

Tuesday 4 June 2013 – Morning

GCSE ENGLISH/ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A680/02/RBI Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

READING BOOKLET INSERT

Duration: 2 hours



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Is the future of fast food ...healthy?



Baby Carrot Campaign

At the beginning of September last year, pupils at an American High School found something unusual in their canteen. Alongside the traditional vending machines that had been supplying them with treats for most of their formative years was another machine – bright orange – filled with row upon row of small crinkly bags and inside each bag were about three ounces of washed and peeled, cut and shaped carrots.

‘Eat ’em Like Junk Food’

In the weeks that followed, the machine was emptied faster than the manufacturers could fill it and students of all ages were munching on the new orangey treats.

They were never really ‘baby’ carrots – only the misshapen carrots supermarkets normally rejected but now peeled, cut to two inches and tapered. As a product, large bags of these carrots had been on sale in supermarkets for years and in this ‘ready to cook’ form they had proved popular – more expensive but convenient. Sometimes a health-conscious parent might take a couple out of the bag and pop them in a child’s lunch box, but they were a main meal vegetable – not a snack.

That was until the reality of recession hit and families cut back on the pricey product. Sales slumped. A solution was needed and the carrot growers made a bold choice to be led by a man with a background in marketing. His experience was not in agriculture, but

in selling fizzy drinks. Carrots were about to get a makeover in the form of an advertising campaign costing around \$25million.

‘The Drawer of Death’

The research behind the campaign was intensive in its detail. Researchers lurked in kitchens watching suburban shoppers unpack and store their groceries, studying where children looked for snacks when they got home from school – was it the fridge or the cupboards? It was obvious at once that no one went to the vegetable drawer looking for a treat: ‘the drawer of death,’ one kid called it.

Adults weren’t particularly fond of the vegetable drawer either. They associated it with food they had bought with good intentions and then discovered weeks later, limp and slimy.

A strategy began to emerge that would distance carrots from all the old, bad ‘veggie’ associations. The campaign would appeal not to the head, with information about the importance of vitamins and beta-carotene, but to the heart with something funny that appealed to impulse rather than responsibility. Just the kind of thing a soft drinks company might do....

‘We are not a vegetable!’

The new message to customers of *Baby Carrots* was bold and striking: ‘We are not a vegetable. If you want a vegetable, eat broccoli, eat spinach. We’re a snack!’ If the idea that a carrot is not a vegetable seems strange to you, wait for the next one: ‘Carrots have an appealing personality. They’re fun-loving, friendly.’ Slightly surreal? Probably. But there was some truth embedded in this. Carrots do possess many of the defining characteristics of our favourite snacks. They’re neon orange, they’re crunchy, and they’re dippable. Perhaps it was not a giant leap to see them as snack food.



A series of high tech, self-aware, junk-food style ads were aired on national TV. They sent up just about every style of advertising ever used for chocolate, crisps and cola. In one, a skater dude rides a jet-powered shopping cart through a desert pass, dodging baby carrot gunfire. Things blow up. A pterodactyl flies overhead. “Extreme pterodactyl!” the voiceover yells. (Extreme pterodactyl? Why?) Baby Carrots had their own website. Their own video game. A web series, *Munchies*, rolled out and @baby carrots began tweeting their snack food rivals with cheeky comments.

‘Grab-a-Bag’

Packaging was crucial if carrots were to be kept out of the ‘drawer of death’. Opaque, crinkly plastic bags, exactly the same size as crisp packets, gave a familiar feel to the product, while bold graphics tied the product to the TV ads.

The new-style packaging cost about 25% more than traditional veggie bags, but moved carrots into the ‘grab-a-bag’ market for instant snacking, in the car, on the move.

At no point did the campaign even hint that carrots might be good for you. The vegetable – and, let’s face it, it is a vegetable – was never to be seen as an antidote to junk food. It was to *become* junk food. And bizarre as it seems, this worked. All the government and health agency drives to promote healthy eating over the last ten years had seen only minimal growth in consumption of vegetables, but early results from the ‘*Eat ’em Like Junk Food*’ campaign showed sales up 10% in the first two months.

A triumph for healthy eating?

