dominate the media headlines in the news, lifestyle and business sections of national newspapers, while broadcasters have followed suit, all with varying degrees of responsible, fact-based, balanced, reporting. Some bakery industry leaders, highly regarded for nutritious, award-winning products have launched branded low-carb options, purportedly to protect market share. It is difficult to believe that an imitation – premium-priced, green-hued, bubble-gum textured, puckery-tasting product that passes off as bread, bagels, etc. – could protect the marketplace livelihood of the real thing.

Shortsighted, capitalistic opportunity is the more likely reason why some



"The bakery industry has to stand up for itself and tell its goodness story," says Culhane.

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members of the bakery industry have reacted to the low-carb notion in this manner. And that response is wrong. While the bakery industry as a whole laments loss in sales, some members of the industry have turned their backs on excellence in an every-man-for-himself standoff. In defiance of several years' investment in a nutrition position, supported by health professionals, government agencies, the bakery and allied industries at large and individual companies, 'low-carb' bakers allow the media, misinformed, fickle consumers and the latest diet gurus to devalue baked goods on the basis of one nutrient – carbohydrate. Low-carb bakery products render carbohydrate the villain, casting guilt on real bakery products, when in actual fact, carbohydrate is, in this case, the victim.

Low-carb is not a trend. It is a symptom of a strong undefined consumer need that begs the bigger question: why is this happening? Until that question is answered, a collection of facts can begin to serve as a basis to an appropriate response.

Food and nutrition facts

- Brain cells can use only one nutrient: glucose – a carbohydrate!
- Carbohydrate deprivation can damage the central nervous system (CNS) especially the upper extremities (i.e., the brain).
- The minimum daily amount of carbohydrate required by the average person is 50g, equivalent to approximately four slices of bread (real bread).
- Carbohydrate is required to nourish the CNS (read: brain). It is also required to allow the complete breakdown of fatty acids in the body. Inadequate amounts of carbohydrate can lead to incompletely broken-down fat circulating in the blood system, which in turn can lead to arteriosclerosis and heart

disease. This is one of the reasons why low-carb diets are controversial.

- Inadequate carbohydrate intake can lead to ketosis, a symptom of which is bad breath. It is a sign that the body is under physiological stress. A U.S. study conducted last summer reported bad breath as one of the negative side effects of a low-carb diet. It is difficult to imagine a person of average intelligence desiring a lower body weight at the expense of offending friends and family members.

- Bakery products prepared from white flour have been erroneously compared to empty-nutrient golf balls. This is wrong. All bakery products in Canada are prepared from enriched flour, containing B-vitamins (essential to ensure the body's cells are supplied with energy), iron and folate.

- A low-carb bakery product in Canada is also lower in B-vitamins, iron and folate than its regular counterpart, a fact not being communicated to consumers. At least one branded low-carb diet recommends that the dieter take vitamin and mineral supplements to replace those lost when bakery products are excluded from the diet.

- Canada's Food Guide and the USA's Food Guide Pyramid, which promote grain-based, complex-carbohydrate rich diets, have been criticized as scientifically unsound. This is wrong. Both of these dietary guidelines are two of the most extensively researched diets in the world. Updated as new information emerges, both are currently under scientific review.

Consumer profile

The consumer profile for low-carb diets is middle-upper to upper income, professional, 40-plus years of age, urban, male or female.

A low-carbohydrate diet is a therapeutic diet, one which is meant to "treat"

a condition. By that account, it requires a huge amount of discipline. It is inconceivable that, as according to media reports, as much as 20 per cent of the American population is on a low-carbohydrate diet. Legions of North Americans are not that disciplined. This must be factored into the volume forecast of any low-carb baked product.

Industry statistics

- The largest category of the functional food sector has always been and continues to be grain-based products. The breads and grains category, pegged to grow 2.9 per cent this year, has an estimated 2004 worth of US \$5.4 billion, occupying 24 per cent of the US \$22.4 billion functional food sector. Included in this category are bread (real bread), other baked goods and cereals. It defies logic that this same category is the target of a low-carb crusade.

To every fad, a counterfad; to every trend, a countertrend. There will eventually be a counter-response to the current low-carb phenomenon and the bakery industry must be prepared with a strategy and a game plan. In the meantime, it has to stand up for itself and tell its goodness story. Should a consumer wish to reduce carbohydrate intake, recommend they simply eat smaller portions of real baked goods. Any short-term loss in sales will in turn sustain a long-term market position. Educate consumers as to all the nutrients that accompany carbohydrates in baked goods. Promote the wholesome qualities of baked goods of all types – white, whole wheat, whole grain, artisan, ethnic, poly-wrapped, paper-wrapped, unwrapped, sweet, savoury – that are prepared with excellence in every form. Know, and let others know, that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. ♦

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