

PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT: ARAMARK AND AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

A GROUNDBREAKING PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP WITH SHARED AMBITION FOR CHANGING THE MENU

Approaching the year 2020 can be a powerful rallying cry for many who work each day to shape a better future for human and environmental health.

In 2015, Aramark and American Heart Association (AHA) came together when they realized they shared not only goals to improve eating habits nationwide, but a motivation to make measurable change before 2020. For years, Aramark had been working on health and wellness, with an army of 750 dietitians and its Healthy for Life® program in place. AHA, for its part, had set an impact goal to boost the health of the American population by 20 percent while reducing deaths from

cardiovascular disease and stroke by 20 percent by 2020. Thus was born Healthy for Life 20 By 20, a joint initiative to improve the health of all Americans 20 percent by 2020.

Over a five-year period through 2020, the initiative set out to reduce calories, saturated fat, and sodium levels 20 percent, and increase fruits, vegetables, and whole grains 20 percent. In addition to the healthy menu commitment across Aramark's businesses, Healthy for Life 20 By 20 includes community health engagement programs, consumer health awareness and education, as well as thought leadership, research, and health impact reporting.

As Aramark is one of the largest foodservice providers in the United States, these commitments stood to impact over two *billion* meals per year. Those meals are served across thousands of outlets and

institutions, from sports arenas and entertainment venues to elementary schools, colleges, offices, hospitals, and beyond.

In November 2016, Aramark and AHA announced their first-year report, revealing major progress in reaching their goals: They had reached an eight-percent reduction in calories, sodium, and saturated fats across key menus, ahead of their three to five percent annual target. While more precise metrics for fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are under development, they reported that already they had reached 30 percent of main dishes being vegetarian or vegan, and 10 percent of main dishes containing whole grains as a leading ingredient.

What are the secrets to their success? How are they actually making these changes across such a vast network of operations and large number of menu items? And what have they learned along the journey so far?

Menu Strategies

In working toward these six targets, Aramark's culinary team tracks calories, saturated fat, sodium, and other ingredients at the individual recipe level, even seasonal menu items, through a propriety menu management system. During the second year of the partnership, they will be able to track fruit, vegetable, and whole grain composition at the levels of individual recipes, menu categories, and entire menus.

"From a culinary development point of view, having an impact across the many different types of locations that Aramark serves was one of the reasons it was exciting for me to be part of this," says Annette Gray, associate vice president of culinary innovation and development for Aramark. "Our chef team here has always developed our menu concepts with wellness in mind—well before it was hip to say so. That gave us a really good head start."

For their whole grains program, for instance, they did a complete sandwich overhaul, offering whole-grain options without raising sodium levels or compromising taste. "Whole-grain ciabatta as a carrier for our sandwiches helped us build alternatives, and we can build any sandwich on that whole-grain roll now," Gray says. Aramark has introduced yogurt instead of mayo on sandwiches across many units as well. Gray explains: "I think we made tremendous progress in making vegetables and a vegetarian sandwich approachable by using hummus as a spread and as a main ingredient that

just tastes great." Her team also doubled down on seasonally appropriate choices to increase excitement around cooked vegetables.

One of their best received strategies was a grain bowl pop-up. Bowls featured 50 percent grains, 50 percent vegetables, often tri-colored quinoa or farro, with brightly colored vegetables, and an option to top the bowl with a small chicken breast if desired.

Rolling out healthier menu options hasn't always been smooth sailing, though. "With our sodium reduction targets, we tried in the beginning to go right down to a low-sodium soup, under 400 mg of sodium, when people were used to having a soup on the street that was over 1000 mg of sodium," says Dan Wainfan, associate vice president of health and wellness for Aramark. "We found out we were actually turning people off." From that came an important lesson that 0 to 60 is not an approach that would work for them. Instead, they shifted to incremental changes: "We'd go down by 100 mg or 200 mg at a time, or add ginger to a carrot soup, or pureed sweet potato that hadn't been there before, so that over time, we got to a variety of custom developed, locally prepared soups, that all had under 700 mg of sodium per serving, and many of them had even less, but we did it in a stepwise fashion, and by adding flavor in other innovative ways. So I think that was a learning by the school of hard knocks."

The biggest challenge has been getting people to try new things, Wainfan says. "Our goal is to get to a place where food discovery is exciting and rewarding and fun, as opposed to something you have to do to have a better doctor's appointment. Because that doesn't last very long."

