

Wednesday April 14, 2010



Bloomberg

## Michelle Obama's 'Spotlight' on Obesity Enlists Kraft, PepsiCo

April 14, 2010, 2:48 AM EDT

By Kate Andersen Brower

April 14 (Bloomberg) -- Fifteen months after moving into a new town, house and job, Michelle Obama is defining her role as first lady by taking on the \$600 billion food and beverage industries in a quest to end childhood obesity within a generation.

Her lobbying of companies to make products healthier, labels easier to read and limit marketing of unhealthy foods to kids is paying off. A month after she began her campaign, PepsiCo Inc., the world's second-largest food and beverage company, pledged to stop selling full-sugar soft drinks in schools by 2012. Kraft Foods Inc., the maker of Oreo cookies and Oscar Mayer lunch meats, announced it would further reduce the sodium content of its products.

The first lady is part of a "movement to recast what the food industry is selling," said David Kessler, who was Food and Drug Administration commissioner from 1990 to 1997. "She puts the spotlight on the issue like few others can."

Obama, 46, also is performing some of the more traditional duties of first lady. Yesterday, she began her first official solo international trip by making an unannounced visit to Haiti, which was devastated by an earthquake in January. From there, she went to Mexico City, where she is scheduled to talk to students and meet with First Lady Margarita Zavala de Calderon.

### National Ad

At home, she has drawn notice with her efforts to change the way children eat. The American Beverage Association has joined her effort by running a national ad promoting the industry's commitment to reducing beverage calories in schools by 88 percent.

The companies' announcements followed a meeting in Washington on March 16 during which Obama told members of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, including Purchase, New York-based PepsiCo and Northfield, Illinois-based Kraft, "to move faster and to go farther" to make their products healthier.

The first lady has "accelerated our focus," Kraft's president of health and wellness, Rhonda Jordan, said in an interview.

"We've long advocated for schools to be made as conducive as possible to promoting the health of students," Michelle Naughton, a PepsiCo spokeswoman, said in a statement.

In another sign companies are listening, Coca-Cola Co., Dr Pepper Snapple Group, PepsiCo, Nestlé Waters North America, and Sunny Delight, have pledged to put calorie information on the front of their products. In addition, Obama's staff is working with the FDA to design clearer food labels.

### President's Backing

Valerie Jarrett, a senior White House adviser, said President Barack Obama has lent his support. After a Feb. 4 White House lunch with business leaders, the president pulled aside Battle Creek, Michigan-based Kellogg Co. Chief Executive Officer David Mackay and Minneapolis-based General Mills Inc. CEO Ken Powell and prodded them to take part in his wife's campaign, Jarrett said.

Michelle Obama's push is in sync with public skepticism about "the motives of big business" in the wake of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, said Patrick Basham, an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based research group that promotes libertarian policies.

Basham said the recent decisions by the companies may be an attempt to prevent a broader crackdown.

"The food industry is terrified of being either legislated out of business or so regulated they won't be able to do what they want," Basham said.

### Not Enough

Still, Carol Tucker-Foreman, a food policy fellow at the Washington-based consumer-advocacy organization, the Consumer Federation of America, said the efforts by companies won't be sufficient to reach Obama's goal of ending obesity.

"The food manufacturers can reduce the calories in their products but it's hard for them to say, 'eat less,'" she said.

By reaching out to corporations, Obama has sought a higher profile than her immediate predecessor, Laura Bush, who focused on literacy. And though she was caricatured as a radical during the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama has defied predictions that she would be as polarizing as Hillary Clinton, who was criticized for her role in forging a failed health-care plan.

Obama is positioning herself as the "dignified center note" between Bush, "who was more reserved," and Clinton, "who was in your face," according to Douglas Brinkley, a historian at Rice University in Houston.

### Working With Companies

Jarrett, a close friend of the Obamas' who is a White House liaison to corporate America, said the administration is working with companies, not "thrusting" changes upon them.

Michelle Obama says the issue of child nutrition is personal. At a National PTA Conference in Arlington, Virginia, on March 10, she said she got a "wakeup call" when her pediatrician expressed concern about her own family's eating habits.

This ability to tie her campaign to her role as a mother accounts for her success, Brinkley said. It represents "the best of first ladyhood," he said.

In a March Associated Press poll, Obama had a 71 percent approval rating, 18 points higher than her husband. That's also 7 points higher than Laura Bush's numbers in July 2001, and 11 points higher than Hillary Clinton's approval rating in May, 1993, according to a Pew Research Center survey.

"She has a bully pulpit because of her popularity," Jarrett said.

--With assistance from Matthew Boyle in New York. Editors: Max Berley, Jim Kirk.

To contact the reporter on this story: Kate Andersen Brower in Washington at [Kandersen7@bloomberg.net](mailto:Kandersen7@bloomberg.net)

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Jim Kirk at [jkirk12@bloomberg.net](mailto:jkirk12@bloomberg.net)