Proceedings from the International Food Information Council (IFIC)  
Expert Roundtable on Energy and Calorie Balance  
Convened on February 19th, 2009, in Washington, DC

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Roundtable Overview  
The prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States has increased attention to the importance of balancing calories to manage weight. Numerous policy and educational efforts are aimed at helping consumers achieve calorie balance.  

The critical issue for nutrition and health communicators is the need for consumer-centered strategies that inspire action toward balancing calories in and calories out to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.  

The International Food Information Council (IFIC) convened many of the brightest minds in nutrition and physical activity communications, behavior, and policy to engage in a critical analysis of challenges and experiences in communicating the calorie balance equation to consumers. The experts have experience with program development and implementation, making them well-equipped to provide practical advice on facilitating behavioral change toward achieving calorie balance.  

Two key concepts were identified by the experts and have the potential to create unique opportunities for promoting healthful eating and physical activity behaviors among consumers.  

**Concept 1:** Healthier lifestyles will become the norm when consumers demand cultural changes toward that reality, and society responds to address those demands. It is essential that the public drive this movement in order for real change to occur. The current environment, where information on the calorie balance message is passively received, is not working.  

**Concept 2:** A “surround-sound” (e.g., 360 degree) communications approach, where consistent and coordinated messages on the calorie balance concept come from multiple sources at multiple touch points, will improve the breadth and depth of reach into the places where consumers live, work, and play.  

The Expert Roundtable provided other insights that could be used to develop best practices for communicating the calorie balance equation by various stakeholders. IFIC is developing a plan of action to build on the outcomes from the Roundtable discussion.
Executive Summary

The purpose of the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Expert Roundtable on Energy and Calorie Balance was to convene wide-ranging stakeholders to begin creating an action plan for an environment where similar calorie balance messages could be effectively delivered to and adopted by consumers. The rationale for the Roundtable was grounded in the experience of IFIC and others that expert evaluation and discussion serve to: 1) clarify needs, 2) provide direction for future action, 3) reduce duplication, 4) enhance efficiencies and effectiveness, 5) strengthen collaborations among stakeholders, and 6) maximize synergies to implement strategic frameworks and programs that result in “quick wins” for consumers. The Roundtable experts were selected based on significant experience in communication, behavior change, program development and implementation, or scientific and/or policy expertise specific to nutrition or physical activity. A list of participants follows the Executive Summary.

The rich and lively dialogue among the Roundtable experts is comprehensively captured in this report. The realities of the current environment, including a thorough discussion of consumer perspectives, challenges, and opportunities, were addressed. Discussion of current initiatives served to explore issues concerning target audiences, outcomes and measures, messaging, and dissemination. Key communication allies and detractors, as well as partnership and collaboration possibilities received considerable attention by the participants.

The Expert Roundtable provided insights that could be used to develop best practices for communicating the calorie balance equation by various stakeholders. They are as follows:

- Calorie balance communication should be individualized in every way, including messaging, delivery, and goal setting for individuals. Three related perspectives shed light on the necessity of individualization: 1) Nutrition research demonstrates that nutritional needs vary among individuals; 2) Behavioral research demonstrates that consumers respond more effectively to approaches that respect individuality; and 3) Consumers state their preference for individualized messages and strategies.
- Multiple sectors much engage consumers at every point where food and physical activity decisions are made—where they live, work, and play.
- Behavior change is complex and should consider the need to move the target audience through the stages of behavior change, the need for message repetition, and social influences such as one’s circle of friends.
- Motivating consumers toward dietary and activity behavior changes requires connecting the action to issues that are valuable to the individual, even if they are not related to health, such as family time or the environment. Examples include using exercise to increase “family time” or to reduce carbon emissions.
- Make the most of the powerful influence of role models. The parent is the most influential role model for young children. Beginning at about 13 years of age, however, the peer influencer becomes increasingly important.
- Consumers want messages to be positive, short, simple, easy-to-follow, fun, and focused on food, not nutrients.
Two key concepts were identified by the experts and have the potential to create unique opportunities for promoting healthful eating and physical activity behaviors among consumers.

