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# Broccoli's Extreme Makeover

By **MICHAEL MOSS**

The ad agency Victors & Spoils has created campaigns for some of the biggest brands in the food industry — Coca-Cola, Quiznos and General Mills among them. Until now, what they'd never done was try to figure out how to sell broccoli. Or any vegetables or fruits of any kind. This of course is not unique to Victors & Spoils. Major American advertising agencies tend not to get hired by produce growers to help them market fresh fruits and vegetables. They are hired by large companies making huge profits from processed foods to reach into whatever crannies of the American (or global) public they have not yet connected with. Victors & Spoils is exceedingly good at doing just that. The agency's "Smile Back" campaign for Coca-Cola, which was released this summer, has been hailed as an ingenious use of a kind of guerrilla advertising, albeit with very slick production, composed of footage of grinning, attractive ambassadors for Coca-Cola pedaling through cities and rural areas around the globe, handing out free Cokes to anyone who smiled back.

But there is some change in the air when it comes to marketing healthful food in America, and in anticipation of that, I posed a challenge to the firm: How would you get people to want to buy and eat broccoli? What would your campaign look like? What would the message be? What would you do that all the well-intentioned government-funded campaigns have failed to do for generations?

Now two dozen associates of the firm sat stymied in a room filled with responses they received from people they surveyed in order to get a handle on exactly what the public felt about broccoli. One wall was draped with sheets of paper upon which various first impressions were scrawled: "Overcooked, soggy." "Hiding under cheese." "Told not to leave the table until I eat it."

The team had also asked that same crowd to write tombstone epitaphs for broccoli, as a way of eliciting possible tender feelings toward the product. The results weren't especially heartwarming. "Goodbye, poor friend," read one. "I hardly spent time with you, mainly because I didn't like you." A third wall contained a dozen snapshots of open refrigerators, an attempt to visualize the space broccoli occupied in people's real dietary lives. ~~The space it~~ held, at least on this wall, was . . . nowhere. It was nonexistent in the photos.

Earlier in the day, the ad team visited an elementary school in Boulder, Colo sense of what children thought about broccoli. This was a progressive school

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as food was concerned. The school district's director of food services, Ann Cooper, was imported from Berkeley, Calif., where she once worked with Alice Waters; on the school's grounds there was a garden where various fruits and vegetables were grown, to inspire the students to be connected to the source of their food. The team was encouraged when it heard that the students had generally positive feelings — until Cooper reminded them that children were only one part of the challenge and that the parents who actually bought the groceries were, by and large, part of a generation that viewed broccoli as “brown, squishy and smelly.”

Sara Brito, the ad team's strategy director, summed up the information they'd gathered — and the predicament of trying to sell something that was drowning in negatives: “It's overlooked and left behind,” she said. “It doesn't matter in our culture. It has lost its confidence, succumbed to bullying and pressure. It's content being on the sidelines.”

Something she said reminded me of the successful ad campaign started in the '70s to sell Life cereal (“He likes it! Hey, Mikey!”) and the challenge that ad team had in trying to take on the more popular sugary cereals it was competing against. Brito nodded her head. Yes, she said. “Where is our Mikey moment?”

Ari Levi, one of the team's associate creative directors, suggested that the canniest strategy might be to embrace broccoli's negatives. “Maybe there's something cool in not being cool,” he said. “Accepting broccoli for what it is.”

Andy Nathan, the agency's chief marketing officer, offered gently: “It is a flower.”

“You could give someone broccoli bouquets,” said another of the associate creative directors, Marco Merced, a Miami native who made clear he likes his broccoli best when it is smothered in cheese soup. “Is it a bro-quet?”

They had a long way to go.

**As of 2010**, diet surpassed smoking as the No. 1 risk factor for disease and death in America. One in three children is on track to develop diabetes, joining one in three adults who are already clinically obese. The resulting medical costs total tens of billions of dollars a year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — not to mention common sense — a diet rich in produce can help fend off an array of chronic diseases, from heart disease to some cancers.

