

**Summaries of Selected Sessions from the
2008 AMA Winter Educators' Conference
(Austin, TX)**

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5.2 Marketing and Society (Special Session)

An Update on Current Issues and Research on Obesity: What Do Consumers Really Know and Can They Use Nutrition Information?

Chair:

J. Craig Andrews, Marquette University

Discussant:

Alan S Levy, Food and Drug Administration

Participants:

The Biasing Health Halos of Fast Food Restaurant Health Claims

Brian Wansink, Cornell University

Pierre Chandon, INSEAD

Disclosures of Calorie and Nutrient Information on Menus and Menu Boards: Opportunities and Potential Benefits for Consumers

Scot Burton, University of Arkansas

Elizabeth Howlett, University of Arkansas

Do Higher Levels of Caloric Knowledge, Nutrition Motivation, and Disclosures Help to Counteract Misperceptions in Processing Nutrition Ad Claims?

J. Craig Andrews, Marquette University

Richard Netemeyer, University of Virginia

Scot Burton, University of Arkansas

Session Summary Writer: Rand Wergin, Oklahoma State University

Brian Wansink began the session by discussing the perceptions people have of food. He stated that perceptions of food are important because they change people's eating habits. One insight that has been found is that if a person thinks that a food is healthy (whether that food is in actuality healthy or not), they tend to overeat. Wansink has found that overweight people eat larger portion sizes of low fat food than people of good weight. This is a problem because low fat food is not necessarily better than regular food; low fat food is created by removing the fat and replacing it with sugar. The result of this increased consumption of higher sugar food is that people tend to eat 28-45 calories more when a food is labeled low fat.

Wansink also suggests that providing nutrition information is not generally effective in changing consumer's eating behaviors. The exception to this finding is for healthy consumers, a small part of population, who do adapt their behavior to the information provided in nutritional labels.

In order to change eating behavior, messages ought to be aimed at the nutritional gate keeper, the one who purchases and prepares food. Moms make up 91% of nutritional gate keepers in families. Reaching moms with nutritional information seems to be most effective using an information multiplier, such as a news release or PSA. Finally, Wansink mentioned two other problems in revealed in obesity research. The first is that people do not know if they ate a balanced meal or not, and the second is that portion size is or may be more important than food choice in diet planning.

Scot Burton and Betsy Howlett presented the second paper discussing the disclosures of calorie and nutrient information on menus and menu boards. Rising obesity rates in the United States are blamed in part on the increased consumption of foods prepared outside the home. Prior research indicates that foods prepared outside the home tend to be higher in fat and calories than foods prepared at home. The purpose of this research is to determine the potential public health benefits obtained by providing easily accessible nutrition information on menus and menu boards in restaurants. The data suggest that consumers are able to accurately estimate the fat and calorie content of healthy items on a fast food menu (as in a chicken breast and baked potato), but underestimate the fat and calorie content of less healthy items (as in a hamburger and fries). Further, results of experiments suggest that providing objective nutrition information does change the consumer perceptions of the healthiness of

the meal and purchase intentions. Finally, many consumers indicate that posting calorie labels on food served at restaurants would affect what they order.

The third paper was presented by Craig Andrews. This seeks to determine if some nutrition claims on labels can be misleading. The authors posit that consumers that have higher levels of caloric knowledge and obesity consequence knowledge will have different perceptions of weight gain risk than those with lower levels of caloric and obesity consequence knowledge. Further, they question whether consumers with higher levels of motivation to search for nutrition information will have a different level of perceived weight gain risk than those with lower levels of motivation. The data presented indicate that exposure to relative nutrition ad claims (health halos) reduced perceived weight gain risk, and indirectly increased intentions to buy the advertised snack bar. Future research in this area should investigate what the affects are for two types of knowledge: what one knows about nutrition, and what one knows about the consequences of good nutrition.