On the evening of April 8, 1999, a long line of Town Cars and taxis pulled up to the Minneapolis headquarters of Pillsbury and discharged 11 men who controlled America’s largest food companies. Nestlé was in attendance, as were Kraft and Nabisco, General Mills and Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola and Mars. Rivals any other day, the C.E.O.’s and company presidents had come together for a rare, private meeting. On the agenda was one item: the emerging obesity epidemic and how to deal with it. While the atmosphere was cordial, the men assembled were hardly friends. Their stature was defined by their skill in fighting one another for what they called “stomach share” — the amount of digestive space that any one company’s brand can grab from the competition.

James Behnke, a 55-year-old executive at Pillsbury, greeted the men as they arrived. He was anxious but also hopeful about the plan that he and a few other food-company executives had devised to engage the C.E.O.’s on America’s growing weight problem. “We were very concerned, and rightfully so, that obesity was becoming a major issue,” Behnke recalled. “People were starting to talk about sugar taxes, and there was a lot of pressure on food companies.” Getting the company chiefs in the same room to talk about anything, much less a sensitive issue like this, was a tricky business, so Behnke and his fellow organizers had scripted the meeting carefully, honing the message to its barest essentials. “C.E.O.’s in the food industry are typically not technical guys, and they’re uncomfortable going to meetings where
technical people talk in technical terms about technical things,” Behnke said. “They don’t want to be embarrassed. They don’t want to make commitments. They want to maintain their aloofness and autonomy.”

A chemist by training with a doctoral degree in food science, Behnke became Pillsbury’s chief technical officer in 1979 and was instrumental in creating a long line of hit products, including microwaveable popcorn. He deeply admired Pillsbury but in recent years had grown troubled by pictures of obese children suffering from diabetes and the earliest signs of hypertension and heart disease. In the months leading up to the C.E.O. meeting, he was engaged in conversation with a group of food-science experts who were painting an increasingly grim picture of the public’s ability to cope with the industry’s formulations — from the body’s fragile controls on overeating to the hidden power of some processed foods to make people feel hungrier still. It was time, he and a handful of others felt, to warn the C.E.O.’s that their companies may have gone too far in creating and marketing products that posed the greatest health concerns.

The discussion took place in Pillsbury’s auditorium. The first speaker was a vice president of Kraft named Michael Mudd. “I very much appreciate this opportunity to talk to you about childhood obesity and the growing challenge it presents for us all,” Mudd began. “Let me say right at the start, this is not an easy subject. There are no easy answers — for what the public health community must do to bring this problem under control or for what the industry should do as others seek to hold it accountable for what has happened. But this much is clear: For those of us who’ve looked hard at this issue, whether they’re public health professionals or staff specialists in your own companies, we feel sure that the one thing we shouldn’t do is nothing.”

As he spoke, Mudd clicked through a deck of slides — 114 in all — projected on a large screen behind him. The figures were staggering. More than half of American adults were now considered overweight, with nearly one-quarter of the adult population — 40 million people — clinically defined as obese. Among children, the rates had more than doubled since 1980, and the number of kids considered obese had shot past 12 million. (This was still only 1999; the nation’s obesity rates would climb much higher.) Food manufacturers were now being blamed for the problem from all sides — academia, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. The secretary of agriculture, over whom the industry had long held sway, had recently called obesity a “national epidemic.”

Mudd then did the unthinkable. He drew a connection to the last thing in the world the C.E.O.’s wanted linked to their products: cigarettes. First came a quote from a Yale University professor of psychology and public health, Kelly Brownell, who was an especially vocal proponent of the view that the processed-food industry should be seen as a public health menace: “As a culture, we’ve become upset by the tobacco companies advertising to children, but we sit idly by while the food companies do the very same thing. And we could make a claim that the toll taken on the public health by a poor diet rivals that taken by tobacco.”

“If anyone in the food industry ever doubted there was a slippery slope out there,” Mudd said, “I imagine they are beginning to experience a distinct sliding sensation right about now.”

Mudd then presented the plan he and others had devised to address the obesity problem. Merely getting the executives to acknowledge some culpability was an important first step, he knew, so his plan
would start off with a small but crucial move: the industry should use the expertise of scientists — its own and others — to gain a deeper understanding of what was driving Americans to overeat. Once this was achieved, the effort could unfold on several fronts. To be sure, there would be no getting around the role that packaged foods and drinks play in overconsumption. They would have to pull back on their use of salt, sugar and fat, perhaps by imposing industrywide limits. But it wasn’t just a matter of these three ingredients; the schemes they used to advertise and market their products were critical, too. Mudd proposed creating a “code to guide the nutritional aspects of food marketing, especially to children.”

“We are saying that the industry should make a sincere effort to be part of the solution,” Mudd concluded. “And that by doing so, we can help to defuse the criticism that’s building against us.”

What happened next was not written down. But according to three participants, when Mudd stopped talking, the one C.E.O. whose recent exploits in the grocery store had awed the rest of the industry stood up to speak. His name was Stephen Sanger, and he was also the person — as head of General Mills — who had the most to lose when it came to dealing with obesity. Under his leadership, General Mills had overtaken not just the cereal aisle but other sections of the grocery store. The company’s Yoplait brand had transformed traditional unsweetened breakfast yogurt into a veritable dessert. It now had twice as much sugar per serving as General Mills’ marshmallow cereal Lucky Charms. And yet, because of yogurt’s well-tended image as a wholesome snack, sales of Yoplait were soaring, with annual revenue topping $500 million. Emboldened by the success, the company’s development wing pushed even harder, inventing a Yoplait variation that came in a squeezable tube — perfect for kids. They called it Go-Gurt and rolled it out nationally in the weeks before the C.E.O. meeting. (By year’s end, it would hit $100 million in sales.)

According to the sources I spoke with, Sanger began by reminding the group that consumers were “fickle.” (Sanger declined to be interviewed.) Sometimes they worried about sugar, other times fat. General Mills, he said, acted responsibly to both the public and shareholders by offering products to satisfy dieters and other concerned shoppers, from low sugar to added whole grains. But most often, he said, people bought what they liked, and they liked what tasted good. “Don’t talk to me about nutrition,” he reportedly said, taking on the voice of the typical consumer. “Talk to me about taste, and if this stuff tastes better, don’t run around trying to sell stuff that doesn’t taste good.”

(continued at http://t.co/dhdE1CcqBP)