And yet a 2010 assessment published jointly by the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, which produce the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, revealed that only 5 percent of Americans younger than 50 are getting the recommended amounts of vegetables, with only 10 to 25 percent of older adults achieving this goal. A majority of Americans, on average, are eating half as many vegetables as they should. We eat less than half the recommended amount of fruits. Moreover, more than half the fruit consumed by

children comes from juice, which packs so many sugary calories into so little bulk (the fiber that makes whole fruit healthful) that nutritionists now consider juice in the same category as soda and urge children to avoid excess.

For those who do consume the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, the science is overwhelmingly in their favor. According to Harvard University's long-running Nurses' Health Study and Health Professionals' Follow-up Study, people who eat at least five servings of produce a day had a 28 percent lower risk of heart disease than those who ate fewer than one and a half servings. Likewise, in the federal trial called DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), those who went heavy on the vegetables achieved a similar reduction in blood pressure as others who took medication. And the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's Family Heart Study, published in 2004, showed that high vegetable and fruit consumption (four or more servings a day) resulted in significantly lower levels of the bad cholesterol known as LDL.

Less definitive but suggestive research also shows that produce has a buffering effect on cancer. A review of the highest-quality studies, undertaken by a panel of experts under the auspices of the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute for Cancer Research, found in 2007 that nonstarchy vegetables and fruits "probably" protect against cancers of the mouth, larynx, pharynx, esophagus and stomach. Fruits also appear to help protect against lung cancer, while the onion-family vegetables appear to aid in keeping stomach cancer at bay. The cancer review also found "limited" evidence that carrots stave off cervical cancer.

For all the evidence piling up on behalf of the benefits of eating more produce, it has become clear that neither children nor adults will do so unless they *want* to, and preaching about health benefits doesn't make people want to do anything. Health messages are simply overwhelmed, in volume and in effectiveness, by junk-food ads that often deploy celebrities or cartoon characters to great effect. We may know that eating fruits and vegetables is good for us, but the preponderance of the signals we get — and especially the signals children get — push us in the direction of junk food. The appeal of the packaging, the grab-and-go portability, the everlasting preservatives, the low cost. It also may be undeniable that the crunch of a piece of broccoli is never going to be as satisfying as what food-industry scientists refer to as the "mouth-feel" of a potato chip.

It's understandable, then, in the face of all that, that produce growers and sellers and the various government agencies trying to get Americans to eat better fall back on promoting the health benefits, because it's apparently the only advantage they can successfully exploit in the battle against junk food.

There are signs that this may be changing, though. In September, at the first White House meeting on marketing food to children, Michelle Obama said, "The average child watches

thousands of food advertisements each year, and 86 percent of these ads are for products loaded with sugar, fat, salt." She applauded efforts by produce companies to emulate the processed-food industry's techniques (for instance, Birds Eye started a marketing campaign featuring characters from the show "iCarly" last year, and its sales jumped 20 percent in two months), and she urged more of the same.

Not long after the White House conference, Jeffrey Dunn, a former president of Coca-Cola who now markets baby carrots, told a crowd of more than 1,000 at the Produce Marketing Association convention: "We must change the game. We can help solve the obesity crisis by stealing junk food's playbook, by creating passion for produce, by becoming demand creators, not just growers and processors."

The group's president and chief executive, Bryan Silbermann, told me last month that Dunn's speech was galvanizing and that the organization will soon announce plans for a new marketing campaign aimed at children. "We thought that if we talked for a long-enough time about people needing to eat more healthfully, they would miraculously change their eating habits," Silbermann said. "But the way you get there is what Jeff talked about, using mainstream marketing techniques to get people to behave in a healthful way without knowing it. The processed-food marketers manipulate the public. We haven't spent nearly enough time in the produce industry adopting those techniques and thinking about what really motivates people."

**The problem is** not just one of demand, however. Even if it is possible to increase Americans' desire for produce, little is being done to bring prices down to the point where selecting produce over processed food is a clear choice for millions of Americans. Blueberries that cost \$5 a pint stack up poorly against the frozen pizza that can feed the whole family for the same cost. Yet the agricultural system offers precious little incentive to farmers wanting to grow more of the crops that would be better for us. From direct subsidy payments, to insurance when crops get blown away by bad weather, to research dollars for increasing yield and profitability, the deck is stacked against produce farmers.

