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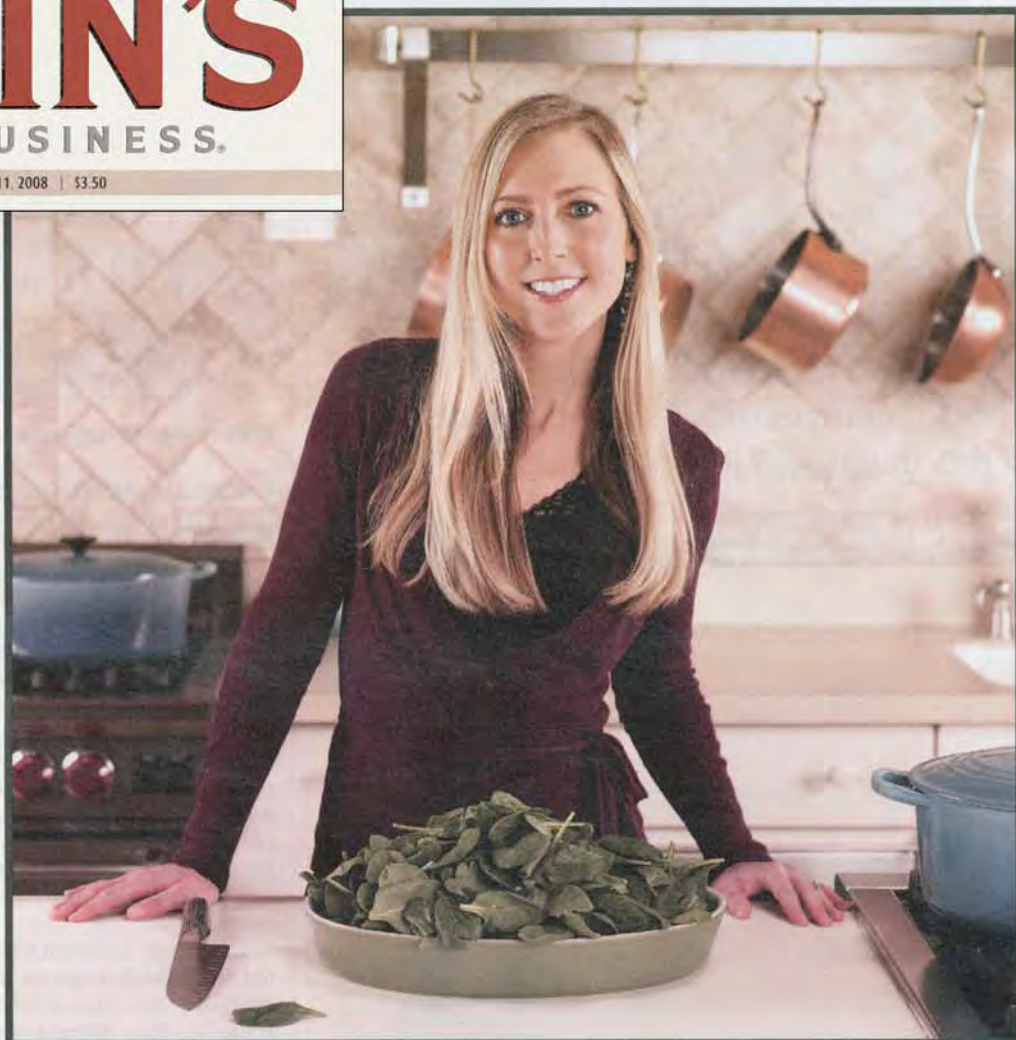
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BUSINESS OF LIFE



A dash of conflict
Dawn Jackson Blatner makes nutrition fun—but her agency has its critics. **33**



ANDREAS LARSSON

Dawn Jackson Blatner, an ADA spokeswoman and Chopping Block teacher, is Chicago's most-quoted dietitian.

Nutrition advice: meaty enough?

