Influencing Giants: How the Cries of Consumers Can End America’s Obesity Crisis

America’s steadily increasing obesity rates, tied largely to the unhealthy American diet, are approaching alarmingly high levels. The disturbing implications of recent studies do not merely relate to fatness, however, as greater obesity levels have also led to a dramatic increase in serious health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. In other words, obesity is killing people, and it must be confronted. Yet, while nearly everyone agrees that change is necessary, no one seems to know exactly what changes are needed. Ready to “help,” America’s booming diet industry, valued at more than $50 billion per year, has advanced numerous dieting plans to end obesity (Maxfield 444). But to many dieting believers, the mere introduction of new and improved diets is not enough. Instead, most readily embrace at least one of two additional measures: replacing most processed foods with more natural foods or developing more restrictions on the processed food industry. While it is certainly true that many of the common processed and fast food items are unhealthy, I intend to show that America’s obesity crisis will only begin to diminish if consumers collectively demand healthier options, and the processed food industry is given the freedom to naturally adapt to those demands. The processed food industry is a critical part of the solution.

Personal and societal freedom have been markedly American traits since the birth of our nation, and have allowed us to achieve much success. Specifically, this freedom has allowed a
variety of industries in the American economy to prosper at incredibly high levels – the fruits of a system which allows them to create new and improved products according to the demands of consumers. After all, the goal of businesses is to make a profit, and the only way to do so is to have people buy their products. Successful businesses thus only create or modify products if they know consumers will buy them. Marion Nestle acknowledges this in her essay “The Supermarket: Prime Real Estate,” saying that businesses “work…long and hard to make [products that are] most attractive and convenient for [consumers] – and most profitable for them” (505). Food and beverage companies invest thousands of hours and millions of dollars into researching how to create their products so as to maximize customer satisfaction and, thus, profitability. Some view this focus on money in a negative light, writing it off as nothing more than an immoral result of greedy capitalism. They view it as a danger to consumers, but in reality, the exact opposite is true. Companies’ concern over profit actually serves to safeguard consumers because it provides them assurance that those food and drink businesses will always do their best to meet the collective demands of consumers in order to generate a greater profit.

Still, others are not convinced, arguing that fewer restrictions on the processed food industry will only allow them to make foods which are even more unhealthy. In his piece “The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food,” Michael Moss, an investigative journalist for the New York Times, reveals evidence which seems to corroborate these claims. He states that, after four years of careful research, he has discovered “a conscious effort” by several companies “to get people hooked on [unhealthy] foods that are convenient and inexpensive” (477). Supporters of more restrictions on the processed food and drink industry have been quick to highlight these findings as evidence which supports their views, asserting that companies abuse their freedom to
create unhealthy, addictive products. Though I agree that the practices of certain companies have
led to the creation of unhealthy products, I disagree that they are the result of a company having
too few restrictions. I argue that it is the continued demand for unhealthy products by consumers
which gave rise to these practices. Critics of the processed foods industry seem to have forgotten
the fact that, when consumers demand change, they get it. For example, in an attempt to satisfy
the cries of consumers for healthier options, fast food companies such as McDonald’s, Burger
King, Carl’s Jr, and Chick-fil-A have thoughtfully not only cut many of their unhealthiest
options, but also replaced them with healthy alternatives. In short, then, companies will adapt to
meet the demands of consumers. Thus, I argue that it is up to consumers to effect change by
collectively demanding healthier options from companies. Only then will true changes occur.

To many people, however, the processed food industry could never be a vital part of the
solution because they view it as the root of the problem. For it is the products of the processed
foods industry, claims Michael Pollan, professor at the University of California at Berkley and
one of the industry’s most vocal critics, which are responsible for “making people sick” and
contributing to the numerous health problems in America (508). Only by ridding ourselves of
processed foods, dubbed “[f]oodlike substances” by Pollan, and eating a more natural, mostly
plant-based diet can obesity be lowered (509). Nevertheless, in reality, eating these “healthier”
alternatives would yield no better results. In his essay “How Junk Food Can end Obesity,” author
David Freedman explains why, noting that many of these “healthier” options actually tend to be
less healthy than those of the processed food industry, often containing many carbohydrates, fats,
and sea salts (513). As if to avoid this issue, Melanie Warner, author of Pandora’s Lunchbox, is
quick to point out that “wholesome” foods contain only natural ingredients, rather than those that
have been chemically synthesized, and are therefore healthier. While this argument may at first appear reasonable, it is false. No serious scientific study has proven that all substances which have been chemically synthesized are unhealthy. They are less natural, but not necessarily bad.

Ultimately, the ideas of “wholesome” food advocates truly collapse due to the fact that they would be impossible to effectively implement. Jamy Ard, an epidemiology and preventive-medicine researcher at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, describes supporters of those ideas as “really naïve.” She encourages “small, beneficial changes” to be made in the processed food industry, rather than “big changes” which she claims have no chance of succeeding (525). The reason for their impossibility is because fast and processed foods have become such a significant part of current American culture. Thus, I contend that the only way to get people to eat healthier is to meet them where they are – the fast food line – rather than force them, especially the obese poor, to radically change the way they live, for that will never happen. Demonizing or restricting the efforts of the processed food industry to provide healthier options only serves to discourage change. As a result, most people will simply be left with the same unhealthy choices as before.

While all reasonable people agree that obesity in the United States is a real issue, they face two possibilities as to how to address it: buy into the beliefs of Michael Pollan and his “wholesome” food supporters, or force the processed food industry to become healthier. Believers in the radical dieting movement will tell you that you are powerless, that the processed food industry will never cease to make products that cause disease and make you fat – all for the sake of their own profitability. However, in making this deceptive argument, they minimize the power you truly have. While the processed food industry is here to stay, we, as consumers, can
encourage larger companies to offer healthier choices if we choose to demand such options.

What is necessary to end obesity is a cultural shift among consumers toward healthier products. The processed food industry is capable of offering healthier choices, but will only do so if consumers demand it.

Works Cited