In July, I traveled to upstate New York to meet Brian Reeves, a fourth-generation farmer with 1,500 acres, on part of which he grows a range of produce that he sells locally. As a general rule, Reeves said, he does not let visitors onto his farm before 10 a.m. during harvest season. The wisdom of that was made plain when I arrived. At 9 a.m., the place was a madhouse. Local grocers had placed orders for 12,000 pounds of tomatoes, blueberries and other produce to be delivered to 52 stores within 100 miles. But one of Reeves's trucks had a flat. And a driver had loaded another truck with the wrong stuff, costing his crew a time-consuming reshuffle. On top of which, 117 boxes of squash were scheduled to be on the loading dock for delivery, but the golden zucchini was still in his fields, on the vines, being picked.

“It’s like that T-shirt says: ‘It’s not the heat, it’s the stupidity,’ ” Reeves said when he, in turn, couldn’t remember the errand he wanted one of his drivers to run on the way back to the farm. And these were just the everyday glitches to contend with. Earlier this year, a freakish chill wiped out his entire crop of early cucumbers. Then his plans to pass on the running of the farm to his stepson, Jeffrey Reeves — home from Iraq and initially excited to become the fifth-generation Reeves to operate the farm — backfired when Jeffrey realized just how little time he would have for a social life. “Part of my reservation about being here is my happiness,” Jeffrey said, watching his stepfather work his way through the morning delivery, two phones and a clipboard in hand. “I can’t just be a machine.” (Not long after I visited the farm, Jeffrey left to get a degree in social work.)

It was perhaps not the best moment to be asking Reeves the question that brought me here: What would it take to get him to grow more? To till more land, buy more seed, run more irrigation lines, fight more pests, apply more fertilizer, endure more inspections, fix more old tractors, fill out more paperwork, miss more summer-leisure fun and generally wear himself further down in order to grow more produce so people could eat better.

The paradox of this last point was not lost on him. His own meals, especially during the summer months, were a wreck: coffee for breakfast, Mountain Dew for lunch, baked beans for dinner eaten straight from the can to save time for sleep — though he does get to snack on his crops. But Reeves is in many ways perfectly qualified to ponder the problems of increased production. The farm that he runs with his three brothers and one of their sons is an example of the kind of nonindustrial farm that’s necessary in a revamped vision of American food production and consumption. Last year, Reeves turned out 420,000 pounds of tomatoes, 65,000 pounds of strawberries and 2.4 million ears of sweet corn. And while they have a nice little farm stand just outside the small town of Baldwinsville, with a quaint patch of pick-your-own organic blueberries behind the sales shed, they mostly sell their crops to big grocers, including Tops, Price Chopper, Wegmans and, biggest of all, Walmart.

Reeves is particularly proud of being Walmart’s first farm supplier in the area, even if that adds significantly to his workload, from filling huge orders to enduring their painstaking food-safety audits. Only a fraction of his output is organic, but more would qualify with minor adjustments in his already-cautious use of pesticides and fertilizers. “I’m a personnel manager, bookkeeper, salesperson, computer guy, logistician and food-safety expert,” he said. “I didn’t sign up for that. I signed up for the sunshine, to grow crops and get my hands dirty. And that’s why I’m not as happy as I used to be. But I want this farm to be successful.”

What’s most telling about Reeves’s farm, though, when it comes to the question of produce supply and price structures, is that more than half of the land he owns, about 800 acres, is rented to farmers who grow soybeans and field corn, the type that’s used to make animal feed or corn syrup for soda and cookies or is turned into ethanol. The abundance of corn on

Reeves's land reflects its dominance nationwide. Ninety-seven million acres are planted with corn that goes toward syrup, cattle feed and ethanol, compared with the 240,000 acres planted for spinach, broccoli and cabbage.

