Global confectioner Mars signed up to the government’s public health responsibility deal in 2011 and has since complied with pledges to reduce salt in its pasta sauces and lower the saturated fat content of some of its chocolate bars.

In 2013 the company announced that as part of its public health commitment it was going to cut the energy content in all of its single serving products to less than 250 calories by reducing their size. It was a move that Anna Soubry, former public health minister, described as “absolutely brilliant.” The company, she told The Grocer, “don’t have to do it but are doing it for all the right reasons.”

But were they? Perhaps something else lay behind the company’s eagerness to reduce the size of its bars in all of its markets, not just the United Kingdom—much easier than reformulating—while keeping the price the same.

As The Grocer noted, the company had reduced the size of its bars before, without making any public health claims, “in the wake of big hikes in the cost of chocolate-making over the past decade.” In 2008, it had cut Mars and Snicker bars from 62.5 g to 58 g—again, while keeping the price the same.
Prevailing economic conditions continue to favour such strategic cost cutting. At the end of 2013 Rabobank, a leading bank in the food and agriculture sectors, predicted correctly that sugar prices would increase by more than 8% in 2014. This, reported Confectionery News, would mean “confectioners will be dealt a double blow in 2014 as cocoa prices are also expected to surge as cocoa production fails to keep up with consumption.” In September 2014 the bank predicted prices would rise again, by as much as 7%, by the second quarter of 2015.

Much has also been made of the “slimline” 250 ml can introduced by Coca-Cola, claimed as part of the company’s contribution to its calorie reduction pledge under the responsibility deal. But according to a Forbes investors’ report last June, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have likewise been inspired to downsize their products as much out of concern for the health of their balance sheets as for their customers’ wellbeing.

And there is no evidence that the number of calories being consumed overall has fallen as a result.

“While the US carbonated drinks market continues to battle a negative consumer perception on account of high calorie and sugar content,” Forbes reported, “beverage giants The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo have looked to keep their product mix favourable, in order to achieve market expansion.”

Translation? Smaller cans increased sales volumes and profits, and Forbes predicted that as a consequence Coca-Cola’s share price would rise some 6%.