RESTAURANTS KEEP CONSUMERS IN THE DARK ABOUT NUTRITION

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Most consumers have little knowledge about the types and levels of nutrients they are consuming, and often underestimate the levels of fat and saturated fat contained in the large food portions served by many restaurants, according to University of Arkansas researchers Elizabeth Creyer and Scot Burton.

“The Nutritional Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) does not require restaurants to provide nutrition information for their menu items,” explained Creyer, associate professor of marketing and logistics. “This is a concern because many menu items contain high levels of fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. In addition, many restaurants serve very large portions of food. Few consumers seem to understand that foods served by many restaurants often contain unhealthy levels of undesirable nutrients. Many consumers just don’t realize they are eating several servings of foods high in fat and calories in a single setting.”

The NLEA, passed by Congress in 1990, was expected to help curtail the rapidly increasing number of obese and overweight Americans. However, current data from the Centers for
Disease Control (CDC) indicate that almost 50 percent of adults in the United States are overweight, double the number in 1990.

One reason the NLEA may have failed to reverse the rising incidence of weight-related health problems, is because restaurants are excluded from some key regulations. These are important exceptions, since Americans spend more than 45 percent of their food dollars on food prepared outside the home, and 46 percent of all adults are restaurant patrons on a typical day.

“American consumers obtain more than one-third of their calories from foods consumed outside of the home, and this percentage has been increasing in recent years. Therefore, we believe it is important for consumers to have a better understanding of the nutritional content of foods prepared by restaurants,” said Burton, professor of marketing.

Burton and Creyer, working with John Kozup, assistant professor of marketing at Villanova University, conducted three experiments to determine consumer response to health claims and nutrition information in two contexts, restaurant menus and food packages. The results of their research appear in the current issue of the *Journal of Marketing*.

All three studies looked at how consumers use health claims and nutrition information to evaluate food products. They considered consumer attitudes toward the product, purchase intentions and nutrition attitudes, as well as source credibility and consumers’ assessments of the likelihood of developing specific diseases.

The first study focused on packaged food products, which are subject to more regulations than restaurant menus. While a food package may present a number of health claims, it must have a Nutrition Facts panel that lists serving size and the levels of total fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, calories and protein in each serving.

In this study, 147 people from a consumer household research panel were shown a package of lasagna from a fictitious company. Half of the packages had a heart-healthy claim on the front and all packages had either favorable or unfavorable nutrition information in the Nutrition Facts panel on the back. In the unfavorable instance, levels of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and calories from fat were inconsistent with the health claim.

As expected, the researchers found that a health claim, in the absence of nutrition information, led to more positive attitudes toward the product, improved nutrition attitudes, and increased purchase intentions.
“This pattern of results suggests that consumers are somewhat wary of health claims and prefer instead to trust the information contained on the Nutrition Facts panel when it is available,” Creyer said. “It also suggests that consumers in general are fairly sophisticated in their ability to use information provided by the Nutrition Facts panel.”

In the second study, 145 different respondents evaluated the same scenario, this time within the context of a restaurant menu. The presentation of a health claim was again varied; half the respondents received no health claim and half were presented a claim stating that the menu item was a “heart healthy” selection. As in the first study, one-third of the menus listed favorable nutrition information, one-third listed unfavorable nutrition information and one-third contained no nutrition information.

Although nutrition information and a health claim did not interact in the package environment, provision of nutrition information had strong main and interactive effects on consumers’ evaluations of restaurant menu items, according to Creyer. When the nutrition information was presented, the health claim had no influence on purchase intentions or attitudes. In the absence of nutrition information, the health claim had a positive effect on consumers’ responses.

The strength and significance of these findings, which demonstrate the influence nutrition information can have on consumers’ evaluations of restaurant menu items, led to an additional experiment. This study presented three chicken-based menu items (Chicken Marsala, Grilled Chicken Fajitas and Slow-Roasted Chicken) to 364 shoppers recruited in a mall. It maintained the same design of health claim or no health claim for one menu item and favorable, unfavorable or no nutrition information for all menu items. Each of the entrees was identified as the heart-healthy “target item” one-third of the time.

“The results of this research suggest that the context within which a specific menu item is evaluated matters,” said Burton. “When the alternative menu items were described by favorable nutrition information, a nutritious target item had a less positive effect on attitudes than when no nutritional information was present for the other choices. On the other hand, when the alternative menu items were unhealthy, favorable nutrition information about the target item had very positive effects on nutrition and health evaluations of the food item.”
The researchers found that consumers’ product evaluations when favorable nutrition information was presented were very similar to product evaluations when no nutrition information was available for the other choice alternatives.

“These studies also reinforce the idea that misleading health claims can have significant negative consequences for the marketer,” said Creyer. “A claim that was inconsistent with the target item nutrition information diminished the credibility of the restaurant. Claims that cannot be substantiated or are perceived as questionable can cause considerable harm to a marketer’s reputation.”

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