

NATIONAL POTATO PROMOTION BOARD
A Report to the Potato Growers of Washington State
on the First Full Year of Potato Promotion

by
Bob Mercer

Over the last ten years, per capita consumption of fresh potatoes has been steadily declining. And so have prices to the grower. The Potato Board's job was clear: we needed to get the grower price back up to profitable levels by increasing consumer demand.

Research clearly pointed out the problem. Many consumers had cut back on potato consumption because they believed potatoes were fattening and non-nutritious. These feelings had been reinforced by fad diets, like the Dr. Atkins diet, which attacked all carbohydrates.

Taking these findings into account, the Potato Board's marketing plan initiated the many programs needed, including:

1. Consumer advertising and public relations to correct consumer misconceptions.
2. Specialty advertising and public relations programs directed to doctors, dietitians and nutrition educators to convince them of the excellent nutritional value of the potato.
3. A retail trade education program.
4. A continuing research program including the exploration of export opportunities.
5. Produce industry efforts to gain produce trade support for the program.
6. An institutional program to promote new institutional feeding ideas.
7. A program to reach the teachers and students of home economics.

Our agency's creative department worked closely with the home economists in public relations and Ron Deutsch, our nutrition consultant, to develop advertising that is highly creative and nutritionally accurate.

Advertising Program

Magazines were selected that really zero in on the best prospects and that carry authority in the areas of nutrition, diet and health. Reader's Digest, Family Circle, Woman's Day, McCalls, Good Housekeeping, Good Food, Redbook, Cosmopolitan, Family Health and Weight Watchers are being used. In Weight Watchers we run advertising to make even the most ardent dieter want to eat potatoes.

The same story is being told on television. During the first year, network television carried the message on shows like Johnny Carson, the Today Show, Walter Cronkite and others. In addition, schedules of spot television ran in America's 25 largest markets.

That's how the Potato Board advertises to the consumer. But the potato industry also needs support from special interest groups who are a major influence on the nation's eating habits.

Advertising is aimed at doctors and dietitians with ads specifically written for them. "Let them eat potatoes" is a plea to dietitians to include potatoes on weight reduction diets. The anatomy of a potato lays on the nutritional content of a potato in clinical terms, a format that doctors really respond to.

The Board also advertises to teachers of home economics.

Research showed that unattractive retail displays in stores turned consumers off. So the Board is developing a program to educate retailers on how to effectively merchandise potatoes.

The industry needs to gain support for the program from the produce industry--so the Board advertises in the Packer and Produce News telling them about the program.

Public Relations Program

Magazine and newspaper food pages are one of the major sources of communication for potatoes. To provide these publications with material, recipes are developed in the agency's test kitchen that illustrate the potato's attributes--that it's low in calories, highly nutritious, economical and versatile.

Recipes are sent with black-and-white photographs and a "story" which highlights these attributes to over 600 newspapers throughout the country. In addition, the black-and-white releases are supported with color features which are sent to over 100 of the major metropolitan newspapers.

Contact with the food editors of major women's magazines is also very important. The Potato Board has had some fine articles resulting from this contact, including:

- Ebony Magazine's September Issue. This magazine is one of the leading general interest magazines in the country with a circulation of over 1 million.
- Weight Watchers Magazine. This audience is very diet and weight conscious--a perfect audience for the Potato Board.
- Family Circle. Ron Deutsch, the Board's nutrition consultant, wrote this article on the hazards of the low-carbohydrate diet and the importance of sensible dieting which includes potatoes.
- The February Good Housekeeping. A "You and Your Diet" section on the need for sugars and starches in your diet.

Besides the print media, TV and radio are also used to tell the story about potatoes. Radio interviews are recorded and put on records for national distribution to 500 major radio stations.

The Board also reaches the consumer through personal appearances on TV in major markets. The Potato Board's home economists have reached a total audience of 1,374,600 touring major markets in the Midwest, East and Southwest so far.

Special P. R. Projects

The "Potato Lover's Diet Cookbook" makes a major contribution to the potato industry because it is the first and only book to not only position potatoes as a relatively low-calorie food, but also provides the consumer with recipes and recipe ideas for preparing potatoes in ways that keep those calories low. The cookbook has been an enormous success. The demand has been so high that the Board is already planning to reprint it.

The Board has developed an extensive nutrition education program to reach the people who are responsible for the dissemination of dietary information reaching consumers through major magazines, TV and radio. The first step in educating these people was a nutrition seminar the Potato Board sponsored last August in New Hampshire. The distinguished panel of nutrition experts included:

- Dr. Frederick Stare of Harvard;
- Dr. Jules Hirsch, one of the country's leading obesity experts from Rockefeller University;
- Ron Deutsch, the Potato Board's nutrition consultant and author;
- Dr. Phil White, Chairman of the Food and Nutrition Council of the American Medical Association;
- Dr. Hilda White, a nutritionist and expert in the nutrition requirements of teenagers.

About 25 science and food writers and editors representing such major and diverse publications as Time, Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping, Family Weekly Sunday Supplement, Journal of the American Dietetic Association and Hospitality Magazine for restaurateurs had the unique opportunity to discuss with these experts such important topics as the body's need for carbohydrates, the hazards of low carbohydrate and high cholesterol diets, and the responsibility these writers have to report accurate nutrition information to consumers.

The March issue of Good Housekeeping is one of the most exciting results from the seminar. Good Housekeeping is devoting its entire 20 some page food section to the potato. The whole potato story will reach 6 to 7 million readers!

We are also very concerned about reaching another important group of nutrition educators with accurate potato information. Doctors, dietitians, and home economists are in the business of talking to consumers on a day-to-day basis about nutrition and dieting. And because of their professional background, these people are very credible sources of information. The fact is, though, that they often have the same misconceptions about potatoes that the consumer has!

Ads appear in medical and dietetic journals. To reinforce these ads, the public relations program works constantly to encourage and place editorial articles on nutrition, dieting and potatoes in these professional publications.

Food Service Program

Last but not least is one of the largest markets for potatoes--the food service industry which includes restaurants, fast food services, hospitals and school cafeterias.

The school food service offers a unique opportunity to combine promotion for the use of potatoes with nutrition education. Holiday menu puzzles were developed to show the school dietitian ways to put potatoes on the school menu.

In addition, we place editorial features in the School Food Service Journal, the major publication for school dietitians.

The second facet of the food service industry is made up of restaurants and fast food operations. The Board's efforts to reach this audience mainly include placing editorial features in the publications that reach these important potato users, emphasizing both fresh and processed potato products usage.

The last part of the public relations program is the effort made to keep the growers informed. Spotlight is the best means of communicating with the growers and it does a good job of highlighting the activities of research, advertising and public relations.

Summary: The Potato Board program is a total communications program with all elements fitting together to achieve our goal: to change the misconceptions about potatoes, so that more potatoes will be consumed, to return a better price to the potato grower.