

## Briefing: Why food companies are critical in UK salt success

By Ben Cooper | 2 December 2014

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Premier's reformulation work has taken in brands including Sharwood's

**In just-food's latest management briefing, Ben Cooper explores reformulation in the context of the febrile debate over diet and health, suggesting it is both the industry's most compelling response to diet-related health problems and the most practical contribution to tackling them.**

In the battle to combat obesity and diet-related ill health, there is much debate about what food companies should do in relation to the marketing of their products. In fact, to be more precise, there is much discussion of what the industry should not be doing.

The tone can be and often is negative, the emphasis being placed on how certain foods are detrimental to health if consumed in inappropriate quantities. Responsibility for that over-consumption is placed at the door of food manufacturers and retailers rather than individuals or other factors that might also have a bearing on patterns of consumption.

Companies looking to grow and compete through creative product development and skilful marketing naturally bridle when their commercial freedoms are threatened. The debates often become adversarial and acrimonious, not least when companies flex their financial muscle and employ the dark arts of political lobbying and public relations to protect themselves.

However, amid the noise of accusations, recriminations and rebuttals, the food industry has a contrastingly positive tune to sing about product reformulation, and is doing so ever more loudly and harmoniously.

The Reformulation Series conference, a three-day event held in Amsterdam in October, brought together food technologists, marketers, dieticians and public health professionals to review and discuss - in a consistently positive and collaborative fashion - the reformulation work food companies are undertaking. Last month,

many of the same themes were discussed by a similarly broad spectrum of stakeholders at the Food Matters Live conference and exhibition in London.

What becomes immediately apparent from the tone and content of these events is, through their reformulation work, food companies have a vital role to play in the challenge of addressing diet-related ill health, they have huge resources and technological ability at their disposal to do so and, having already achieved a considerable amount, they are committed to doing more.

In other words, they are ready, able and willing - and their continued help and engagement is most definitely required and welcomed.

### **Success in sodium reduction**

The food industry's capacity to be part of the solution to diet-related health problems through reformulation is amply illustrated by what has been achieved in sodium reduction in the UK.

As in many countries, the UK government has sought to lower salt consumption, with sodium associated with a raft of health problems, notably high blood pressure, risk of stroke and heart attack, kidney disease and osteoporosis. A campaign was launched under the auspices of the country's Food Standards Agency in 2006.

As the vast majority of salt intake in developed countries comes through processed food, the engagement of the food industry has been pivotal in what has been achieved in the UK, and the work of food companies has been widely lauded by politicians and public health agencies.

The FSA set salt targets for 85 food categories in 2006, and average salt intake had fallen from 9.5g to 8.6g per day by 2008. In 2011, new targets were set and salt consumption fell again from 8.6g to 8.1g. This year, a third set of targets was set with the aim of driving consumption down further towards the 6g level recommended by the UK's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN).

### **Reduction by stealth**

The success in the UK has been largely achieved by what is termed "stealth reduction", the steady reduction in salt levels by small increments over time. The reductions are gradual and are designed to be effectively undetectable to consumers.

Speaking to just-food as far back as 2010, Professor Graham MacGregor, chairman of Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), the pressure group that can arguably take most credit for the achievements in the UK, and which has now spawned the Action on Sugar campaign, said the reductions made up to that time had been achieved without consumers "really knowing it's happened", and praised food companies for the reductions they had made.

Incidentally, at another conference held in London this July, Professor MacGregor suggested stealth will work with sugar because palates adjust in exactly the same way. Not all agree, however, that consumers can be weaned off their sweet tooth that easily and, along with other challenges associated with sugar reduction, this is discussed later in this briefing.

### **Next steps for salt**

Salt reduction is an ongoing process at major food companies, which promote it as part of their corporate sustainability programmes. Among the companies presenting at the Amsterdam and London conferences were [Nestle](#), [Barilla](#) and [Premier Foods plc](#).

