

## **Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health – The role of the Norwegian grocery trade**

The Norwegian Association of Wholesale Grocers has forwarded the Eurocommerce recommendations to member companies. Furthermore, we have elaborated reports about the substance of the matters involved and circulated these papers to members. We have also on several occasions published commentaries in our professional weekly newspaper reaching the totality of the Norwegian grocery sector covering both manufacturing industry and trade. The Association started this activity well before the advent of the relevant recommendations of the World Health Organisation.

The Norwegian Government has initiated the work on action plans in the above areas. The Ministry of Health invited last Thursday non governmental organisations and relevant businesses in the food chain to a half day seminar collecting inputs for the current work on preparing an action plan on improved nutrition in the population. This action plan will be published in the late part of the current year. Various working groups have also been established to contribute to the elaboration of this national action plan. There is no doubt that the Norwegian grocery trade accepts the overweight challenge including the negative health consequences of obesity and wants to contribute to improving the situation.

### **Initiatives by the grocery trade**

Under the auspices of the Federation of Norwegian Commercial and Service Enterprises a working group has been put up to look at the possibilities of coordinating activities of the grocery trade groups including the feasibility of keyhole labeling for a selection of goods with lower contents of fat, free sugars, salt or products with a high fiber content.

Some groups have already decided to introduce such a labeling system on a test basis applying in one case to initially 7-800 products and to work for official recognition of it in Norway as well as in other Nordic countries. Sweden has established this labeling some time ago and in that country the National Food Administration states that the keyhole is the only accepted symbol for foods that are low in fat, sugar or high in dietary fiber.

This may assist consumers in making a healthy choice on the basis of official nutritional advice thereby making it easier to choose between all types of products. It will be enhanced by advertising and in-store and web activities including concrete food suggestions, recipes for everyday meals and encouragement of physical activity.

On a commercial basis the grocery trade groups have in full competition between each other been extending the number of stores with fresh food assortment alongside with modernisation of the network of stores. There has in particular been a focus on improving and developing the fruit and vegetable counters and this progress has been recognised by the wider public.

### **Matters of principle**

The Norwegian grocery trade is fully aware that its responsibility is first and foremost to offer all their customers a widest possible selection of products that can all have their role in a balanced and varied diet. It is a question of personal choice to achieve a healthy diet and lifestyle.

But the grocery trade can contribute to making it easier to eat healthy foods. The trade supports and influences the activity of the manufacturing industry to implement the recommendations of the World Health Organisation to reduce the consumption of free sugars, the fat that is unhealthy and salt plus promote the consumption of the most healthy foods like fish, lean meat, white meat, fiber rich foods and fruits and vegetables.

There is no doubt that the focus of authorities, media, organisations and businesses has contributed to a public dietary swing during recent years exemplified by the increase in Norway in consumption of soft drinks with artificial sweeteners and fruits and vegetables. The manufacturing industry is serious about ameliorate the composition of products. They seem for the time being to want to improve nutritional advice to consumers primarily through the declaration of nutritional content on the packaging of the product.

Many experts believe that the basic cause of increasing overweight is not that people eat too much or wrongly – but that they are less active in their daily life. It seems to be well documented by now that it is more dangerous to be slim and in bad physical shape than to be overweight and in good physical condition. Consequently, it is necessary for any action not to

concentrate only on the diet but simultaneously on contributing to increase the physical activity of the population **inter alia** through improvement of public and private activity centres and opportunities in the neighbourhood areas. The governments must focus in a balanced way on both diet and physical activity. The interrelationship between these two areas cannot be stressed strongly enough.

Also, there is a jungle of dietary advices from different experts pulling in different directions. Media focus on them all – one after the other. To illustrate: One recent dilemma is why the permitted limits of heavy metals in fish seem to be higher than similar limits in landbased food products: are possible health risks by eating fish outbalanced by the healthy fish fat? There are several such paradoxes. It is a pressing need for public authorities to create a basis for reliable dietary information.

**The Green Paper “Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases”**

As a consequence of the above, the Commission Green Paper is timely and the European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health is most appropriate as an example of coordinated but autonomous non-legislative action by different parts of society.

In addition to measures of the kind suggested previously in our paper, dietary information and food knowledge in schools should probably be stepped up steeply combined with encouragement of understanding of a close linkage to physical exercise.

**Oslo, 22.02.06**

**Norwegian Association of Wholesale Grocers**

**Steinar B.Kringlebotten**