Working Hand in Glove

There are many reasons Aramark and American Heart Association were a fitting match for this joint initiative.

"AHA's mission is to build healthier lives, free of cardiovascular disease and stroke," says Dorothea Vafiadis, national director of healthy living for the American Heart Association. "We recognized that, as a public health organization, a public-private partnership is really the way to do it. We can't just be public health, criticizing what's happening—we have to be out there, engaged with stakeholders around clear, shared goals." AHA was particularly drawn to Aramark's culinary expertise and broad reach in the marketplace.



“In looking for a partner to collaborate with, connecting with the preeminent advocacy organization in the country was the way to go,” says Wainfan of Aramark, emphasizing AHA’s deep scientific knowledge, expertise, and research capabilities, as well as their national footprint of volunteers. In fact, with over 30 million volunteers and supporters, AHA is the nation’s largest voluntary organization committed to tackling heart disease and stroke. Aramark was particularly inspired by the “wonderful simplicity and symmetry” of the 20 percent by 2020 framework, motivating both of their organizations in tandem.

Wainfan emphasizes that this is not a single dimensional kind of sponsorship arrangement; it’s about truly working together on shared goals on a daily basis throughout many years.

Beyond the Plate

The Healthy for Life 20 By 20 partnership consists of much more than the already robust undertaking of overhauling menus. It consists of four pillars: menu impact and innovation, community health and awareness, consumer and employee engagement (looking externally at diners as well as impacting Aramark’s own 170,000 employees), and thought leadership. For this second piece, in the spring of 2016 they ran their first community empowerment program, piloting a community health engagement program in five community centers in three underserved communities in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Houston. AHA led a rigorous evaluation model, in which participants engaged in month-long modules, and researchers compared participants’ behaviors and attitudes toward healthier foods. They were thrilled to see that, by the end of the program, 69 percent of participants increased their fruit and vegetable consumption by at least half a serving per day, and 48 percent increased their whole grains consumption by at least one serving.

“In order to eat better, people need to have choices available where they live and work and play,” says Vafiadis of AHA. Aramark not only engages consumers directly, but by having conversations with its vendors to change their ingredients and sourcing practices. “We recognize that it’s across the food chain that change needs to take place.”

The strategic cross-pollination of their organizations even happens at the CEO level. AHA has a CEO roundtable of 22 CEOs from leading corporations, and Aramark’s chairman, president, and CEO Eric J. Foss is among them. AHA considers that a strategic

piece of their overall partnership as Foss from Aramark and other CEOs from leading companies across the country collaborate with AHA leaders to share best practices that can improve the health of their own employees and have a broader impact on public health.

While both organizations are proud of their multiple work streams, they recognize the biggest hurdle is changing the food environment as a whole. To see change at the scale to which they both aspire, Healthy for Life 20 By 20 is beginning to showcase some of the best practices from this partnership and lessons learned from their work thus far.

LESSONS LEARNED

As for the best ways to reach their shared targets, the leadership of Healthy for Life 20 By 20 has learned some key lessons along the way.

- Helping consumers have more say in what’s in their foods has been a key to mobilizing consumer engagement, says Dorothea Vafiadis. AHA launched a letter-writing campaign, with over 10,000 letters sent to CEOs of food companies, in which consumers asked for lower sodium and other improvements to products while keeping the flavor right. “Consumers need to have choice,” she says. “They’re wanting more and more to have power over their destiny and take control.” She also emphasizes not to forget to give positive feedback to those companies who do make changes in the right direction.
- Annette Gray’s top takeaways for exciting diners about healthier options are to stay on-trend with what’s out in the marketplace, to lead with beautiful colors that pique excitement around a dish, and to focus on simple authenticity, rather than “trying to engineer it too much,” she says. “If it is a roasted carrot, it should be the best roasted carrot you can have.”
- For Dan Wainfan, it comes down to: “Don’t be the food police.” For Aramark, that means ensuring indulgent choices are still available, and that the indulgent options receive gradual improvements as well, but that they are offering many more opportunities to engage people in healthy food discovery. “There are times when people want a brownie or a burger—we all do—so it’s important we focus on the big picture: empowering people to discover what healthy food can do to make a difference in their lives.”



Aramark Photos by: Aramark/Edward Savaria Jr.