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BARBARA RUHS Developing Nutrition Education Materials for Supermarket Dietitians

By Juliann Schaeffer

Instead of providing nutrition counseling from behind a desk, you could say Barbara Ruhs, MS, RD, LDN, has positioned herself to counsel Americans from the aisles of a grocery store. She's a former corporate supermarket dietitian who recently started her own food and health consulting business called Neighborhood Nutrition. She works with consumer product goods, retailers, commodity groups, and public relations agencies to develop nutrition education and marketing materials for supermarket dietitians, all with one goal in mind: educating customers so they can make more informed and thus more healthful decisions, thereby improving public health.

Dietitians working for supermarkets have a direct link to shoppers and can use successful retail strategies to influence behaviors. Product placement, price, promotions, product sampling, and being the trusted nutrition expert at the point of purchase can play important roles in empowering customers to take charge of their health. When she was a supermarket dietitian, Ruhs implemented a line of nutrition shelf tags to further

promote and help shoppers pinpoint healthful options in the aisles. "Nutrition education tools at shelf edge have the potential to powerfully impact consumer behavior," she says.

In spite of the for-profit nature of the food industry, Ruhs says supermarket dietitians actually are in the perfect position to make a lasting influence on public health. "Educating people where they buy food is an incredible opportunity to impact the choices people make in the grocery store," she says, as long as RDs understand all the factors at play.

"Although partnering with the food industry may seem unsavory to many dietitians, it's important for RDs to recognize the power there," Ruhs says. "Food companies are invested in making products that sell, and they know how to position them at retail for success. They also have millions of dollars to study, innovate, market, and test new and more healthful products that appeal to customers. It's completely possible to create healthful products that taste good that shoppers will buy. Dietitians can have a front seat at the table, if we're smart."

Ruhs says her experience working in public health, marketing, and counseling were integral to her success as a supermarket RD, and she suggests other dietitians looking to break into the field first consider seeking out similar experiences. Working with the food industry to effect positive change and a healthier population is possible, according to Ruhs, who makes more strides toward this goal every day.

"As advocates for customer [public] health, we need to find ways to work together," she says. "We may work in competitive markets, but we need to find ways to work together toward the common good."

Today's Dietitian (TD): What inspired your career path?

Ruhs: I was overweight as a child, and that really had an impact on me growing up. As I look back on my childhood, I realize now that I was eating as a coping mechanism while my parents went through a sticky divorce. In hindsight, I have a great appreciation for single moms, overweight kids, and the power of good nutrition.

It wasn't until I was in college and playing tennis that I truly got the connection between healthful eating and performance. It was a lucky break that I took an Intro to Nutrition class and my love affair with nutrition began. (I also made one of my best friends in the nutrition/dietetics world—Dina Aronson, RD—by taking this class. She was a teaching assistant at the time and is now a very successful dietitian.)

TD: You've led the Oldways Supermarket Dietitian Symposium since 2010. What's behind this concept, and what does the symposium seek to provide?

Ruhs: The Oldways Supermarket Symposium is a concept that I hatched as a newbie supermarket dietitian. I wanted to connect with other dietitians who were doing the same job

and find efficiencies and solutions. Before moving to Arizona, I lived in Boston and worked at Harvard. There's a long history of partnership between Oldways and the Harvard School of Public Health. They were invited to the first symposium and afterwards became the ideal partner to host future events. They're a nonprofit that's committed to promoting healthful foods and lifestyles. I liked their global perspective and their simple, whole foods-based approach and appreciated their passion. We're kindred spirits in many ways.

TD: What's your favorite professional mistake?

Ruhs: I think I've made numerous blunders in my professional career, and it's hard to have a favorite one. I did run the Boston Marathon during the last year of my master's degree program. (Ruhs earned a master's degree in nutrition from Boston University.) My academic advisor wasn't thrilled about it. But it was the 100th running of the Boston Marathon, a historic opportunity that I couldn't miss.

Running a marathon is something I'd recommend to anyone interested. It's certainly a fitness test, but more importantly, it's a psychological test, and I believe I'm stronger both professionally and personally for having completed the 26.2-mile feat (with a colleague, Kathy Cappellano, RD).

TD: As part of your nutrition practice, Neighborhood Nutrition, you advocate a nondiet approach to nutrition counseling. Can you explain what this is and why you believe it to be an effective counseling strategy?

Ruhs: Unfortunately, as dietitians, we can do more harm than good. Early on in my private practice days, I'd had several clients who experienced a great deal of shame in their inability to follow the advice or diet plan prescribed by a dietitian. As I started to work with clients suffering from eating disorders, I realized the impact of my language and recommendations. I stopped giving meal plans to clients. Instead, I started reviewing their eating intake (24-hour recalls and food diaries) and asked clients to tune in to everything else that was going on while eating: hunger, emotions, the time lapsed between meals, etc, and I discovered that there was much more going on than simply what food was being consumed. Often it was these other things that had the biggest impact on the quality and quantity of their dietary intake.

A nondiet approach is having a holistic appreciation for how, why, and what someone is eating that isn't focused on one outcome: losing or gaining weight. Food is fuel, but eating is an experience. Food also is a coping mechanism just like drugs, overexercising, alcohol, and cutting behaviors. It's important that we empower our clients to recognize that they can be healthier in many ways that aren't measured by a number on the scale. I'm a big fan of Molly Kellogg, RD, LCSW, and her counseling-intensive program and counseling tips. In addition, I think motivational interviewing techniques are intrinsic to the success of any dietitian seeking to counsel individuals.

TD: If you could offer clients only one piece of advice, what would it be?

Ruhs: Unplug and truly enjoy food. Taste it. Prepare it at home, if possible. Take pleasure in the entire experience. Socialize. Stop when you feel satisfied. Be grateful for the affordable and safe food that's available in America. And please, don't forget to eat your veggies!

TD: You spent the early part of your career in Boston before relocating to the Southwest in 2008. What do you miss the most about the Northeast?

Ruhs: I love living in Arizona because I can do all of the outdoor activities that I love year-round: tennis, golf, cycling, hiking. Of course, I did commute on my bicycle in Boston year-round for nearly a decade in rain, snow, and sunshine. I miss running along the Charles River every morning. I used to row crew, and I just loved watching all the rowers in the morning out on the river. I also miss the beaches on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Long Island in the summertime.

TD: What's your favorite place to unwind your mind?

Ruhs: I've always said that I'm the happiest on my bicycle. I do a lot of thinking on the bike and often have my greatest moments of inspiration with the wind blowing through my hair—and helmet! It's a daily ritual and a great way to start the day.

— Juliann Schaeffer is a freelance writer and editor based in Alburtis, Pennsylvania, and a frequent contributor to *Today's Dietitian*.

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