Top 2014 Food Stories: War on Sugar Created Biggest Behavior Shift

By Karlene Lukovitz

In awareness terms, the great drought in the country's Western states was 2014's biggest food story, but in terms of changing behavior, the biggest news was the "war on sugar," according to the 12th annual Food Study from Hunter PR.

The report is based on an online survey, conducted in November, of a sample of 1,004 people representative of the U.S. adult population in terms of age, race and region, with quotas set for even representation by gender. The majority (84%) of respondents do the cooking and food shopping in their households.

The top five food stories overall were: The drought that drove up prices of beef and many other products; the shrinking bee population; the war on sugar; new food labeling standards; and genetically modified organisms/GMOs in food and beverages.

The bottom five: America's continued bacon obsession; the soda calories cutback; Michelle Obama's "Let's Cook" program; Coke's campaign with "personalized" names on packaging; and pumpkin spice mania.

Behavior-Influencing Leaders

This year, slightly fewer Americans overall said that they consider food stories to be "very important (28%, versus 32% last year).

But at the same time, Americans reported a higher level of behavioral change overall based on food news stories than in 2013.

A quarter of respondents said stories about the war on sugar directly affected their behavior.

The other stories in the top five in terms of influence on behavior were: new food labeling standards; GMOs; soda calories cutbacks; and the drought.
Americans with children were particularly apt to indicate that they are checking food labels more often, eating less sugar and paying more attention to where their food comes from.

**New Year’s Resolutions**

The top resolutions are "try to lose weight by eating better" (cited by 44%); "eat less processed food" (36%); "eat and cook more at home" (30%); "save money on groceries" (29%); "eat less salt/sodium" (28%); and "drink beverages that have less sugar" (26%).

**Demographic Differences**

Those 40 and under ranked GMOs as the year’s most important story, while those 41 and older chose the drought.

By gender, the drought was No. 1 among males, while the shrinking bee population was No. 1 among females.

Those with children ranked the war on sugar No. 1, while those without ranked the drought No. 1.

Millennials' attitudes toward food stories are markedly different than those of Gen X, Boomer and Matures. Their top three stories, in order: Coke’s name campaign, GMOs and pumpkin spice mania.

In contrast, both Boomers and Matures chose the drought as No. 1, and Gen X chose the shrinking bee population.

Also, unlike other cohorts, Millennials consider food stories to be more important than other types of news stories.

The media channels favored by the generations are correlated with influencing which stories they rank as most important.

Gen Xers, Boomers and Matures all favor more traditional media sources (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines), where broader, less food-centric stories — like the top two in this year's study — tend to be covered. But with Millennials, who get their general food news from Facebook more than any other source (30%) and are self-curating their social media content, pop cultural and cause-related news stories dominated.
Social, Mobile Gaining Share of Food Story Consumption

While Web sites, TV, magazines and newspapers continue to rank as the top sources of food-related content, social media is making serious inroads.

Social channels showed significant gains as a source of food recipes and nutrition information among Americans as a whole (up 7% and 8%, respectively).

Other key trends found in the study:

* Americans are more likely than last year (21%, up from 17% in 2013) to consider purchasing a product or trying a recipe they saw on Facebook. Gen Xers, followed closely by Millennials, are the most likely groups.

* Respondents reported marked increases in use of mobile for recipe searches (up 10%), storing shopping lists (up 7%) and watching video recipe demos (up 7%).

* Millennials "out-mobile" their counterparts by significant margins, relying on their mobile devices for a range of food-related activities: searching for recipes (46%), checking nutrition information while shopping (25%) and watching videos for cooking directions (27%).

* Instagram continues its popularity with more people than ever sharing their amateur food photography, and nearly a quarter of all Millennials participating in that social/culinary activity.

A free slide presentation accessible through Hunter PR's site provides more detail.