
From Super-Sized to Superior Gratification: A New Path For the Food Industry



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Why we need to focus on eating as pleasure if we want to start eating healthier.

Much has been written about the negative impact of the food system on the health of the planet and people, from the harmful effect that intensive agricultural practices have on the natural environment to the looming global health crisis resulting from unhealthy eating habits.

Many people believe that the food industry can do more to tackle the problems with food production, such as incentivising suppliers to adopt regenerative agricultural practices, but that it is the responsibility of governments and lawmakers to promote healthier eating habits.

However, based on extensive research into eating habits and food marketing I would argue that there are practices that the food industry can adopt to change mindsets and help consumers make more positive dietary choices.

Why should food companies care?

Food industry players know that they need to react to growing pressure from different stakeholders, be they governments, environmental groups or consumers, to change their business operations if they don't want to lose out financially.

This is especially true in the Global South, where governments have more leverage over businesses and also face a much more pressing need to respond to the health crisis in the absence of robust healthcare infrastructure.

Chile led the way in 2016 with a comprehensive series of reforms that included black warning labels for foods high in salt, sugar, fat or calories, television advertising bans, and the removal of brand characters such as Kellogg's Tony the Tiger. These policies led to **significant reductions** in sugar and calorie sales. These were driven mostly by changes in demand but also resulted from the reformulation of existing food products to improve their nutritional profile.

Although these effects were not uniform – changes were larger in categories that many consumers erroneously perceived as healthy than in those that they already understood to be treats – similar legislation has since been adopted from Peru to Mexico. In response, most of the larger food companies have announced plans to offer healthier alternatives and pledged to promote them until their customer's diets improve.

While these are positive moves, the problem is that the colour-coded nutrition labelling schemes that many governments have adopted (these are different from the black warning labels instituted in Chile and aren't accompanied by the same marketing restrictions), actually have a **limited impact** on changing eating habits. Yes, they induce food companies to reduce salt and sugar levels if they can do so without affecting taste, but the reality is that most consumers, and especially those with the worse diets, **aren't really influenced by nutrition labels**.

While food scientists are improving Nutri-Score ratings, **consumers continue to choose food based on taste**, price and convenience. People who really care about nutrition tend to already be eating healthily whereas those who would benefit most from reading nutrition labels usually don't.

Healthy eating = healthy profit

From a commercial viewpoint there is already a lucrative market of people who want to eat healthier. In many ways the industry actually wishes that people would eat healthier, the real challenge they face is persuading more consumers to make this shift.

The biggest promoters of healthier eating are to be found in the retail and food services. Supermarket chains want you to eat more of the fruit and vegetables they display in prominent spots. That's not necessarily down to altruism but simply because so much of fresh food remains unsold and ends up in the dump.

Meanwhile, food services providers like Sodexo or Compass aren't just serving the people who eat at workplace canteens or school restaurants, they are also satisfying corporate clients' demand for healthier food for their employees or students. Increasingly, these clients understand that healthy lunches nurture a healthy workforce that is both happier and more productive.

How to move the needle?

But it's also important to be pragmatic; there is no magic wand to solve the issues overnight. While the industry's reactions to market forces are positive, they can conceal a bigger issue. The simple fact is that we are all eating too much junk food, and that we generally need to be *overeating less* and eating *better*. We therefore need to look at how the food industry can adapt its messaging to help nudge people towards healthier eating habits.

As such I believe that the most achievable solution is to move from the current "food as fuel" business model, where growth comes from selling more calories to more people, more often, and for more money, to the "epicurean" model, where growth comes from selling fewer calories but with more pleasure. In other words, making customers happy to spend more for less food but greater gratification.

Before getting into how the food industry can implement this change, it's important to understand that by overeating less, I simply mean **a return to more "normal-sized" portions**. For example, Coca-Cola was marketed for almost 50 years in **just one size: 19cl**. This portion size is now smaller than that served to children in fast food outlets. Similarly, servings of fries and pizza are now 50 percent larger than they were 30 years ago.

To encourage consumers to return to smaller portions, the industry can employ four relatively simple tactics:

- **Change the shape** of the portion or packaging by elongating them instead of cutting their height or length. [Studies have found this to be effective](#) because our eyes are bad at geometry and so estimate volume from objects' surface area.
- **Segment** portions by cutting them into smaller pieces. This works because people tend to estimate the amount of food based on the number of units and neglect to consider the actual size of these units. Ongoing research, for example, shows that consumers calculate that there is more pizza when it is cut into eight slices instead of four, even if the total size of the pizza remains unchanged.
- **Branding** – Give a downsized product a name that emphasises not its lack of heft (which is perceived as a minus) but accentuates the benefits of being small, such as refinement or convenience. For example, rather than calling its new elongated 20g Snickers portion “Micro”, Mars named it “Stick”. The name was perfectly designed to suggest that the candy can be used to stir coffee, offering the consumer a taste of Snickers without all the calories of the regular bar.
- **Epicurean Marketing** — This is the most important tactic. It uses the multi-sensory pleasure of food to entice consumers and steer them away from the supersized portions that aren't actually optimal from a pure pleasure standpoint. [My previous research](#) has shown that evocative descriptions of food make hungry consumers choose a smaller portion. It also makes them willing to pay a higher price for a smaller portion compared to a larger option not described in such vivid terms. Epicurean marketing works because pleasure in food does not increase with the quantity consumed. In fact, the last spoonful of chocolate mousse, which tastes only okay compared to the first ones, [pulls down the average satisfaction](#) and is often the one that is regretted the most.

While acknowledging that many of the steps above appear to target wealthier consumers, focusing on pleasure is actually an inclusive approach. First, epicurean eating (the tendency to derive pleasure from the aesthetic appreciation of food's sensory and symbolic value) is [unrelated to income](#).

Second, it is **not really any more expensive** for a company to focus on the pleasure of the food they are producing rather than on its ability to satiate hunger or offer value for money. But at the same time they are able to reduce the quantity of the product in question, reducing the resources used and costs of production.

Embracing an epicurean approach can be a simple and relatively inexpensive way for the food industry to shrink portion sizes. It won't address all the issues created by the global food system overnight, but it will be a crucial first step in the right direction.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/super-sized-superior-gratification-new-path-food-industry>

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