



Labelling, Packaging and Other Eating Enticements

Food marketers have taken the blame for seducing consumers into over-eating. But expert researchers claim it doesn't have to always be this way...

The U.S. has the dubious honour of leading the “rich world” on the fatty front: government statistics show one in three American adults and one in six American children is obese. Critics of the food industry blame food companies for the way they market bigger servings and higher calories for bigger profits.

“One thing that I really want to make sure that people understand is that marketers are not trying to make us fat,” says **Pierre Chandon**, L’Oréal Chaired Professor in Marketing – Innovation and Creativity at INSEAD. “In fact, with very few exceptions, all the people I’ve met in food marketing, whether they are producers or retailers, are really concerned about obesity, privately as citizens and also as business people because they know it is not sustainable if the business is based on just making people fat.”

The major obstacle, however, is to change the food industry’s current business model. “What food marketers are doing is creating and promoting products that are high in calories, high in salt, sugar and fat, that are easy to consume and purchase everywhere, and that are inexpensive and tastier than the healthier alternatives like fruits and vegetables. Food marketers have also supersized their portions, because it’s so much more profitable for them to do that. Consumers like it because it’s

cheaper, except that there’s a big problem: we don’t realise how big the portions are and we overeat them.”

However, alternative approaches exist, as Chandon explained in the lead article of this month’s issue of *Nutrition Reviews* “*Does food marketing need to make us fat? A review and solutions*”. Chandon and his co-author, Cornell professor Brian Wansink, show how marketers can use the 4 P’s of marketing (product, price, place and promotion) to increase their corporate bottom line fat without doing the same to customers’ waistlines.

A healthy price

Chandon’s article shows that ready-to-eat foods high in sugar and fat, especially those consumed outside the home, have experienced the steepest long-term price decline over the years, contributing to obesity, particularly for low-income households. “If you paid full price for some cookies, you will wait for a special occasion to eat them. But if you got them on a discount, then you may be eating them for no reason,” said Chandon.

However, pricing tactics can also work for healthful foods. In his research, Chandon describes how consumers preferred bonus packs when buying healthy or “virtue” foods – ie, get more for the same

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price, because it is easy to justify buying them in larger quantities. Stockpiling food then increases consumption. “In our research, we found that if the food is more visible at home, if it’s taking all the space in their fridge, people eat more of it,” Chandon explains. Click [here](#) for more pricing findings.

Health halos

Fresh fruits may be healthier than processed foods, but not all the foods that claim to be healthy can be consumed without moderation. One should beware of falling prey to a “health halo”, which is the tendency to perceive a food that scores high on one aspect of nutrition e.g. low-fat, scores high on all measures of healthy eating, including weight control.

However, what may be considered “healthy” isn’t always less fattening. “Apple juice has more calories than Coca-Cola, but people just don’t realise this because it is considered a healthy drink,” says Chandon. “What happens then is that people think that, if it is healthy, I can eat more, and then people end up, without knowing it, with a much higher calorie intake,” he adds. Click [here](#) for more ways in which health halos make us overeat.

Geometry to the rescue

Chandon suggests food marketers take a psychological approach to selling food in a more healthful way. That starts with packaging. “The mind is very bad at geometry. If you double the size of something, it doesn’t look twice as big – it looks 50 to 70 percent bigger,” Chandon explains. “So, part of the solution is to downsize portions and packages in a smart way, which means by elongating them. This way, you can cut up to 24 percent of the size and volume without people noticing it. This helps increase the acceptance of more natural, healthier, smaller portions of food.”

Chandon suggests these same principles also apply to restaurant servings, where the temptation is to eat everything put in front of you. “The research shows that you should serve the “unhealthy” food in smaller plates and in tall elongated glasses, because the eye being so bad at estimating volume, people would think that there is more than there really is. And you should serve water, for example, in conical glasses or fat wine glasses because people will underestimate how much water there is, and therefore consume more of it.” Click [here](#) for more findings on how packaging can help people eat better.

Rebrand health as an identity issue

Chandon’s research also found that nutrition is the

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least important factor when consumers choose a food item; taste, cost, and convenience come first, in that order. This is why educational campaigns exhorting people to eat healthily have consistently failed—health is just not that motivating, especially for children and teens.

For example, sales of fruits and vegetables improve when pictures of celebrities or licensed characters are featured on product labels. So a pre-packaged box of salad with a sticker of Mickey Mouse, or simply branding carrots as “Superman X-ray vision”, can make children eat more vegetables.

As for older children and teenagers, Chandon says it is about marketing an identity or lifestyle. “You can rebrand healthy food in terms of sustainability; no harm to animals; tastier, fresher; or simpler, more natural. It’s always amazing for me to see teenagers who cannot stop eating chips and junk food, but all of a sudden would make a drastic change when they decide to become vegetarians. Why? Because now it is a big deal. It’s about changing the world. It’s an identity change.”

You are what you eat

Despite his focus on food, Chandon himself is slim. “Well, it’s partly genetic, so I don’t want to take full credit for it. At the end of the day, you don’t want to make every food decision a battle because you are going to lose most of them. I don’t buy full-calorie soft-drinks. If you just rely on some simple traditional ideas, and you eat the food that your grandmother used to cook during lunchtime, and without thinking too hard about it, then it’s easier to make those decisions.”

“The big moralistic, prescriptive approach of saying, ‘Eat this, not that, and be good’ just doesn’t work. But if you change a little bit of your environment stealthily, the plates you have at home, the kinds of food you buy, where you store it, how big the portions are, you may be able to reduce it by 100 calories, which is driving most of the gain in weight. It’s not going to be enough for people who are really obese, but for the majority of us who are gaining weight by eating an extra 100 calories a day, these small changes may actually be enough.”



Pierre Chandon

is Professor of Marketing and The L'Oréal Chaired Professor of Marketing - Innovation and Creativity at INSEAD. Findings of his latest research can be found on the article "[Does food marketing need to make us fat? A review and solutions](#)" on Nutrition Reviews.

Find article at

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