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How Food Marketers Can Make “Win-Win” Adjustments to their Strategies to Help Consumers Eat Better while Staying Profitable

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Food marketers are masters at getting people to crave and consume the foods that they promote. Often their marketing tools are used in response to consumers’ desires for tastier, more convenient and less expensive foods. Unfortunately, much of the food that is advertised may be high in fat and sugar. With the obesity epidemic at an all-time high, we need to look for marketing solutions that can have positive outcomes for both businesses and consumers.

The following is from an academic article that describes how food marketing may be influencing consumption and over consumption. It then provides food marketers with some promising ideas on how they might meet their business objectives of profitable sales and at the same time make adjustments to help consumers eat better.

The authors are Pierre Chandon¹ and Brian Wansink² and the full article can be found at: http://foodpsychology.cornell.edu/pdf/market_fat.pdf.

Summary

It is important to understand that marketers and the executives who guide them are torn between satisfying the desires of various consumers, the demands of their shareholders, and the concerns of public health organizations that largely perceive the food industry as the new tobacco industry. Looking for solutions that would work in today’s fast-paced culture, we scoured a host of marketing studies and examined current marketing trends. We then identified changes that food companies can implement to continue to grow their profits without growing their

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customer's body mass index (BMI). In our exploration we chose to focus on key marketing tools, all of which have powerful effects on consumers.

Pricing is one of the strongest marketing factors that predicts energy intake and obesity and explains why obesity mainly plagues lower-income consumers. Econometric studies suggest that lower food prices have led to increased energy intake. Within the last thirty years the price of food has drastically declined which in turn may have caused people to eat more. In addition, one study suggests that if fast food prices were increased by a mere 10%, the obesity rate would decrease by 0.7%. People accelerate the consumption of products they believe were purchased at a lower price. We suggest applying this principle to healthier foods by offering quantity discounts or bonus packs. This can induce consumers to increase their purchases of fruits and vegetables, for example. Other win-win considerations include:

- Reduce retail price of healthy food through more efficient production and distribution, e.g., lower spoilage with better packaging.
- Give coupons or discounts on fruit and vegetables, such as \$1 off salads, buy-one-get-one-free.
- Use social media to promote healthy food choices.

Marketing **promotion**, or communication, enhances consumers' expectations of taste, quality, and social value. Today, 72% of television advertising for food promotes candy, cereal, and fast food. A study in Montreal proved that banning television advertising in children's programming reduced consumption of sugared cereal and trips to fast food restaurants. Promoting healthy foods in and of itself to consumers may not be effective though because of the stigma that they will taste worse. We propose re-branding healthy foods on non-health related positive benefits. Some win-win considerations include:

- Increase the use of social media and adver-gaming for healthy products.
- Increase healthy eating in the media; in movies and TV shows, portray characters eating healthily, especially in media geared towards kids.

The tastiness and package size of a food **product** can have an effect on satiety and how much a person ultimately consumes. Increasing the flavor complexity and number of components in a food improves its overall tastiness rating. Offering healthy foods that have more complexity, such as a fruit salad instead of a whole fruit, can increase consumption because of both variety and convenience. Larger package sizes can lead people to eat more. Reducing package sizes of less healthy foods by elongating the packages makes the size reduction less visible, which in turn can make choosing a smaller size more likely. Furthermore, restaurants can add a smaller size on the menu. Even if nobody chooses it, it will make other sizes look bigger and will lead people to choosing smaller sizes.

Eating is often more than just food intake; it is a social activity, a cultural act, and a form of entertainment. The eating environment, or **placement**, can promote mindless behavior that causes people to eat more food than they realize. For example, studies have suggested that the increased availability of fast food (but not full-service restaurants) is a strong predictor of local obesity. Salience, or visibility, matters. When jars of 30 chocolate candies were placed on the

desks of secretaries, those in clear jars were consumed 46% more quickly than those in opaque jars. The more visible and accessible a food is the more of it will be consumed. Displaying healthy foods in highly visible areas will increase consumption. For example, fast food restaurants could more prominently display an attractive picture of a salad, and grocery stores might replace candy with fruit and healthy snacks at the register. This and previous research shows that small changes in the eating environment can cause a significant difference in the width of our waistlines. Other win-win considerations include:

- On dining tables at home or in restaurants, replace foods that are easy to eat, such as chips or bread, with food that is more time-consuming to eat, like peanuts
- Instead of asking consumers if they want the supersize, ask if they want to add a salad or another healthy item that brings in more money
- Serve the same size portions on smaller plates to reduce consumption and maintain satisfaction

Food companies are already trying some solutions to mitigate the effect of overconsumption. Some of initiatives include:

- Chili's \$20 dinner for two – each person gets an entrée but they split an appetizer.
- A Bunch of Carrot Farmers has fun, innovative advertising for produce, “Eat ‘em like junk food” campaign for baby carrots on YouTube.
- Food companies have reduced the amount of fat, sugar, and salt in many of their products without compromising the product's taste
- Positioning chocolate milk in the school lunchrooms so it is less convenient to take

Food marketers can use these and other suggestions located in the complete article as a winning formula to make money while promoting healthier foods!

“Smart Marketing” is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry. *Please cite or acknowledge when using this material.* Past articles are available at <http://marketingpwt.aem.cornell.edu/publications.html>.