Reeves said he could convert his corn land into produce if some basics were covered. He'd need more labor, already harder to secure, or even better, some of the expensive mechanization employed regularly for field corn: machines that could harvest broccoli, for instance, without damaging the heads. He'd also need more irrigation lines, because leafy vegetables can't rely just on rainfall the way field corn can. But corn has become so dominant in American agriculture that it has spawned its own separate industry, with a host of incentives that sometimes tempt him to give up produce altogether. Field-corn farmers get turnkey service from agribusiness companies, including one-stop financing, supplies and technical aid. They spend about six weeks planting and six weeks harvesting, with much of the summer freed up to do other farm work. And when they do work the crop, they typically ride in tractors and combines, many with air-conditioning and stereos. "You can never overstate the desire of farmers to sit on their butts," Reeves said. "We're human, too."

There are also huge financial supports for corn. A spokesman for the National Corn Growers Association told me that they conservatively estimate that two of the largest seed producers, Monsanto and DuPont Pioneer, together spend \$2 billion a year on research and development for corn. This is the lab and genetics work that has driven yields upward by 1 percent each year. (Monsanto does spend some money on vegetable research — \$181 million for 22 separate crops.) Government spending mirrors the private sector. Greens and leafy vegetables, for example, together get only \$13 million from the government in research funding; corn receives \$121 million.

Vast opportunities to increase production — and therefore lower the price — of produce are being lost. A few years ago, Reeves experimented with planting broccoli, most of which is still grown in California. Expanding produce production in the rest of the country would not only boost supplies but would also give consumers access to fresher, local fare. But he lost his entire crop when the heads suddenly bolted, bursting the green florets into yellowish petals. This is the kind of problem that could be addressed if there were more research money available to develop different strains; at the moment, the only money available for that is a tiny \$3.2 million grant from the Department of Agriculture.

Corn growers also benefit from a U.S.D.A. program known as commodity checkoffs, which involves levying producers in order to fund a kitty that then pays for marketing. Two of the corn industry's biggest customers — livestock and dairy — have annual marketing budgets that add up to some \$300 million, which has spawned a series of campaigns, with help from some of the biggest ad firms in the country, that continue to shape much of our diet: "Got Milk?" for dairy farmers; "Beef: It's What's for Dinner" for cattlemen; as well as partnerships with Domino's and other restaurant chains that have helped triple our

consumption of cheese. Back in the 1970s, Iowa corn growers started their own checkoff — at one-tenth of a cent per bushel — which raised the marketing funds to help persuade Pepsi and Coca-Cola to use high-fructose corn syrup instead of sugar in their sodas.

A few fruits and vegetables, notably avocados and Florida citrus, have started successful campaigns using funds from their own checkoffs. Most, however, like blueberries and watermelons, are too small to pay for the kind of marketing that can boost consumption. Since 1991, produce growers and handlers have teamed up with federal agencies to conduct collective marketing — using first the slogan “5 a Day for Better Health” and, more recently, “More Matters,” but this effort also suffers from meager funds.

In 2009, the produce industry weighed a proposal to create a much bigger kitty, a \$30 million annual fund that would require a minuscule 0.047 percent levy on their crops. The farmers rejected the plan for various reasons, including the worry that it still paled by comparison with the livestock and dairy industries’ \$300 million. But the nature of advertising is changing, and Silbermann believes that spending tens of millions of dollars in television ads is no longer the only way to influence Americans’ buying habits. Substantial gains in sales, he says, can be accomplished with far smaller sums, through ingenious campaigns and the use of crowdsourcing and social media.

**This summer, when** I began talking to people in the advertising industry as well as growers and marketers of produce about what might be done to encourage Americans to eat better, the universal response was to stop sending the message that this is something dutiful you have to do for your health and start advertising more creatively. I approached Victors & Spoils because I was aware that some of their most successful campaigns for processed-food giants had been built on comparatively low-budget, crowdsourced approaches. They were instantly excited by the challenge of devising a campaign on behalf of broccoli and agreed to do it for The Times at no cost. (As Chris Cima, the creative director, put it: “We sell Pepsi and Coke, and it’s like, this is promoting something that can make the world a better place.”)

One day in August, the team went to stand in a broccoli field belonging to a farmer named Jason Condon. Sara Brito asked Condon how he would feel if overnight the demand for broccoli disappeared. He shrugged and said he’d just swap in one of the 80 other things he grows. “I like broccoli,” he said. “It’s dependable, heavy, middle-of-the-road in requiring labor. But I always tell my employees: ‘Don’t fall in love with vegetables. It’s a business.’ I would like to see more broccoli grown, because it’s good for us but not really as a farmer.”