Concept 1: Healthier lifestyles will become the norm when consumers demand cultural changes toward that reality, and society responds to address those demands.
Society must share responsibility with individuals in order for a positive, sustained change in the collective state of health to occur. Given the ongoing challenges to elicit changes in dietary or physical activity behaviors or body mass index (BMI), the time has come to move beyond prescribing lifestyle goals to the public. A much more far-sighted approach is needed, noting that consumers generally do what they want to do. The challenge will be for communicators to stimulate changes in attitudes and actions to a point where they are self-directed and self-sustaining. Social networking and other technological tools will likely play an integral role in facilitating this approach.

Concept 2: A surround-sound (360 degree) communication approach, where consistent and coordinated messages on calorie balance come from multiple sources at multiple touch points, will improve the breadth and depth of reach into the places where consumers live, work, and play.
Although there are many programs in action today, impact is sometimes isolated to relatively small pockets within communities. Consumers may hear good information and feel motivated by a healthcare provider, yet find a lack of support for healthful lifestyle choices in the places where they work or play. Creating consistent, quality communication throughout the consumer’s daily life, so that they can see, hear, and experience healthier lifestyle choices, is a challenging but also an essential need in today’s environment.

Plan for Action
With gradually increasing consumer desire for improved health and expanding efforts in multiple sectors to stimulate change (e.g., government, community, industry), the time is ripe for a coordinating force to provide direction and facilitate synergistic action. To that end, the International Food Information Council will develop a plan for action that will build on the success of this Roundtable, continuing to engage the participants along with additional experts. Potential outcomes may include: 1) publicizing the proceedings of the Expert Roundtable, including publishing a paper in an appropriate journal, 2) developing best practices for communicating the calorie balance concept, and 3) exploring consumer research needs. IFIC is committed to collaborating with the Roundtable participants and others to help consumers understand and achieve calorie balance.
Roundtable Participants

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Summary of Expert Roundtable Discussion on Energy and Calorie Balance

Current Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Health Environment

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics issued a report in February 2009 on the health of the U.S. population of young adults, 18 to 29 years old. For this age group, obesity rates have tripled since early 1970’s.
- President and First Lady Obama and Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, emphasize health and disease prevention. Vilsack has put nutrition at the top of his priority list, noting the unintended damage that some past efforts have had in the form of creating shame around eating and weight issues.
- The Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee was revisiting federal nutrition guidelines and made recommendations in 2010. Obesity is at the top of their priority list.
- The inaugural Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans were published in 2008.
- Consumers and communicators are confused and frustrated about the messages they receive on nutrition, physical activity, and health.

Current Consumer Perspectives, Challenges, and Opportunities

- Consumer assessment of personal nutrition knowledge is high, although misunderstanding is rampant.
  - Consumers think of eating for health and eating for weight as separate concepts, and are willing to do unhealthful things to lose weight.
  - Consumers incorrectly perceive that they understand calories in foods and how many calories they need (very few can estimate calorie needs correctly). This is a particularly difficult communication barrier.
  - ‘Energy’ is used by consumers to describe a physical or mental state of being. Using ‘energy’ to describe calories in food is counter-intuitive. Using either ‘energy’ or ‘calories’ with respect to physical activity is also lost on consumers.
  - Understanding how energy in food relates to energy expenditure is essential to understanding energy balance.
  - People perceive moderation as what they’re currently doing, and descriptors such as ‘sedentary’ or ‘active’ are highly subjective.
  - However, the pertinent question with respect to education is, “What do consumers need to know to do what they need to do?” Educating about these terms may not be as helpful as focusing on eliciting changes in behavior to increase activity, regardless of the specific starting point.
- We need to separate “physical activity and health” from “nutrition and health” and better understand consumer perspectives on physical activity and health.
- Motivating consumers is an elusive goal.
  - The lack of consumer interest in the phrase ‘energy balance’ is related not only to poor understanding of energy and calories, but also to the fact that ‘balance’ relates to considerations well beyond health for the consumer. They want to be healthier, but not perfect. They are indeed ‘balancing’ behaviors, but doing so with respect to health in addition to multiple other behaviors and priorities.
  - Complex social and emotional factors contribute to energy imbalance.
Time may be a marker for lack of motivation/prioritization.

Family dynamics are complex.

The total life environment, from school to work to home to play affects consumers’ decisions.

Conflicting and confusing food goals for parents of young children, weighing the need to feed with the dangers of overfeeding.

Many consumers say they do not like to exercise.

