

# Bitter(Sweet) Controversy: Public Perceptions of the CRA & HFCS

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## Introduction:

High fructose corn syrup (HFCS) has been the target of media scrutiny over the last several years, yet the scientific community has not come to a conclusion regarding the sweetener's health effects. While HFCS's health ramifications may be unknown, the sweetener has seen a significant decrease of its share in the marketplace. In fact, the absence of HFCS in a food product has become a selling point, with many product labels touting "no high fructose corn syrup." In 2008, the Corn Refiners Association (CRA) launched a national commercial campaign attempting to counteract the negative media messages pertaining to HFCS. More recently, in 2010, the CRA petitioned the Federal Drug Administration to permit food manufacturers to replace HFCS on product labels with the term "corn sugar." Unclear health messages from the scientific community, media and the CRA have the potential to leave consumers confused about the health implications of the sweetener and sugars in general.



A label advertising there is no HFCS in its product.

Images retrieved from <http://www.miller-mccune.com/health/sweetener-death-match-sugar-vs-syrup-36624/>, <http://hdryer.wordpress.com/2010/08/26/high-fructose-corn-syrup-vs-table-sugar/> & <http://eatingbender.com/shop-drop-review/arnold-grains-more-bread/>

## Research Questions:

The goal of the study was to measure the media's influence on consumers' perception(s) of high fructose corn syrup, and focused on the following:

1. The participants' current feelings towards HFCS
2. How those perceptions guide shopping and consumption decisions
3. Messages participants have received regarding HFCS
4. The effectiveness of the CRA's commercial campaign
5. The participants' feelings towards sugars and health



Examples of products containing HFCS.

Image retrieved from <http://www.biblical-health.com/hfcs.php>

## Methods:

- 2 focus groups (n=9)
- 3 CRA commercials were viewed by the focus groups



Images of the CRA commercials promoting HFCS.



CRA commercial images retrieved from youtube.com, CornRefinersAssociation

## Implications

- Assist manufacturers and marketers in designing advertising campaigns which effectively relay their intended message
- How can science based evidence reach consumers through media in an easy to obtain, entertaining and effective way?

## Results:

5 major themes were found with several subthemes

- **Defining HFCS**
  - Limited knowledge of HFCS
  - Attributes of HFCS
- **Consumption and purchasing decisions**
  - Not a top-of-mind concern
  - Too much HFCS in products
  - Moderation is necessary
  - Avoid or limit purchasing products with HFCS
- **"Corn Sugar"**
  - More positive connotations than "HFCS"
  - BUT - deceptive
  - Sugar is sugar
  - HFCS is not the same as sugar
- **Print media, movies and the classroom were the sources that influenced perceptions of HFCS. Messages received:**
  - Environmental
  - Body processes HFCS the same as sugar
  - Moderation
- **CRA commercial campaign**
  - Uninformative
  - Not credible
  - Not effective

## Discussion:

- **Participants' general perceptions of HFCS**
  - Neutral to positive perceptions
  - Levels of previous knowledge were mixed
  - Those with little knowledge did not have well defined opinions
  - Greater knowledge = strong opinions and positive perceptions, but not necessarily factual
- **Purchasing/Consumption Decisions**
  - Moderation used as a coping strategy
  - Third-person effect - acceptance of media's negative HFCS messages
- **HFCS Messages Received**
  - Participants claimed neutral messages
  - Qualifiers - "I've heard" used frequently
  - Generally - negative messages were received
  - Third-person effect
- **Effectiveness of CRA's commercial campaign**
  - Commercials did not alter previous opinions of HFCS
  - Did not trust the CRA
  - Questioned legitimacy of the communication
  - Reactance - negative effect on product evaluation
- **Sugar & America's health**
  - Participants understood sugar and HFCS are both responsible for an overall increase in energy