Towards a Collaborative Maple Syrup Marketing Effort for the U.S.A. and Canada

The International Maple Syrup Institute (IMSI), working cooperatively with the North American Maple Syrup Council (NAMSC), has been focused on developing a dynamic generic marketing strategy to outline alternative options to increase consumption of maple syrup and related maple products.

Goal
To grow maple syrup consumption by 10% per year for the next 7 years, doubling the maple market size from about 1% to 2% share of the total sweetener market.
1) Emphasizing good forest management and production practices across the maple industry
2) Working across maple’s political, geographical, size and functional role boundaries (producers, packers, etc.), which have historically constrained cooperation in the marketing arena.

Primary Consumer Target
Consumers who lead health conscious lifestyles and are already pourable syrup users (maple or corn based). Convince them to substitute corn to maple or to increase maple’s share of usage. If reached effectively with the right message, this group alone, albeit relatively small, can boost maple syrup sales significantly.

Uniform Message
Maple syrup is the most nutritious sweetener a person can consume in addition to being a versatile, totally natural and delicious tasting sweetener. The nutritional claim is supported by the results of major accepted research findings showing that maple syrup delivers substantially more nutrition than all other major sweeteners.

Maple syrup is versatile as it can be used as an ingredient in a wide range of food products and not merely as a topping for pancakes, waffles and ice cream. Many recipes are available in various maple cookbooks and maple can be substituted in recipes calling for other sweeteners.

Key Messages
Part of our natural heritage and sustainable resource
Uniquely North American
Most nutritious sweetener
Highly versatile and diverse pure products
The real alternative

Background
The maple syrup industry should focus what collective resources they have, including individual maple associations, industry and maple packers, to effectively market and promote maple syrup and related products as a sweetener of choice to consumers. In addition, there needs to be an emphasis well beyond traditional uses of maple syrup.

The Business Development Bank of Canada Study analyzed factors in growing future businesses and how different consumer trends are changing the landscape, both in Canada and the United States.

Consumers purchase differently:
The internet now shapes almost all aspects of shopping, pricing, and eventual purchasing. For many consumers, the first step is to search online in order to read reviews, search for products or services, compare information from various websites, locate businesses that sell what they want and shop online.

A simple website presence to sell maple products in no longer enough. A structured, proactive and tailored multi-platform social media and sales strategy is critical in today’s business environment.

The new “health mania”
Health concerns are rising and health awareness is growing among consumers and will continue to accelerate as the North American population ages, with 25% over the age of 65 by 2031.

The maple industry has already invested very significantly (and should invest more) in continued research and awareness of the nutritional aspects and potential health benefits of pure maple products. However, the maple industry should not be premature in pronouncing specific health benefits in the public domain before conclusive research has been completed.
The green and local advantages
Social and environmental concerns are becoming increasingly influential in consumer’s purchasing decisions and corporate social responsibility has become very important for consumers. Consumers want to know that maple producers adopt high ethical and green standards throughout the value chain. Third party certification is becoming an expected aspect of maple production and consumers will make an effort to buy local, especially if they have developed a positive relationship with producers.

Customization is king
The maple industry has worked hard towards providing value-added products and gift packaging that suits the demands for “customization” by consumers. Maple syrup and products are used widely in corporate gifts, speaker thank you tokens, wedding favours, and innovative products for ingredients and culinary pursuits. The health benefits of maple syrup can be called a customization that reflects consumers’ preferences, and can include those with food allergies, special diets, athletic needs and varied taste preferences.

Designing more niche products that utilize real maple can increase profit margins, expand utilization, and contribute to a more environmentally conscious society.

The lingering effects of the recession
Whether it is stock market “shock”, falling oil prices or dollar volatility, consumers are more aware of where their dollar goes and what is perceived as value for money. However, a growing number are willing to pay a premium if they understand a food product to have higher health and nutritional benefits.

From Vision to Action

Purchasing Trends
Most maple producers report that they sell a significant amount of their syrup at their establishment, through venues like “maple weekends”, repeat loyal customers and farm gate sales. However, consumers don’t always have the opportunity to make purchases in that manner for a whole host of reasons, one of which is that most do not live in a maple producing area. As most people live in the suburbs, that cohort purchases more syrup than people living in rural areas or the inner city.

Implementation “Best Bets”
In no particular order, the following are areas that the maple industry should focus attention on and develop very specific tactics to further the objectives in the overall strategy. Resources are tight and we need to invest strategically where we can maximize returns from our efforts. High priority items are noted with an (H) and lower priority ones with an (L).

1. Uniform message for the maple industry in North America (H)
Effort should be taken to develop a slogan or uniform catch phrase for the maple industry to eventually be prominent on maple syrup labels and maple related products across North America. The maple industry already has considerable investment in producing maple syrup nutrition rack cards and posters, entitled “Natural and Nutritious”. While this has served the industry well, perhaps there is another slogan or phrase that would resonate more effectively.

An emphasis on real maple as a product and as an ingredient would be a desirable approach.

2. Seek out a champion (L)
Well known and recognizable public figures can lend credibility and support in branding a product. The maple industry needs to work towards finding someone that can resonate with the consumers that the industry desires to target. The use of maple in the culinary arts is increasing and can expand. Cooking and food show celebrities should also be included in this outreach. Significant inspiration for maple consumption comes from the food, health and fitness media.

