

Slimming Down: Food and Beverage Companies Cut 1.5 Trillion Calories, Accelerating Obesity Rate Decline

Jon Entine, CONTRIBUTOR

I write skeptically about science, public policy, media and NGOs.
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Three years ago, when a group of the country's biggest food and beverage companies got together to discuss what they could do to curb the country's collective appetite, the concern over America's burgeoning waistline was soaring, with no apparent peak in obesity rates in sight.

A front-page [headline](#) in 2010 in the *Washington Post* delivered grim news: "Obesity epidemic rages on, CDC says." The report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was a belt buster. The number of states in which at least one-third of the adults were obese had tripled in two years. Between 2007 and 2009, an additional 2.4 million Americans ages 18 and older had become obese, according to the report. Overall, 26.7 percent of American adults—more than 72 million—were considered obese.

It's at that very time when 16 food and beverage companies teamed up with First Lady [Michelle Obama](#)'s Partnership for a Healthier America with the goal of reducing the number of calories sold and consumed by Americans by 1.5 trillion by 2015. Today—two years ahead of schedule—the [Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation](#) announced the partnership had exceeded that goal. HWCF president Lisa Gable made the announcement at Washington, D.C.'s Bipartisan [Policy Center](#) joined by White House representatives, as well as former U.S. secretary of agriculture Dan Glickman and Tracy Orleans, a senior scientist at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which will review the data and issue a formal report later this year.

According to the report, they've exceeded that goal. And the initiative coincides

with what researchers believe may be a decisive turn in the battle against obesity. Last fall, decades of rising childhood obesity rates, American cities are reporting their first declines, according to a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [study](#). A CDC study released last December [showed](#) obesity declining in 2-4 year olds from poor families. Targeted studies, like one in Los Angeles by the [CDC](#) released in February, indicated the decline had begun in 2010.

HWCF brought assembled a [broad based coalition](#), representing some of the top global brands in the food and beverage industry, including [Coca-Cola KO +0.56%](#), [General Mills GIS +0.86%](#), Nestle, Kraft and Con-Agra. Their challenge was daunting—impossible in some people’s minds: turn around the ocean liner of America’s out of control eating habits. They embarked on what amounted to a riverboat gamble—reducing portion sizes, changing recipes to meet calorie goals and providing lower calorie options, without gutting their own bottom lines.

By every measure, the initiative has been a success. Their combined efforts coincided with a shift in consumer preferences and maybe even helped the trend along. According to a study conducted for the HWCF by The Hudson Institute, lower-calorie sales among the 16 companies increased by \$1.25 billion, more than four times the sales increase of higher-calorie items. Many of the companies, such as Coca-Cola, have also begun to advertise the new options and emphasize a healthier lifestyle in marketing messages.

"Our industry has a important role to play in helping people lead healthy lives and our actions are having a positive impact," said Indra Nooyi, HWCF chair and CEO of PepsiCo, and a news conference in Washington. "We see continued opportunities to give consumers the choices they're looking for and to work collaboratively with the public and non-profit sectors on initiatives that enable continued progress."

The HWCF celebrated the news with a full-page ad in Thursday’s *Washington Post*. Separately, Coca-Cola ran an advertisement in *The New York Times* noting that obesity is about more than fizzy drinks.

The initial findings show that the calorie reduction is about 14 calories a day on average, but the final numbers will be released in September. That adds up to 2-3 pounds per person per year, enough to make a dent in obesity trends.



It's also about five times the reduction that soda taxes might yield. Recent studies have shown calorie reductions from soda taxes of **as few as three calories per day**. According to a **Yale and Emory research team**, "evidence suggests caution in enacting sugar-sweetened beverage taxation legislation with a core purpose of obesity reduction." Another **study from the University of California San Diego** found that soda bans might even lead to more consumption, not less.

THE HWCF pledge is the centerpiece of a raft of recent corporate based initiatives launched in recent years as obesity rates soared and company's came under attack for producing more and more processed foods. In recent years, food and beverage companies have added many more nutritious alternatives and become leaders in the movement for 'food transparency,' and the largest companies have voluntarily reduced food ads on TV aimed at young children.

According to a recent study in the *American Journal of Public Health*, economists monitoring the beverage industry's promise to self-regulate and get sodas and other sugary drinks out of schools found that companies shipped 90% fewer calories to schools in 2010, compared with 2004, and reduced shipments of full-calorie sodas by 97%.

That's the result of a pledge, called the School Beverage Guidelines, signed in 2006 by major beverage companies, former President Bill Clinton and health advocacy groups. It is enforced through independent monitoring, outlined calorie content and serving sizes. Robert Wescott, president of Keybridge Research, a private economic research firm in Washington, that was selected to independently monitor the effort, said the landscape has shifted dramatically and that industry self-regulation can work.

"Is it possible that somewhere in America there's a Coke machine in a hallway where I can put a buck in and get a Coke? Absolutely," Wescott said. But he added that there has been no "backsliding" by food companies since 2010. "In the main, yes," he said, the industry is doing would it committed to do.

The announcement that the collation hit the 1.5 trillion calorie target is likely to bring out the perennial scolds who scoff at corporate-led initiatives, but some usual skeptics seemed impressed by today's announcement.

"If similar initiatives come from other food companies, from restaurants, and from school and workplace cafeterias, the [reduced] number of calories per person may grow to be significant," said Mark Schrimsher of the nutritional-information Web site CalorieLab Inc.

"Food companies have an unparalleled role in determining what products are available on the market and what products are being marketed," said Y. Claire Wang, assistant professor in health policy & management at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "And marketing works."

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Jon Entine, executive director of the [Genetic Literacy Project](#), is a senior fellow at the [Center for Health & Risk](#)

[Communication](#) and [STATS \(Statistical Assessment Service\)](#) at George Mason University.