They went to a local farm-to-table restaurant to talk to the chef about the role broccoli plays in his menu planning. (He said that broccoli tends to be thought of not even as a food but as the divider in the display case between meat and fish.) They looked through various food and cooking magazines to get a sense of broccoli’s place in foodie culture. (In one recent issue of *Bon Appétit*, a long feature on the “vegetable revolution” contained a timeline of 10 different

vegetables' "it" moments. Broccoli did not make the list.) Finally, they began to riff on possible avenues to explore in the campaign. What can we do with the color green? Is there some packaging we could make? Is there a ritual with broccoli? If not, can we create one? Maybe we could literally change the name to something else? Or the pronunciation? It sounds American but comes from Italy. Maybe we could have some Italians pronounce it.

Their aha moment finally came as they were perusing a bland report on broccoli sales data. Ranked 20th among vegetables, broccoli wasn't a star, but it was doing far better than kale, in 47th place, despite kale's sudden rocketing to fame on T-shirts and cookbook covers and in the kitchens of hipster foodies across the land. (Of kale, that same issue of *Bon Appétit* said, "This is the green that conquered menus.")

"Let's pick a fight with kale," Cima said, voicing the whole group's thinking.

Thus was born the fictitious Broccoli Commission of America, whose slogans include: "Broccoli: Now 43 Percent Less Pretentious Than Kale" and "What Came First, Kale or the Bandwagon?" and "Eat Fad Free: Broccoli v. Kale." Picking on kale — rather than on, say, French fries — was especially brilliant because it mimicked the Great Soda War between Pepsi and Coca-Cola, an entirely bloodless battle that greatly enhanced the bottom lines of both companies. While consumers assumed Coke and Pepsi were in some sort of zero-sum game, the marketing reality was that the idea of a soda war, and the ads created to perpetuate it, brought many more consumers to both companies.

That was Phase 1, the campaign that they would take to the streets of Brooklyn and Portland and so on. But they also wanted to reach a much broader crowd that didn't necessarily shop at Whole Foods or spend their Saturdays at farmers' markets or invest much time or energy (or money) thinking about the food movement. They needed to give broccoli "a new attitude," as Ari Levi put it, something that said, "I'm tired of being pushed around."

They called this second campaign the Alpha Vegetable and mocked up billboards that exclaimed "Goes Great With a Side of Steak" and "Melts Butter" and "Never Gets Creamed." They imagined that alpha broccoli could endorse a Nascar entry or be served in various forms from food trucks. They even imagined a stunt in which they lifted it by helicopter over a volcano and roasted it, to demonstrate "Extreme Brocking."

When the ad team formalized this campaign into a presentation, the most important people in the room listening to the marketing pitch were not treating it like a joke. Jeffrey Dunn, the former Coca-Cola president, was there, along with his former colleague Todd Putman. They both now work for Bolthouse Farms, a baby-carrot producer that used some of the people now working for Victors & Spoils to design a campaign that rocketed sales in the test markets where it was introduced: "Baby Carrots: Eat 'Em Like Junk Food."

The agency estimated that the total cost of their campaign would be between \$3 million and



\$7 million, including advertising fees, if they were to execute it for real — well within the proposed budget for the produce industry. When the presentation was over, Putman said, “You could put this in the marketplace, and sales would go up.” Whether that’s true is debatable, because who can know in advance whether an ad campaign will strike the right nerve? What’s not debatable is that the messaging that has been tried for years has not moved the needle in terms of Americans’ eating habits. What the Victors & Spoils team was proposing at least made it seem as if produce could get into the game. What effect that might have on all the other factors that determine consumers’ habits and farmers’ incentives and U.S. agriculture policy was at least something to be optimistically considered.

The Produce Marketing Association recently elected Dunn to its board. It also made Putman the head of a task force charged with finding the best marketing ploys. Late last month, Bryan Silbermann, the association’s president, told me that they soon would announce their new initiative. “We have a unique opportunity now, when the stars have aligned and public opinion is starting to show signs of change in dietary habits,” he said. “This is a real tipping point.”

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