

How Dole is addressing food insecurity

A Q&A with the brand's global CMO, Rupen Desai

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Access to food—healthy food, in particular—has been a challenge for many people across the globe. And the pandemic has only escalated the issue further.

Dole Packaged Foods has set out to curb food insecurity and make nutritious food within reach for everyone, and the company knows it's no easy feat. We recently spoke with Rupen Desai, global CMO of the brand, about the actions Dole is taking and what it has learned thus far.

Tell us about Dole's efforts to fight food insecurity.

The world we live in is quite lopsided. Unhealthy food is far more attractive, accessible, and affordable than healthy food. A Happy Meal costs a family [just a few dollars], and you and I would probably end up paying \$12 to \$14 for a quinoa salad.

In the middle of the pandemic, we launched several ambitious initiatives—almost as a business model for ourselves, but also as promises to the world. One of them is providing access to good nutrition for a billion people in the next few years. This initiative is the best way for us to be purposeful, yet humble enough to know we're a small drop in the big ocean of the cause.

That's very ambitious and certainly can't be achieved overnight. What does the rollout look like in the short term, as well as in the long term?

We realized the same thing, that this is one of those infinite games: You're never going to win in this. And we hope for everyone's sake that there will be an end to food insecurity, but it's a long hope.

We began a pilot in Jackson, Mississippi, about four months ago and were working very closely with the mayor. Since then, we've been trying to identify systemic changes, because Jackson is one of the most unequal places in the US in terms of access to healthy food. We're seeing where it is much easier to find unhealthy food than it is to find fresh vegetables and groceries, and whether those areas are scattered around minorities. So, Jackson has been our pilot to test and learn, and we're now ready to take this to a lot more cities around the US.

Because we're in it for the long haul, we need to go through a learning process ourselves. Within Dole, we use the word "purposeful" around our initiatives, because they end up becoming global forces. We've been doing a whole host of programs around our promises, whether it's the pilot in Jackson, our recent "#UnstuffedBears" campaign, or other programs looking at plastic reduction or solar power. All of them are centered on those big promises we made to the world, of how we will change as a company in the midst of the pandemic.

The pilot in Jackson is still new, but have you learned any lessons already?

We've had a whole host of learnings along the way, though the biggest one is the power of partnerships. What we've learned is that there are enough like-minded partners. Whether it's NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], government bodies, schools, or the Boys and Girls Club in Jackson, each of them is individually trying to chip away at this huge rock. And by joining together, we've been able to maximize our effort.

How will you decide which markets you want to branch out to?

From our end, [we're looking at] every city, every county, and every state where there is inequality. And the inequality can be between food and feed, between what's grown, what lands in people's hands, and what barriers people have to nutrition, such as affordability. All of these factors would make a city a great contender.

We've also been asking people to participate and to nominate their city and tell us why. After we've taken a look at what we found and which cities people have nominated, we'll announce our next city and our plans of how we will take learnings from Jackson to as many cities as we can.

Are you looking to take this worldwide as well?

Yes. The challenge of inequality is global. While the challenge in the US may be specific to food deserts and minority communities, that can be related to other causes worldwide. So, we're doing a similar set of pilots in Asia.

As a company, we need to keep increasing the impact we can have, whether it's through our products, our actions, our innovation, the way we are structured, the partners we work with, or beyond.

The pandemic has accelerated your efforts. But has it also shaped them in any way?

Yes, in a weird way. The pandemic has shown us that nothing we planned for came to fruition, but that, in a brilliant way, everything that did come to fruition was what we should have planned for in the first place. The biggest pivot we did—in hindsight—was to stop trying to talk about any of this and start acting on it.