Consumers report that they do not want to eat foods that they perceive as not tasting good.

Interviews with people who have maintained weight loss indicate no particular common motivators. It may be that the sources of motivation are as individualized as nutrition guidance should be. Still, a few commonalities emerge from consumer research:

- Role modeling is very important, serving as a motivator for women and a guide for children.
- Women are motivated by appearance, as well as family, being a role model for their kids, and health issue related to weight status.
- Although weight loss maintainers do not like to exercise, they do it and say it is an important part of their lives. Is there an important difference between people who like versus do not like exercise with respect to avoiding weight gain, losing weight, or maintaining weight loss?
- The importance of habituating new behaviors and changing overall lifestyle was noted. For some, this means even changing one’s circle of friends.

- Consumers want messages to be positive, short and simple, tailored to them, specific and manageable, provide a payoff. They want to hear about food not calories and nutrients and want it to be fun.

Current Initiatives at the Time of the Roundtable (NOTE: Not an all-inclusive list.)

- The Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) at USDA convened 102 companies at the “Small Changes Summit” in 2008 to encourage companies to promote MyPyramid on food package labels. The program has significant promise. To move it forward, there is a desire to set up an institute among several universities and segments to coordinate, reward, and acknowledge efforts.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has extensive experience in health communication. A module on weight management is forthcoming.
- Ad Council work is aimed at determining the right ways to communicate with various populations. For example, plans are underway to launch a USDA program around MyPyramid, featuring Pinocchio, and including online and PSA messaging, and a multimedia tour with Secretary Vilsak. In addition, in summer 2009, they will launch the next round of a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) physical activity and nutrition campaign, using kids as health ambassadors.
- Active Life in Austin is an initiative in Austin, TX that is designing programs that are owned and delivered by adolescents through Twitter, Facebook, etc., creating demand for healthier lifestyles. The focus is on having adolescents decide what they want and how to do it.
- American Dietetic Association programs include: Healthy Weight for Kids, Evidence Analysis Library (EAL) Analysis on nutrition counseling, and BMI Square, aimed at using motivational interviewing to move parents along stages of change.
- America on the Move is a grassroots movement to increase physical activity in communities.
• American Society for Nutrition (ASN) is working with IFIC and Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) around projects that combine nutrition and food science. Out of that dialogue a paper was recently published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, outlining how a national initiative around small changes could work to impact public health.

• DHHS produced the Physical Activity Guidelines, including 8 physical activity strategies that are proven to work. An online community with 200 partners for the “Be Active Your Way” campaign, to include blogs, success stories, etc., is launching soon. ([http://health.gov/paguidelines](http://health.gov/paguidelines))

• CDC VERB campaign (to increase physical activity among youth ages 9-13) was successful, but cost millions of dollars and was therefore discontinued. Could the success of VERB be regenerated with a partnership model, with partners echoing VERB through their own channels? Such a strategy would be complicated, but could be executed at a lower cost than government operating independently, and individual groups could keep their own branding, etc. Importantly, this could increase sustainability of an effective program.

• The Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA)/Food Marketing Institute (FMI) Healthy Weight Commitment was formed as one way to put the force of industry behind this initiative. There is an emphasis on consistent messaging and identifying and mobilizing the right ambassadors. Three pillars of action have been established as follows, with criteria formed in advance for prioritizing and selecting existing programs to support:
  - **Marketplace (Individual Energy Balance):** Deliver company-specific solutions to help individuals achieve energy balance within the context of a nutritious diet.
  - **Schools (Teaching Kids Early):** Support the Healthy Schools Partnership (HSP) as a model, school-based physical activity and nutrition education program that will help build knowledge and life-long positive habits among children aged 6-11.
  - **Workplace (Walk the Talk):** Undertake new or enhanced programs designed to reduce obesity in company workforces.

**Barriers to Communication Effectiveness**

• Federal agencies struggle with dissemination due to lack of funding.

• Physical activity is not a traditional public health issue.

• There is a lack of cohesiveness and coordination among multiple programs. Communicators from all sectors need to get behind communication strategies that we know are working, and contribute more and louder voices, rather than a new language.

• There is a lack of surround sound for messaging. Current engagement of the public is primarily in the grocery store. To change how people make food and activity decisions, need to engage at every point where they make those decisions.

