True Colors

Food companies like to present themselves in their best public-relations dress. “We care so much about our customers’ health,” they claim. But in recent months, many of them have replaced their kid gloves with boxing gloves.

Kids foods. Last April, a federal task force proposed sensible guidelines for foods marketed to children. They would require a minimum of real food (like fruit or whole grains) and would limit the bad stuff (like salt or added sugars).

How did the food industry react? It went berserk, and started lobbying to kill the voluntary measure.

Bingo! In December, Congress passed a law that delayed the guidelines so that its industry friends could keep advertising their sugary cereals and Spaghettios to kids.

Never mind that one out of three American children are now overweight or obese.

School meals. In January 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture proposed long-overdue improvements to subsidized school meals, requiring less salt, fewer fries, and more fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.

That spelled bad news for sellers of pizzas, fries, Tater Tots, and the like. So they quickly got their pals in Congress not only to block the FDA limit in foods. We’re still waiting.

I suspect that FDA officials want to cut sodium, but, with an election coming up, they can’t persuade the White House to buck industry pressure.

Also on the food industry’s hit list: block taxes on soda, prevent the FDA from requiring clearer food labels by adopting the industry’s own wishy-washy “Facts Up Front” labels, and keep the FDA and USDA from stopping non-essential uses of antibiotics in livestock.

As this election year grinds on, you can bet that the Administration will be ever-more reluctant to risk offending members of Congress and their food-industry contributors.

And you can bet that companies will feel no reluctance to continue to market junk foods to kids (in and out of school), and to dump as much salt and trans fat into their foods as they want.

Ask and Ye Shall Receive. A generous campaign contribution doesn’t hurt either.

■ Trans fat. Over the past few years, manufacturers and restaurants have voluntarily switched from trans fat to healthier oils for about two-thirds of their foods. But progress seems to have stalled.

The Food and Drug Administration could eliminate trans fat simply by saying that partially hydrogenated oil (the source of most trans) is not safe. But pressure from industry has silenced the agency.

■ Salt. In 2010, the Institute of Medicine concluded that companies’ voluntary actions over the last 40 years have not led consumers to eat less sodium. So the IOM recommended that the FDA limit sodium in foods.

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