Finding a well known chef or corporate chef to cook and bake with maple would have a significant impact on current and potential consumers of maple syrup and maple sugar.
3. Develop an education strategy furthering the nutritional and potential health benefits message (H)

Given that obese and overweight people in North America range from 35% to 50% (depending on what statistics one uses), the topic of sugar consumption and the stated health benefits of maple syrup and maple sugar needs to be strategically focused. A plain language education strategy, focused on nutrition along with emphasizing the unique natural flavour of maple needs to be developed. This should drive media attention, which in turn would necessitate a credible maple and media savvy spokesperson.

The work that prominent maple related scientists have conducted and reported would be the basis for this tactic and would obviously need to be carefully written and peer reviewed. The overall intent of this initiative needs to be communicated on a regular basis. It is recommended that articles relating to marketing, trends, consumer preferences etc., be written and submitted to all maple publications, such as Maple Digest, Maple News and all provincial and state association newsletters.

A marketing training program for maple producers should be explored in the future as time and funding permits. A course outline, with accompanying material, should be developed for a concise, relevant marketing workshop which would be universal enough to enable uptake in all areas of the maple industry.

4. Retain the services of a social media expert to drive desired social media messages (H)

The maple social media expert would develop and maintain a group Facebook page, develop a Twitter following and blog significant activities and “what’s new” in the maple industry postings as well as keep up with the constantly changing social media platforms. Developing followers, along with sharing significant activities such as food festivals, tasting venues and prominent culinary dishes at certain establishments would utilize the power of sharing and informing on an informal, low cost basis.

The move to adopting the IMSI new standardized grades needs to be highlighted in concert with the food messages. Comparing tastes and what people can expect from the various maple syrup colours is an important aspect of having consumers gain an appreciation for the variety of maple syrup.

5. Sharing maple syrup and maple products as a key ingredient in food manufacturing and culinary uses (H)

It would be prudent to explore options to further the availability and utilization of maple syrup and maple sugar as ingredients in the broader processing of foods. Labeling of “pure” maple syrup is essential to ensure consumers that the real product is within the food. Some of this tactic would focus on commercial grade syrup and maple sugar.

On the flip side, sharing recipes for culinary use of maple syrup and sugar should be enhanced. The industry needs to develop a high-end cookbook (or recipe book) with brand name chefs (see Martin Picard’s Sugar-Shack-Au-Pied-Cochon) and food partners as well as individual “taste of” books from local maple associations (e.g. “Taste of Maine”, “Taste of New Brunswick”).

A sub strategy, exploring messages to areas where maple is not prominent on the landscape, should be pursued more actively. Consumers living in a geographic area with no historic maple industry may not have maple top of mind when cooking and eating. A further strategic partnership with another commodity group (e.g. chicken, beef or pork) marketing a common food produced or consumed in that area may be an effective way of gaining the trust of consumers.

6. Co-host an international maple month with NAMSC (L)

Concrete progress is occurring on this front. The maple industry needs to utilize this initiative to further market maple as a staple in households and to celebrate the culture and tradition that sugaring holds.
7. Actively support voluntary quality assurance programs including training and third party certification in the maple industry (L)

While significant progress has been made in the quality of syrup being produced, major packers express that often the quality of maple syrup does not met all the parameters outlined in legislation or good management practices. Maple producers are producing a food, and expectations of the consumer, old and new, is high, especially regarding of foreign materials in food, such as lead and potential cleaning agents.

The maple industry also needs to continue to express concerns about misrepresentation of maple ingredients in food as well as any adulteration issues, both domestically and internationally where possible.

The industry should strongly support and promote third party certification programs with clear standards, accountability and monitoring to guarantee that the standards are followed. This plan is not intended to promote any specific certification program. In the short and medium term, stepped up quality assurance awareness and training will go a long way in making third party certification more seamless and achievable.

8. Development of a “green” program for the maple industry (H)

Significant progress has been made in positioning the sustainability of the overall maple industry. Sound sugar bush management, the planting of maple orchards, the use of RO technology to reduce fossil fuel burning and various quality control processes has put the industry in a leading position in relation to being a “green” industry. The industry also needs to be seen to continue research and development (R&D) on these issues.

Consumers expect industry and commodity groups to conduct themselves in an environmentally sustainable manner. The maple industry needs to develop a credible approach and messages: not only is the sap collected in a sustainable manner without cutting down the trees but producers also look to the future, working to improve the health of their sugar bushes.

The burning of fossil fuels to produce maple syrup can also create questions. A “green” approach is recommended which could include things such as a training program on sustainable forest management for sugar makers to an outright tree planting program to offset the carbon released into the atmosphere. With the heightened awareness of climate change issues, the maple industry would be seen as responding in a responsible and appropriate manner.

Science based analysis of carbon sequestration by the present and future sugar maple forests should be carried out and the resulting information shared on an ongoing basis. The industry needs to show how little energy is now used to produce maple syrup in a modern, efficient operation as well as conduct some thorough research on the overall carbon balance of maple syrup vs. other sweeteners.

9. Maple Water/Maple Sap Marketing (L)

As a summary, the collaborative maple syrup marketing effort key objectives are:

- To arrive at consensus that collective actions at the North American level are essential to ensuring that market growth and production of maple syrup in North America are balanced in the medium and longer term
- To produce a uniform message for the whole maple industry
- To recognize and understand the supply chain which is demand and value driven
- To support education, regulation and quality production methods
- To raise awareness regarding maple marketing and infrastructure and successful marketing strategies

The responsibilities of this strategy are shared between the International Maple Syrup Institute, North American Maple Syrup Council, provincial and state associations, federal and provincial/state governments, processing companies and individual producers.