Chicago expert puts fresh face on tips from American Dietetic Assn., but some find group's approach a bit thin

BY LISA BERTAGNOLI

It is an arctic-cold Friday in January, and Dawn Jackson Blatner is promoting a new diet on Chicago-based morning talk show "In the Loop with iVillage" on WMAQ-TV/Channel 5.

Ms. Blatner, 32, created the "3-4-5 Diet," which calls for 300 calories at breakfast, 400 at lunch and 500 at dinner, plus two small snacks, for a total of 1,500 calories per day. This morning, she displays homemade and restaurant choices for all three meals.

Host Erika Vetrini interrupts: "You haven't mentioned fat. . . . Should we be thinking of that as well?" Smiling, Ms. Blatner sets her straight. "If people are looking to lose weight, calories are the bottom line," she says, long blond hair swinging.

With her good looks and ebullient

personality, Ms. Blatner has become one of the most-quoted diet and nutrition experts in the Chicago area. She is the national nutrition expert for MyLifetime.com, a health site geared to women, and a member of the advisory board for *Fitness* magazine.

Yet behind her cheerful nuggets of advice, controversy simmers. Some critics of the agency she represents say it delivers warmed-over advice and refuses to challenge the interests of the food companies that fund it.

Ms. Blatner is one of the American Dietetic Assn.'s 30 official spokespeople. The non-profit, Chicago-based ADA represents 67,000 registered dietitians; founded in 1917, it exists to promote dietetics as a profession.

Through Ms. Blatner and other spokes-

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PHOTOS BY ANDREAS LARSSON

Dawn Jackson Blatner says she dispenses advice based on science but also tries to make her tips fun and achievable.

A split over dietary advice

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people, the group is a primary source of nutrition information for American news consumers.

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, as written extensively about the ADA's role in forming public health policy.

"We're not talking about the American Heart Assn., whose goal is to reduce heart disease," she says. "The goal of the ADA is not to promote the health of the nation—it's to promote the role of dietitians."

ADA President Connie Diekman counters, "The ADA's No. 1 goal is to promote the health of the nation through food and nutrition, by promoting the skills of the registered dietitian."

All nutrition information dispensed by the organization's spokesperson is "science-based," says Ms. Diekman, director of university nutrition at Washington University in St. Louis. And the ADA's positions do change over time, she adds.

An example: Studies conducted three years ago indicated that three servings of dairy a day could aid weight loss. Subsequent research has suggested otherwise, so today the ADA advises that three servings might not help weight loss, "but it won't be a negative," Ms. Diekman says.

PULLING ITS PUNCHES?

These moderate statements rankle critics like Ms. Nestle, who holds a doctorate in nutrition and believes the nation's eating habits need radical revising.

The ADA's messages, she charges, are influenced by its partnerships with for-profit donors. They include Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc.; the National Dairy Council, a Chicago-based non-profit marketing arm of the for-profit Dairy Management Inc., which represents dairy companies, and McNeil Nutritionals LLC, maker of the sweetener Splenda, based in Fort Washington, Pa.

A Kraft spokesman says the corporate grant "is used at their discretion. We are not involved

in the research process and the contribution is not designated for any specific programming." McNeil and the Dairy Council say their contributions are in line with their corporate focus on nutrition education. Other non-profits, such as the American Heart Assn., also accept donations from for-profit companies.

The partnership with food companies has resulted in an "all foods in moderation" approach to nutrition, a sore spot with Ms. Nestle. "If they were really focused on changing the nutritional quality of diets, they'd have to talk about what people shouldn't eat—and they won't do that," she says.

What should people absolutely avoid? "Soft drinks, for example; junk food in general," she says.

Ms. Diekman, though, counters that draconian directives confuse consumers. "When you say, 'Never do this, never do that,' then all you're left with is, 'Well, gee, what do I eat?'"