• A broader representation of expertise should be collaborating and should include not only nutrition and physical activity experts, but also parks and recreation people, city design experts, entertainment industry, and behaviorists.

• The environment is not conducive to healthy lifestyles:
  - Urban policy and planning are key.
  - Cafeterias in the workplace, hospitals, etc do not always offer healthful options, adequate nutrition information, etc.
  - Groups are working to further a bill to define standards of fitness.
Need to create climate that allows the private sector to promote what they are doing, so they will want to do even more. Currently, corporations are attacked even for positive action.

- Misinformation is perpetuated.
- Motivation for physical activity is poorly understood.
- There is a lot of research being conducted that is not published in journals. We need a place to share all of it (government, industry, etc.).

The Evolution of Target Audiences

- Based on food purchase decision-making, community influence, and an identified need, the most common target audiences identified are parents (particularly mothers) of young children.
- Health professionals remain an important group. It was noted that nurses are a population that is underutilized, although very influential on the job and in their communities.
- Health disparities necessitate a focus on subgroups who suffer from overweight, obesity, and ill health far more than others. For this reason, health literacy and cultural competence are important concepts to consider and address.
- Psychographic characteristics may be more important than demographics.
  - Messaging can be targeted to 4 distinct consumer segments, derived from a 2x2 matrix:
    - Do they believe they are in charge of their environment?
    - Do they demonstrate a degree of self-efficacy?
- The emerging consumer thought leader is active in social networks and engaged in life. They provide deeper reach than traditional opinion leaders. CDC has research using community leaders to influence, rather than just using health professionals.

A New View on Getting the Word Out

- Need to know your audience. Not everyone has the same starting point, goal, or is influenced through the same techniques.
- Provide incentives for action by all sectors of society.
- Obama phenomenon: How do you tap into new communications and really build on excitement with cognitive and behavioral strategies?
  - Use modern technology to disseminate messages and allow the messages to take on a life of their own. There is fear of losing control of the message, but it was noted that this is why it works. Essentially, the topic has potential to become a 'cause,' and consumers, especially young people, want ownership.
- Potential hooks:
  - Environment: Is there is a natural way to hook this to the environmental movement, as kids think taking care of the Earth is the right thing to do. It's greener to be active? You can have more energy in your life if you burn a little energy? Eat less to reduce carbon footprint? Walk to save gas? CAUTION: The green movement is mainstream, but behavior change is not as far-reaching as it may seem.
  - Personal economics
  - Make healthy choices the easy choice, the fun choice.
- Identify key players who have the ear of target audiences. Generate 2-3 concepts/messages, encourage key players to apply what they know will resonate with the target audiences, be entrepreneurial and give the concepts/messages 'legs.'
• Cultural change comes from the bottom up. How do we create a demand rather than telling people what they ought to be doing? Find ways to let the target audience create demand, e.g. Active Life in Austin, history of recycling, etc.

• For young children, teachers and parents remain the most influential. Encouraging these groups to role model healthful lifestyles is important.

• For 13-year-olds and up, peer leaders become increasingly influential.

Targeting and Measuring the Right Outcomes

• There is a general lack of confidence in data on dietary intake and physical activity, as well as discussion regarding the merit of targeting weight changes versus behavior change.

• Whether aiming for anthropometric or behavioral outcomes, focusing on improvement rather than discreet target values (caloric intake, minutes of physical activity, weight) may be a more meaningful measure of health impact.

• Other potential outcome measures were discussed, such as wellness, happiness, happiness with respect to weight, reduced stress, and positive versus negative stress.

• Moving the target audience through the stages of behavior change (awareness, shifting attitudes, behavior change, outcomes) was noted as a valuable strategy.

• Helping consumers to understand the importance of defining goals was also raised.

Key Characteristics of Successful Energy Balance Communication Programs

• Working together will yield a greater impact than any one voice can create on its own. Combine resources rather than compete.

• Listen, learn, and be role models.

• Any message is incomplete if it did not include both food and activity.

• Reach people where they live, work, and play.

• Provide a positive, feasible approach.

• Identify audiences with an obvious need.

Partners and Collaborators

• Consider:
  o Who is talking about calorie balance
  o Who is looking at food and physical activity in a different way

• Consumer research: IFIC, Ad Council and others. Tap into available data from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, technology providers as well as academia.

