
Is food marketing making us fat?



By Grace Segrán , INSEAD

Are we to blame for the obesity epidemic? Or the people who sell the food to us? New research shows that packaging and position, not just advertising, are at least part of the problem.

The world is becoming a fatter place. Obesity has been on the rise for the past 30 years. In the United States, the problem is pronounced: at the last count, 68 percent of U.S. adults were classified as overweight and 34 percent as obese, more than twice as many as 30 years ago.

And the phenomenon is not just found in developed countries. Emerging countries are also reporting increases in obesity rates as they become part of the global economy and find their shelves stacked with brightly coloured food packages and food advertising. Practically overnight, countries such as Saudi Arabia have gone from being undernourished to boasting one of the highest rates of diabetes in the world. As doctors and policy analysts observe these developments, they have singled out one particular aspect of the food industry as the cause of the problem: marketing – how food companies convince us to buy and eat what they sell.

But how exactly does food marketing make us fat? How does the multibillion-dollar food marketing industry affect our decisions when we go out for lunch, or buy cereal at the grocery store?



Food marketers are tasked with helping to identify what consumers want, then giving it to them at a profit. Until now, it has often meant selling more by getting people to consume more, according to research, by professors of marketing [Pierre Chandon](#) of INSEAD and Brian Wansink of Cornell, entitled 'Is Food Marketing Making us Fat?'

“The key take-away of the paper is yes (food marketing makes us fat), because we as consumers mostly want food that tastes good (i.e. high in sugar, fat and salt), that is cheap, in large amounts and with lots of variety, and convenient to get and prepare; and marketers have fulfilled and encouraged our wishes (some would say, our vices) and this leads to overeating,” Chandon told INSEAD Knowledge. And it’s not just the obvious TV commercials, but factors that are much more subtle.

“Whereas all the focus is on obtrusive marketing actions such as television advertising, other marketing actions like changes in package size and shape, in the composition of food, or in the convenience of accessing and preparing it, may matter more than other actions that get all the attention because they fly below the radar and rely on mindless, automatic and impulsive repetitive behaviours,” Chandon argues.

More than meets the eye

Advertising channels have certainly created a familiarity with brands and new products, but Chandon and Wansink believe that these obtrusive forms of marketing are “simply the tip of the iceberg”. The most innovative and powerful methods of food marketing are far more subtle. Marketers are closely involved with the process of producing the food, by helping to make the decisions about composition and quantity of the product. Since marketers recognise that consumers enjoy the taste of sugar, fat and salt, marketers have convinced food producers to add these ingredients to a wide range of food items.

Setting low prices on foods is perhaps the strongest marketing factor that has increased consumption. Prices of foods - particularly processed, high-calorie foods - have been going down for decades now. Transformed foods, particularly those with high concentrations of sugar and fat, experienced the steepest declines. The price of food prepared away from home has also declined significantly over the years. Studies suggest that prices of food items from vending machines have declined fastest of all.

Consumers have access to plenty of cheap, calorie-dense foods such as soft drinks, fast food and snacks. In times of recession, sales of “Dollar Meals” and other low-cost, high-calorie fast foods boom. But the lines between rich and poor blur when it comes to taste. In the past, people may have connected lower prices to poorer food quality and taste. Chandon and Wansink argue that over time, with the widespread availability of cheap foods, “consumers appear to have learned that lower-priced foods ... are as hedonically satisfying as higher-priced foods.”

I ate too much!

Marketers have also exploited the fact that consumers find it difficult to judge how much food they have consumed. Researchers have discovered that people focus on visual cues, rather than on how full they feel, to determine how much they have consumed. Say Chandon and Wansink: “Information about food size, volume or calories is not always easily available ... Even when it is available (for example, in supermarkets) most people, especially low-income consumers, choose not to read it, preferring to rely on visual estimation of the package’s weight or volume to infer the amount of product it contains.” The food industry has responded to this insight by increasing portion sizes and packaging of foods.

This is profitable to food manufacturers and restaurants because people believe that they are getting more value for their money when they pay a little more to get a much larger portion, but the additional food comes at minimal cost to the food manufacturer. These larger portion sizes increase caloric intake because consumers tend to eat what is presented to them with little awareness of how satiated they feel. People are also influenced by the social norm that they should leave their plate clean. This means that consumers are constantly eating beyond the point where they might otherwise stop with a smaller portion. Evidence shows that supersized portions even increase the consumption of food that tastes bad, such as stale popcorn.

Marketers create size labels that give the consumer an understanding of how much they have eaten. As a whole, consumers tend to choose the 'medium' sized product when given options, so marketers have responded by adding larger sizes, which have made the regular size that people used to consume appear too small. However, size labels mask huge discrepancies between brands, because a small size in one brand can be larger than the medium

size from another brand. These labels have a massive influence on size perceptions and actual consumption. Researchers have discovered that consumers who eat portions described as 'small' or 'petite' can eat a larger quantity of food than usual but think that they had eaten less.

Environment matters

Marketers also influence the environment in which food is consumed. In most developed countries, convenient ready-to-eat food is available throughout the day, and everywhere. Food is now easily available in places that were originally not associated with eating, such as gas stations, pharmacies and places of work. Marketers have also recognised that altering the eating environment can increase consumption. For instance, people who eat while they are distracted tend to forget how much they have consumed and therefore feel less satiated. Or to take an alternative approach, by providing soft lighting and pleasant music, consumers may be more likely to want to stay in a restaurant and order an additional dessert or drink.

Use knowledge for healthy eating

With the current concern about obesity, the question is whether marketers can use their knowledge of consumer behaviours to encourage us to eat healthier foods and smaller portions. Chandon reminds us that food marketers are not focused on making people fat, but on making money. “The industry is now reinventing itself and finding ways to continue to grow by selling less, not necessarily more,” says Chandon. Consumer advocacy groups and policy makers should stop thinking of marketers as enemies and try, instead, to collaborate to promote foods that will benefit consumers, rather than harming them. Meanwhile, for those of us trying to eat healthily in the midst of all this easily accessible calorie-dense food, the best strategy is to be mindful of our mindless eating and shape our eating environment to avoid falling prey to the temptations, subtle or not, offered by food marketing.

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