Bonnie Minsky, a certified nutrition specialist and president of Nutritional Concepts Inc. in Northbrook, which offers nutritional counseling and sells supplements, says the ADA's milquetoast advice "can do more harm than good."

One example: urging people who want to cut down on sugar to drink diet soft drinks. Ms. Minsky, 60, says research indicates that the artificial sweetener in diet soft drinks can make some people feel hungrier and can block the absorption of certain nutrients.

Ms. Blatner says the ADA's position is that artificial sweeteners can be safe; however, when she sees patients, "we can determine if that's the right solution for someone or not."

Ms. Minsky, who holds a master's degree in nutrition, also disagrees with Ms. Blatner's "3-4-5" approach on the basis that it's

nutritionally wiser to eat more food early in the day, then taper off in the evening. "She's compromising what she knows," Ms. Minsky says.

PALATABLE GUIDANCE

Sitting in her modest but chic Humboldt Park home, Ms. Blatner counters such charges. Her nutrition information "is always science-based," she says, adding that every Friday morning, she gets a "humongous" e-mail blast of research from "the mother ship," ADA headquarters.

As for the advice she doles out? "It's an interesting juggling act" to present upbeat guidance people will actually follow, she says. Hence the "3-4-5 Diet," so crafted because, realistically, most people eat tiny breakfasts and large dinners, she says.

Ms. Blatner grew up in Oak Forest and recalls her mother revamping the family's diet when she was 8 years old: out went doughnuts and pop, in came bagels and canned sparkling water. Ms. Blatner began studying nutrition as a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

While her friends saved their money for new outfits, "I saved up for a 'Moosewood Cookbook'... I rode my bike to Strawberry Fields co-op Saturday mornings," she says. She presented those proclivities to a career counselor, who suggested she study dietetics.

She graduated in 1997 with a bachelor's degree in human nutrition, food science and dietetics. In January 2002, she joined Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Wellness Institute and became an ADA spokeswoman.

Now, on weekends, she and her husband of three years, Chris Blatner, experiment with tasty tofu recipes (enchiladas worked; a crispy tofu bowl did not) for the healthy-cooking classes she teaches at the Chopping Block cooking school, which has locations in Lincoln Square and in the Merchandise Mart.

Mr. Blatner, 32, says he's lost 20 pounds since he met his wife nine years ago. "She gradually made more meals for me... She packs my lunch," which usually consists of a turkey or hummus sandwich, crackers or popcorn and fruit. Their favorite "pigout" food, he says, is pizza—with vegetarian toppings.

"People just respond to her... Her personality is her No. 1 quality," says Mr. Blatner, a regional sales manager at Mitchell Aircraft Spares Inc., an aviation company based in Cary. "She tends to be the center of attention; she likes that."

Indeed, Ms. Blatner quit her staff job at Northwestern Memorial six months ago to focus on her media work. Through her private practice, Dawn Nutrition Strategies LLC, she still sees patients, mostly women who want to get in shape before or after pregnancy.

She spends most of her time in her home office writing a book, "The Flexitarian Diet," scheduled to be published this fall, and thinking up "fun, clever, upbeat" approaches to nutrition. "That gets people calling me," she says.

SMILEY FACES

David Grotto, an Elmhurst-based registered dietitian and former ADA spokesman, says Ms. Blatner's lighthearted approach is necessary because very word "nutrition" conjures images of a boring, if not torturous, diet. "You get that deer-in-the-headlights look" from clients, he says.

Mr. Grotto, who sees patients in his private practice, Nutrition Housecall LLC, also goes to lengths to make his advice seem fun. He rummages through clients' pantries and refrigerators to do what he calls a "shelvic" exam, plastering green smiley faces on "good" foods and "red boo-boo faces on stuff they should give to the neighbors they don't like." He agrees with Ms. Blatner that they're as much marketers as dietitians.

"You have to reinvent the message to make it usable and fun," Mr. Grotto says.



Dietitian David Grotto says a lighthearted approach counters images of diet boredom.