Premier, for example, claims to have reduced salt in its product by 286 tonnes in 2012 alone. However, speaking at the Food Matters Live conference, Luise Kloster, brand nutritionist at Premier Foods, said driving salt levels down further "is getting increasingly more of a challenge".

According to Kloster, it is as companies attempt to reduce salt further than the 15-20% achieved in many products to date that the problems get harder. In some products where salt is particularly crucial, such as bread and cured meats, the task is particularly challenging.

Among the techniques highlighted in the two conferences was the use of potassium compounds as salt replacers, potassium chloride being the most popular.

Given the prominence now being attached to the health benefits of potassium, notably in lowering blood pressure, the use of potassium would appear to have a lot to recommend it. There are some challenges, however. In the first place, as Steve Osborn, business innovation manager at Leatherhead Food Research, pointed out in Amsterdam, potassium is associated with some "bitter notes".

In addition to the metallic taste, Osborn went on to speak about the other chief problem with potassium chloride: that the UK's Department of Health advises against using potassium-based substitutes on health grounds. "Potassium salts might be seen as the obvious and easier replacer, but until there is change in the advice from the Department of Health it will not be seen as an entirely positive switch," Osborn tells just-food.

The industry's specialists are attempting to alter the UK government's stance. There is a widely held view within the industry, and shared by public health advocates, that the health benefits of lowering sodium and increasing potassium outweigh the possible negative health risks of over-consumption of potassium.

Food reformulation expert, Professor Paul Berryman, told the Food Matters Live conference: "The Department of Health in the UK has advised against using potassium salt replacers because that has a detrimental effect on dialysis patients but maybe that advice needs revision because obviously most people don't need dialysis, so clear labelling might be a way forward."

A report from Leatherhead Food Research, commissioned jointly by UK industry association the [Food and Drink Federation](#) and the British Retail Consortium, recommended the Department of Health "should review their advice against using potassium-based solutions, and consider if there are specific applications, for example raising agents, or food categories for which the use of potassium may be appropriate".

If the health benefits of potassium become more widely appreciated, the potential for foods bearing a "double benefit" claim of having lower sodium and higher potassium could even become a possibility, though Osborn feels this is some way off. "If there is sufficient documented scientific evidence to demonstrate the claims surrounding an increase in potassium then subject to health claims legislation, there is no reason to exclude the concept of 'double benefit' claims. I suspect that we are some way off that."

The problem of the adverse consequences of reducing one nutrient and adding a compensatory ingredient which itself causes concern is a very common challenge in the food reformulation field, and is discussed further in the next section of this management briefing.

The stealth reduction undertaken in the UK is by definition a low-profile approach. The idea is the consumer is unaware of the reformulation. However, with products or product variants that are overtly promoted as having lower levels of sodium, or other nutrients of concern, there are opportunities for recruiting new consumers, as Kloster explained at the Food Matters conference.

Kloster took as her example cooking sauces, an important category for Premier. The company, she explained, found it was "under-indexing on cooking sauces" with older adults who are particularly concerned about their salt intake and perceive cooking sauces to be high in salt. This is where reformulation "turns into an opportunity", she told her audience, adding adults with young families had similar concerns and would therefore also represent a good potential market.

"Salt-reduced' or 'no added salt' is a really good opportunity," she said. "Young families and seniors are really looking for this and they are really big consumer groups, growing consumer groups."

Salt-reduced products therefore represent the win-win of reputational enhancement and commercial benefit that has been found with other better-for-you products. The problem, however, is better-for-you products tend to be consumed disproportionately by better-educated and better-off consumers, and it is poorer and less well-educated consumers who are at far higher risk of diet-related ill health.

So in preventive health terms they are arguably less effective than stealth reduction. It is for this reason, probably above all others, some public health experts have hailed the UK's salt reduction strategy as its most successful nutrition policy since the Second World War. The food industry should be given credit for its role in achieving that 15% reduction in average salt consumption, but it will gain even greater plaudits for looking ahead to how it can help realise the further 26% reduction required to meet SACN's 6g recommended intake.