• Behavioral and psychological societies

• Nutrition societies: American Society for Nutrition, Society for Nutrition Education, American Dietetic Association

• Physical activity societies

Agents of Change: Allies

• Local communities, including mayors, public health officials, citizens, city planners, and coalitions, are struggling with the “what to do.”

• “Uncommon Players”
  o E.g., C-Change, a coalition of 130 organizations working for cancer prevention
• Healthiest Nation Alliance, key stakeholder groups involved, open to everyone
• Technology providers, e.g., Microsoft or Apple, to understand data regarding technological communication tools and to increase availability of the tools
• Policy makers
• Health insurance companies
• Local business community
• Hollywood, music industry
• Media
• Faith communities
• Schools, beyond food service to also include teachers, administration, etc.
• Food and restaurant industries
• Physical activity industries
• Public-private sectors coalitions

Communication Research Questions
• Programs and strategies:
  o How do changes/programs become sustainable?
  o Explore successful social networking models
  o Test impact of technological applications in behavioral interventions, e.g. telephone or online vs. in-person counseling.
    ▪ Example: Virgin Health Miles, financial incentives (points) for taking a certain number of steps could have some helpful data.
• MyPyramid impact/effectiveness:
  o CNPP has anecdotal, limited info on Web site users, indicating that interactive tools are powerful.
  o Tie small steps into the Pyramid/future dietary guidance symbol
  o Use IFIC Foundation Food & Health Survey to help evaluate use of MyPyramid and see if people are making changes based on it.
• Communicating the calorie balance concept:
  o Short term gratification of eating vs. long term gratification of exercise?
  o Instead of measuring absolute energy balance or BMI, measure directional progress/behavioral change
  o Promote the importance of both eating well and exercising
  o What is the most effective way to communicate why physical activity is important? Physical activity is more than just burning calories and food is more than added calories.
  o MindFUL eating: Help people tune in and experience the food they are eating, their own internal signals, hunger cues, etc. be mindful of emotional aspects that impact eating behaviors.
  o Incentivize behavior change?
  o Reward behavior vs. outcome?
  o Do small steps serve as an entry point to facilitate a mind shift and then bigger behavioral changes?
    o NCI behavioral group is looking into decision making in eating behavior.
• Terminology:
• Calories are understood to come from food, but they are not equated with energy, particularly not with energy expenditure or physical activity. Energy is considered a physical state of being. In addition, ‘calories’ is a negative word for consumers, associated with restrictions.
• As balance is poorly understood, would ‘tradeoffs’ or ‘choices’ work better? Trade-offs may over-emphasize the need to give something up, while balance may convey a bigger impact on actual health.

• Science questions:
  • Is there an important difference between people who like versus don’t like exercise with respect to avoiding weight gain, losing weight, or maintaining weight loss?
  • What is the physical activity threshold under which people will not lose weight?
  • The energy in/energy out equation is more complicated than once thought and needs to be explored much more deeply.

Big Ideas

• **The only way healthier lifestyles will become the norm is to facilitate consumer demand for a cultural change toward that reality.**
  • There was broad agreement that, given the ongoing challenges to eliciting changes in eating or physical activity behaviors or body mass index (BMI), the time has come to move beyond prescribing lifestyle goals to the public.
  • A much more far-sighted approach is needed, noting that consumers generally do what they want to do.
  • Individualization is not only preferred by consumers, but demanded by nutrition and behavioral science findings.
  • Social, cultural support is essential. How do we collectively make it the right thing to eat well and exercise?
  • Incremental lifestyle change, using behavior change models, will build self-efficacy.
  • Incentivize corporate changes, such as cutting calories in foods.
  • Policy may be needed to start the ball rolling, e.g., mandatory recess for kids and corporate tax incentive to allow employees time to go out and walk.
  • Social networking and other technological tools will likely play an integral role in facilitating this movement.
  • The challenge will be for communicators to stimulate changes in attitudes and actions to a place where further changes are self-directed and self-sustaining.

• **A strong, consistent coordinating force is needed to create surround sound for effective calorie balance messaging, giving direction and breadth and depth of reach to the current plethora of boutique programs and approaches.**
  • Getting more voices from all sectors around good programs and messaging will carry more force than creating a new program.
  • IFIC noted that it looks forward to continuing to engage participants and broaden the expertise of the participant pool in moving forward on a strategy to work together.