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Terry Plumb: Less said the better

Plumb: Exercise a win-win

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New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has never backed away from a fight, but did he take on an unbeatable foe by trying to limit the size of soft drinks sold in New York movie theaters and restaurants?

For years, the alcohol and tobacco lobbies have fought restrictions on sale of their products by accusing adversaries of trying to implement a nanny state. "What's next," they ask, "limiting the size of soft drinks?"

In the Big Apple, that day may be coming. Bloomberg wants to limit the container size for soft drinks and other sugary beverages to 16 ounces.

Customers would be allowed to buy more than one 16-oz. drink or walk to the corner market to purchase a 32-oz. bottle of pop, so what's the point? 

People are creatures of habit, Bloomberg argues, so consumption of sugary drinks will decrease as it becomes more inconvenient or expensive to obtain refills.

Such tactics have worked in the battle against cigarettes.

When I joined The Herald 25 years ago, employees could smoke at their desks. I witnessed more than one former smoker being seduced by fumes from a colleague's cigarette. Over time the smoking area was moved to the break room, then outdoors. Hard-core smokers continued to take smoke breaks, but casual smokers tended to cut back and fewer ex-smokers became backsliders.

It took years for local governments to enact smoking bans in restaurants and bars.

Indeed, were it not for two determined physicians, Alan Nichols and David Keely, chances are it would still be legal to light up in local establishments. Through a barrage of letters to the editor and impassioned appeals to city and county governing bodies, they fostered a successful grass roots movement.

Their most persuasive argument involved dangers from breathing second-hand smoke. It wasn't right, Nichols and Keely argued, to expose bartenders and waiters to cancer-causing fumes.

Unfortunately, a parallel case can't be made against soft drinks. You can sit next to someone chugging a half-gallon of Pepsi and come away unscathed.

Big Tobacco also suffered from image problems that the soft drink makers thus far have been able to avoid. Not only were researchers able to prove that nicotine was addictive, but cigarette manufacturers also were shown to have suppressed evidence linking smoking to cancer.

Big Soda would do well not to emulate the hubris of Big Tobacco. In response to Bloomberg's proposal, Katie Bayne, Coca-Cola's president for sparkling beverages, denied that soft drinks were responsible for America's expanding waistline or that evidence has shown sugar to be addictive.

If I were Coca-Cola, I'd rein-in Ms. Bayne. The last thing Big Soda needs is to dare scientists to prove that portion size or sugar content leads to obesity. Indeed, evidence exists to make both cases.

Obesity is a worldwide problem, one many nations are waking up to. Denmark, for example, recently imposed higher taxes on high-fat food products.

As people learn more about the causes of obesity, support can be expected to build for limits on sugar content in food products, and perhaps even for higher taxes.

Big Soda could ameliorate such opposition by helping America focus on the other side of the obesity equation: Exercise.

Unlike fights over food, advocating exercise can be a win-win. Who's against human fitness?

Every day brings reports of a new study touting the benefits of exercise. Last week The New York Times reported that people who jog for as little as 90 minutes a week live several years longer than sedentary counterparts.

In his book, "Spark," about new discoveries about the beneficial effects of exercise on the brain, Harvard psychiatrist John J. Ratey, M.D., describes a school district in Naperville, Ill., where the obesity rate is roughly 10 percent the national average. Two physical education teachers are credited with that amazing accomplishment, and they did it by helping children understand the importance of daily exercise.

America didn't get fat overnight, and we can point our chubby fingers at any number of responsible parties. What's needed is a commitment to action.

Coca-Cola ought to stop fighting Mayor Bloomberg and join the crusade. After all, he's trying to help its customers live longer.

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