

Part 4, Chapter 47: Processed Snack Foods

I mentioned previously that I used to be addicted to potato chips. At my local grocery store there is an entire isle dedicated to chips and related snacks. There is also an isle dedicated to soft drinks and a whole isle for cookies and crackers. There are two isles for processed breakfast cereals and another isle for boxed dinner type foods such as macaroni and cheese. There are also two rows of freezers with pre-made dinner entrées and, in particular, one-third of that space is for frozen pizza. In total, there is about five (maybe six) times more space dedicated to Standard American Diet foods than to fresh produce. (It could be even more.) Even in the produce department a significant part of it is dedicated to display meat and deli items. What's wrong with this picture? The answer is that there is this much space for all these products because they sell.

THAT IS the core issue: they sell this stuff. A message would be sent very quickly to the meat, egg and dairy giants, as well as the massive food processing companies, if no one bought their products. It would doubtless take far less time for your local grocery store to figure out the change, but the real impact wouldn't happen until your local grocery store stopped ordering such items because they were still sitting on their shelves. Ultimately, the food choices that the public has is a result of supply and demand. If we didn't buy it companies wouldn't supply it. They couldn't. This is why my local grocer carries a limited supply of Bragg's products, organic foods and coconut oil: Because their customers demanded it! Suppliers would either be out of business or very quickly have to change what they sold. Granted, such a sudden change in buying habits would raise havoc in a number of industries, but we, as customers, would be much better off were we to only buy foods relevant to a vegan diet. This scenario, of course, won't happen overnight but statistics are indicating that this is happening slowly. Some companies are getting the message; some are not.

In an earlier section I talked about the Lay's potato chip phenomena—where you can't eat just one. Big food companies spend a fortune developing and testing chemicals to create food products with taste and textures that make their products impossible not to crave. It has nothing to do with their nutritional content. With rare exceptions, these companies could care less about whether their products are nutritious. All they care about is you buying them—and buy them people do.

In a disturbing article published by The New York Times Magazine titled "The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food"^{1} the magazine wrote an enlightening article about what goes on inside the corporate offices and laboratories—which I guess makes their customers into lab rats—in terms of developing chemicals to make their foods irresistibly salable. It's a fascinating article though quite long.

In the process of product optimization, food engineers [isn't that an interesting term] alter a litany of variables with the sole intent of finding the most perfect version (or versions) of a product. Ordinary consumers are paid to spend hours sitting in rooms where they touch, feel, sip, smell, swirl and taste whatever product is in question. Their opinions are dumped into a computer, and the data are sifted

and sorted through a statistical method called conjoint analysis, which determines what features will be most attractive to consumers. Moskowitz [Howard Moskowitz is a food-industry legend and statistical mathematician] likes to imagine that his computer is divided into silos, in which each of the attributes is stacked. But it's not simply a matter of comparing color 23 with color 24. In the most complicated projects, color 23 must be combined with syrup 11 and packaging 6, and on and on, in seemingly infinite combinations. Even for jobs in which the only concern is taste and the variables are limited to the ingredients, endless charts and graphs will come spewing out of Moskowitz's computer. "The mathematical model maps out the ingredients to the sensory perceptions these ingredients create," he told me, "so I can just dial a new product. This is the engineering approach."

Moskowitz's work on Prego spaghetti sauce was memorialized in a 2004 presentation by the author Malcolm Gladwell at the TED conference in Monterey, Calif[ornia]: "After ... months and months, he had a mountain of data about how the American people feel about spaghetti sauce. ... and sure enough, if you sit down and you analyze all this data on spaghetti sauce, you realize that all Americans fall into one of three groups. There are people who like their spaghetti sauce plain. There are people who like their spaghetti sauce spicy. And there are people who like it extra-chunky. And of those three facts, the third one was the most significant, because at the time, in the early 1980s, if you went to a supermarket, you would not find extra-chunky spaghetti sauce. And Prego turned to Howard, and they said, 'Are you telling me that one-third of Americans crave extra-chunky spaghetti sauce, and yet no one is servicing their needs?' And he said, 'Yes.' And Prego then went back and completely reformulated their spaghetti sauce and came out with a line of extra-chunky [sauces] that immediately and completely took over the spaghetti-sauce business in this country ... That is Howard's gift to the American people. ... He fundamentally changed the way the food industry thinks about making you happy."^{2}

I find this type of precision in determining what people will buy and eat to be a little unnerving. The same type of process is applied to how much, and what kind of, sugar, fat and salt to add to all sorts of snack foods. Salty is good; salty and sweet is even better; salty, sweet and loaded with luscious fat—I've died and gone to heaven.

The problem is that your body still doesn't recognize this stuff as food, or at least very little of it as food. Add to this flavor enhancers, stabilizers, artificial colors and other chemicals and you have a cornucopia of something that would have given people nightmares a hundred years ago.

Along the way an interesting paradox was discovered. Some foods that tasted good would be eaten but only partly. Other foods like white bread, that were pretty bland, would be relished. This research eventually led to the magical discovery of the "bliss point".

This contradiction is known as "sensory-specific satiety." In lay terms, it is the tendency for big, distinct flavors to overwhelm the brain, which responds by depressing your desire to have more. Sensory-specific satiety also became a guiding principle for the processed-food industry. The biggest hits—be they Coca-Cola or Doritos—owe their success to complex formulas that pique the taste buds enough to be alluring but don't have a distinct, overriding single flavor that tells the brain to stop eating.

Thirty-two years after he began experimenting with the bliss point, Moskowitz got the call from Cadbury Schweppes asking him to create a good line extension for Dr. Pepper. I [the author of this article] spent an afternoon in his White Plains offices as he and his vice president for research, Michele Reisner, walked me through the Dr. Pepper campaign. Cadbury wanted its new flavor to have cherry and vanilla on top of the basic Dr. Pepper taste. Thus, there were three main components to play with. A sweet cherry flavoring, a sweet vanilla flavoring and a sweet syrup known as "Dr. Pepper flavoring."^{3}

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Personally I find the flavor of Dr. Pepper to be revolting but there are a LOT of people that absolutely love it!

The article cited is quite detailed and includes a discussion about how Lays potato chips got to the point where no one could eat just one. It was an intentional ploy by the company to make their product as addictive as possible. As noted in my discussion of table salt, inorganic minerals, the kind used in junk food, have a devastating effect on the body.

And on and on it goes. These days there's growing pressure on the food industry to 'clean up its act'. Specifically:

The growing attention Americans are paying to what they put into their mouths has touched off a new scramble by the processed-food companies to address health concerns. Pressed by the Obama administration and consumers, Kraft, Nestlé, Pepsi, Campbell and General Mills, among others, have begun to trim the loads of salt, sugar and fat in many products. And with consumer advocates pushing for more government intervention, Coca-Cola made headlines in January by releasing ads that promoted its bottled water and low-calorie drinks as a way to counter obesity.^{4}

Obesity is the big issue but it's not the only one. The essence of this discussion is that processed snack food, processed food in general, is not real food. It adds a plethora of chemicals to a body already over taxed. I'm reminded how addicted my mother was to Kraft macaroni and cheese. I'm also reminded that she developed osteoporosis, heart issues, kidney failure and Alzheimer's disease, primarily because of living on a Standard American Diet. Of that I have no doubt. She wasn't a stupid person. Like so many people—and this is slowly changing—she was just grossly ignorant.

With the knowledge presented in the book, you don't have to be taken in by the giant food companies. If it's processed, if it has added salt, sugar and fat, the bottom line is that you don't need it as part of your diet.