

## RICE FITS: PROMOTING PRODUCTS FOR GOOD NUTRITION

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In 2004 the U.S. rice industry launched a consumer and health professional education program to promote rice based upon its health and nutrition attributes. This marked a strategic change for the industry, since our programs have been mostly food and culinary-based. Today I will describe why we made this change, and what the results have been.

### **Introduction**

Rice is the culinary staple that sustains two thirds of the world's population. It plays an integral role in the culinary traditions of many cultures. With the ethnic shift in the U.S. population, rice is becoming an integral part of culinary traditions here as well. In the parts of the world where rice consumption is highest, there is also a lower incidence of obesity and heart disease.

In the U.S., rice is grown in six states. In the south, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Missouri grow primarily long grain rice, while California grows medium and short grain rice.

U.S. consumers like rice. Two thirds eat rice once a week, and 85 percent at least twice a month; per capita consumption is around 26 pounds per year. USA Rice Federation programs have historically promoted the culinary strengths of rice – versatility, convenience and taste. Although rice is a nutritious product, the nutrient contributions and potential health benefits of rice have been a secondary theme. The cost per serving is low (around 5 cents), making it a readily accessible, nutritious food for all Americans.

### **New Marketing Direction**

In 2004 the rice industry made a strategic shift in marketing strategy. Here are the factors that went into that decision.

#### **Public Health Issues:**

With a 65% of Americans labeled as overweight or obese, and the growing concern over obesity-related health issues such as diabetes and heart disease, people are looking for solutions. There were many ways rice could fit as part of the solution.

In addition, since FDA mandated folic acid fortification of grain products, there has been a subsequent 23% decrease in neural tube birth defects; 17,000 fewer deaths from heart disease; and 31,000 fewer deaths from stroke. Research shows that consumers get over half their daily folic acid from enriched and fortified grains such as rice.

### Consumer Trends:

A look at current trends showed that there is a strong consumer constituency for nutritional marketing. Americans are more tuned in to nutrition now than at any time in the past decade. According to the Food Marketing Institute:

- Shoppers see food as a solution to present and future health problems.
- 59% said they're trying hard to eat healthfully to avoid health problems.
- 51% make food choices based on nutrition, and say that health concerns have an influence on their overall grocery purchasing decisions.

### Consumer Research:

Research revealed that rice had lost ground on health and nutrition attributes in the consumer's mind. Most had an impression of rice as a "healthy" food but were not sure why. Our conclusion was that unless consumers had a better understanding of rice's specific nutritional benefits, rice consumption would continue to be vulnerable to dietary fads and trends such as the low carb craze.

### Low Carbohydrate Movement:

When the nation went from being carb lovers to carb phobics, rice took a hit, along with pasta, potatoes and bread. Rice sales dropped around 6%. Interestingly, brown rice sales shot up 20% due to the low carb diets. Last year we saw that the low carb movement was losing steam. As consumers began returning to carbs, a 'teachable moment' opened up to talk about the 'right carbs' as opposed to no carbs. We also recognized we could capitalize on the recent higher visibility for brown rice by linking it to the growing interest in whole grains for health.

### High Media and Consumer Interest in Nutrition News:

Government updates to the Dietary Guidelines and Food Guidance System would continue to keep nutrition and health in the spotlight.

## **The "Rice Fits" Program**

We realized that rice had important contributions to public health that fit many of the Dietary Guidelines recommendations. Rice is a nutrient dense, low calorie food, has no fat, cholesterol or sodium, and delivers 15 essential nutrients, including folic acid. Rice is usually combined with other foods, making it the "healthy partner on the plate." There is consumption data to show that rice can help increase intake of vegetables, beans and whole grains.

Using the Dietary Guidelines recommendations as a basis, we launched the Rice Fits program to show that no matter what your dietary or nutrition goal, rice could help you implement a healthy eating program.

### Program activities include:

1. Health Professional Education: Working with the American Dietetic Association Women's Health and Reproductive Nutrition Practice Group to promote the role of folic acid in preventing birth defects. We also scheduled educational sessions with registered dietitians and provided nutrition information.

2. Consumer Outreach: Television appearances and cooking demonstrations by a well-known media spokesperson, who is also a registered dietitian, to show consumers how to use rice to increase vegetable consumption, and how to incorporate brown rice in their diet as a whole grain.
3. Partnerships: Became a charter member of the Whole Grains Council to help communicate the benefits of whole grains to consumers, and developed new consumer materials on how to prepare and use brown rice.
4. Communications Tools: Developed a logo and theme: “Rice. The Foundation for Healthier Eating” to show how rice can help increase the consumption of healthy foods such as vegetables, beans, and lean proteins.
5. Research: Commissioned a research study to show rice eaters’ diets as examples of dietary patterns that follow the Dietary Guidelines recommendations.
6. School Foodservice Outreach: Created a ‘kid approved’ taste test program for healthy school lunch recipes to give to school menu planners.

The Rice Fits program has been underway for about seven months. Based on our interaction with food and health media, the program is being well received. Release in January of the final Dietary Guidelines gave a big boost to interest, as will the imminent release of the new Food Guidance System. USA Rice will continue to grow and expand the Rice Fits program to help consumers implement the new nutrition recommendations.