

LOW-CARB

Friend or foe of concessions?

by Susan Cross

The low-carb craze seems to be everywhere, with traditional staples like bread now the enemy, and increasing numbers of people turning their diets upside down. You can't go anywhere without seeing food items touted for their carbohydrate content, and a steak and potatoes meal is now just steak.

Some 35 million Americans - roughly 12 percent of the population - are currently on a carb-controlled diet, according to Opinion Dynamics Corporation. A recent survey by Leo J. Shapiro and Associates, a Chicago-based behavior research firm, also found that 12 percent of Americans were on a formal low-carb diet. However, it also found an additional 23 percent were cutting back their carbohydrate consumption, meaning 35 percent of U.S. adults are reducing their carb intake.

Food manufacturing companies have responded in a big way, launching hundreds of low-carb products from bunless burgers, entrée salads, and low-carb beer. According to Mintel International Group, U.S. companies have launched 994 new low-carb products thus far in 2004, compared with 392 products in all of 2003. In 2000, only 26 new low-carb offerings were introduced. Existing products that meet low-carb guidelines are also repackaging and marketing to capitalize on the trend. Some

carb-heavy products, however, are hurting. The Food Institute reports that supermarket bread sales dropped 2.5 percent last year, while pasta and cereal sales fell 4.6 percent and 3.8 percent respectively.

Ice cream retail sales dropped 2.7 percent during the 52 weeks ending May 8, reports AC Nielsen. Overall sales are lower now than four years ago. Some manufacturers are

the range of low-carb products available.

But is low-carb a trend, or just a fad, and how is it affecting the concessions industry? How are concessionaires responding to the low-carb craze?

"I think it's cyclical, but not a fad," states Sheila Parisien, CCM, of the Calgary Flames/Saddledome. "I think this will be something we will

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trying to slim down and cut the carbohydrates from their ice cream products. Ben & Jerry's has rolled out carb-reduced versions of their products called Carb Karma. Almost 30 percent of all products sold by giant Good Humor-Breyers now are in its better-for-you line, with sales doubling in the first five months of 2004.

There is even going to be a "Low Carb Month" sponsored by the Low Carb Manufacturers Alliance (LCMA) in January of 2005.

LCMA, a group of manufacturers, distributors and marketers of low-carb products, will be using Low-Carb Month to create awareness of

need in the future, much as we will need larger printing on signage for aging baby boomers."

"We've noticed a few requests for sandwiches without buns, or for healthier items, but not in large



numbers,” says The Lexington Center’s Brian McMillin, CCM. “We’re not having anyone walk away because we don’t have specific low-carb items.”

The impact of low-carb on concessions seems to be minimal for many concession operators. “I have not seen any appreciable effect on per capitas,” states Skip Stefansen of Metropolitan Theatres. “There’s really been no impact on popcorn sales or other products.” Stefansen notes that while bottled water sells well at his theatre circuit, with full and half-liter offerings, “soda still

two days that we didn’t have enough chocolate and high-fat items!”

For some, the low-carb craze is reminiscent of other diet and health-conscious trends of the past. “Over the years there have been many different requests for healthy products,” notes Stefansen. “They get put in the stand, but don’t get purchased.”

The concessions industry has often been somewhat immune to diet trends, as many people perceive a trip to the concession stand as part of the entertainment experience, and not one they are willing to give up, or

Vending gets healthy

Canteen Vending Services, one of North America’s largest vending machine operators, has announced plans to install hundreds of machines with healthier food choice in 11 cities – including New York, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco. The company plans to install at least 7,500 of these machines in the next five years.

Among the nutrition-conscious items to be added include fresh melon and berry fruit cups, turkey and reduced-fat Swiss cheese wraps, granola bars, vitamin-enhanced water and even vitamin packs.

At the same time, the company is making at least fifteen percent of the items in all 160,000 of its traditional vending machines more nutritious products. Just five years ago that percentage was about two percent.

Some communities have begun to enact laws requiring that more nutritional foods and beverages be sold in school vending machines. In U.S. sales, companies are demanding better nutrition to combat a health care price tag for obesity that has reached \$12 billion.

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outsells water 100 to 1.” He also notes that “the age group that goes to the movies the most often, the 14 to 23-year-old ages, may not be the group that is worried about their diet.”

Maria Dos Santos of the Thomas & Mack Center at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas, disagrees. “We’re actually seeing more younger audiences buying healthier fare. They seem to be more health-conscious.” Dos Santos does state that the low-carb trend does not seem to have affected the suite and catering sales at her facility. “Most people order a variety of items for their suites,” she continues. “We really haven’t seen a difference in that trend.”

McMillin agrees, stating that his facility has made no permanent changes to their menu to add low-carb items. Recently, however, McMillin did have a ‘low-carb backlash’ at his facility during a two-day conference that drew 18,000 women. “We tried some healthier fare such as wraps, salads, healthy sandwiches, etc., thinking that this would be a good audience for that type of menu. They complained for

alter. “People treat themselves when they go out,” says Stefansen. Stefansen is an personal advocate of the low-carb based South Beach Diet, but notes that the diet uses the term ‘treating’, not ‘cheating’. “When I go to the movies, I still treat myself to a hot dog, popcorn and a soda,” states Stefansen.

McMillin agrees, stating “People often think ‘We’ll eat what we want now and eat healthy later.’ No one is going to the concession stand just to look for healthy food.” Dos Santos notes that “there are so many trends, it just depends on the person. Some people watch what they eat no matter what, and some eat whatever they want.”

This is a partial version of the complete story that appeared in the Fall 2004 issue of Concession Profession, the magazine for NAC members. [To become a member of NAC click here.](#) Members that would like to receive the complete story can call the NAC office at (312) 236-3858.

Better for you vending substitutions

In	Out
Bottled water	Full-sugar soft drinks
Nutrition bars	Candy bars
Salads, wraps	Pizza, burgers, hot dogs
Decaf, green tea	Coffee, hot chocolate
Dried fruits & nuts	Regular potato chips