True, each bag eaten represents one portion of the ‘five-a-day’, but *Baby Carrots* has not won the whole-hearted endorsement of nutritionists and parent groups. Cynics argue that nothing has changed about our attitudes to snack food and our dislike of vegetables. All ‘*Eat ’em Like Junk Food*’ has done is to confirm the modern-day preference for food with a quirky gimmick and that comes without effort. A triumph for marketing, no question.



I Love Junk Food – But That’s My Choice

If there really is to be a government ‘attack’ on junk food – as several newspapers have reported recently – I would be the first person to waddle to the barricades and defend it. My idea of luxury eating is a bucket of fried chicken with a side order of spicy wings. And chicken popcorn (don’t ask). I want to be buried in an immense polystyrene kebab box.

Oh, stop scowling! Food snobbery is as ugly as every other kind of snobbery. I once saw a news programme in which a reporter was despatched to a large city supermarket – as though to an African wildlife reserve – to inspect the contents of people’s shopping trolleys. And what do you know! The British public eats biscuits and burgers. This was explained to camera in the sombre tones normally used to describe a natural disaster. That’s patronising. Enough with the arguments against junk food: plenty of people enjoy it and to dismiss them all as stupid is offensive.

Over-eating, under-exercising? It’s your own business – provided, of course, that you are aware of the risks and you have real freedom of choice. Now I don’t believe ‘freedom’ comes about simply when a government does nothing to interfere with what people do. I believe encouraging real personal freedom has always been about expanding the opportunities for genuine choice in our everyday lives.

I do believe it is the job of government to make sure you understand what your lifestyle choices do to you, and to see that alternatives are available if you want to change. This is not an attack on our freedom to gorge, but an attempt to ensure that we have a real chance to make ourselves fit, if we so choose.

Everyone knows non-stop fry-ups are bad for you; who needs to be told that? But most people tend to think their diet is healthier than it actually is – and manufacturers are in no hurry to correct them. Now, the current government ‘attack’ on junk food merely amounts to a small, but quite impressive, innovation: a simple, easy to follow labelling system based on the three traffic light colours, red, amber and green.

I think this is good (no sinister plan to force feed us spinach). This gives more freedom, more choice. You can make a well-informed choice. You will know at a glance how risky your diet is: a red label means, ‘Watch out! Danger!’ No more denial – you know it’s not good for you.

So will we all be able to use this freedom of choice? Maybe not. Research indicates that it is the poorest people in our society who have the least healthy diet and the fewest choices available to them. The reality is that many people in modern Britain are trapped in what sociologists call ‘food deserts’. It is a bizarre thought, but in our modern urbanised society we have some densely populated areas that actually have very few shops. A fact we have to face is that the rise of the out-of-town supermarket has cut down on the number of shopping trips we make. We go for big stock-ups on longer-life tinned or frozen products. This, together with the loss of many of our high street greengrocers, means that fresh, healthy food is possibly even harder to get to now than it was a few decades ago.

If you have no car and a limited public transport service (or a couple of unwilling kids to drag along to the bus stop), it can be difficult to do any decent food shopping. The choices around what to have for dinner can be limited to what's in the freezer (if indeed you have one) or whatever take-away is within walking distance. It's like being cast adrift in a sea of saturated fat.

So, another new idea (or 'attack', depending on your politics) is to offer financial encouragements to the big supermarkets if they will open small branches in these less profitable 'food deserts' and sell us some affordable fresh goodies.

Again, this is not part of a hate crime against the stuffed-crust pizza, but another step towards extending choice to us all. Meaningful choice – equally spread.

Of course, some people – like me – will have the means to eat healthily but still opt for a triple cheeseburger. That is our right in a free society. But the choice has to be there. At this moment for too many people, it's not; their only option is between straight cut or crinkle cut chips.

Now, all this talk of chips is making me hungry and lunch today will be a quarter pounder. On my way to enjoy it, I shall stroll past a gym I can afford to join but don't and wave at the personal trainer I can afford to hire but won't. I am exercising. I am exercising my right to choose.

Choice – shouldn't it be part of everyone's diet?

By Johann Hari. Published in The Independent, 17th November 2004

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