

Do consumers really want healthy fast food?

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Health has never been more firmly on the agenda, or has it? Detailed nutritional information abounds at QSRs like McDonalds, and will soon be mandatory on food items. So what do consumer really think?

Recent media coverage and government policies have made even the least healthy of us realise that diet is an important aspect of our daily lives. Consumers - especially the ones with health issues such as celiac disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. - are more aware now than in the past of the food they put in their mouth and what effects it might have on their body and overall health. They want products that are low in fat and sodium, offer good nutrition and give health benefits. Companies started realising that brands promising a healthier lifestyle generate enormous profits and generate loyalty.

Herein, though, really lies the challenge for food manufacturers and retailers: what exactly does "healthy food" mean to the average consumer? What is their perception of health?

After a conversation with consumers, you'll quickly find that healthy food means different things to different people. As an example, for some it's low content in fat and sodium, for others it's fresh ingredients and for some others might be both. In addition, there is a hell of a lot of confusion around healthy terms (i.e. organic, free range, etc.). Marketers should not take their expert knowledge and industry lingo for granted. They must seek to better understand how their key consumers define the "health" and "healthy living" and then speak to them in a way that is relevant and engaging, avoiding technical terms and meaningless jargon.

A good starting point is to identify the different clusters of people, dependent upon how "absolute" their point of view on health is. Within

this context, it seems that consumers can be classified on a spectrum that ranges from non-healthy to extremely healthy, clustered under 4 broad profiles:

- a) the No-Cares,
- b) The Lows,
- c) The Rich-Ins, and
- d) The Nothing-Buts.

As you move to the fourth level, people include in their opinion everything that the previous group does, plus something extra.

The no-cares

As expected, they rarely pay attention to what they put in their body; their overall lifestyle is not health conscious and therefore healthy food is not an issue with them.

The Lows

These are the most low-maintenance in terms of healthy food. They're easy to convince that a product is healthy. They look for low-fat, low-sodium and low-carbs mainly. Good quality and freshness implies health, or at least that "is not bad for you".

The Rich-Ins

They are not only looking to identify what is low, but also to understand what a product is rich in. So, in addition to low-fat and -carbs, they look for products with no additives or chemicals. And they additionally prefer products with "active" ingredients (probiotic) or good nutritional value.

The Nothing-Buts

These are the most difficult consumers to satisfy. Their opinions on health are very absolute. Mass production and long shelf-life immediately imply unhealthy food to them. They go for organic food, or packaged food that explicitly states fresh, unprocessed ingredients. Some extremes among this group won't even touch any packaged or prepared food.

There appears to be an ever-accelerated movement from the left hand side of the spectrum to the right. As with many segmentation schemes, the profiles are not mutually exclusive. More and more people in the left hand side of the spectrum are beginning to adopt a more "flexible" attitude towards healthy food, creating a whole new approach to diet called "Flexitarian".

Communication health benefits

From a communications perspective, and just to make things even more complicated, conveying health benefits to mass consumers is like trying to teach a 6 year-old child about politics! Why? Even though many people claim to be health conscious and look for healthy products, they rarely bother reading the ingredient list, and when they do so, they get confused and end up giving up. Marketers have to look for additional cues, other than language, to express the healthiness of a product. An over-arching attribute that many mass consumers equate to health is "freshness". Consumers respond positively to images and colours. As expected, bright colours, such as green, red and yellow, immediately are associated with freshness and health. Similarly, outdoors, mountains, trees etc all imply a healthier attitude towards food and respect for the environment. And don't forget the little red tractor, which indicates local produce to many.

This brings us to the last challenge. It's just a matter of time before the majority of consumers seal what they define as a total healthy lifestyle, paying attention not only to food, but what they put on their body (personal care), what the packaging is made of, the activities they choose etc. What will happen in the future when "healthy" becomes the norm and not just an option? Companies who differentiate on just one aspect of health will have to think twice. Marketers will have to adopt a more holistic approach to health; ingredients will not be enough. The retail environment will play an important role. Manufacturers and supermarkets will have to coordinate and create new ways of displaying their products. Variety, presentation, signage, merchandising, uniforms, training and culture of the employees will all have to promote well-being.

Signs of such a trend are already evident in some niche retail spaces. For example, WholeFoods, a US based retailer display fruit and vegetables unpacked; and even sprinkle some with water often to maintain their freshness. There is nutritional information about veggies and the benefits they offer our bodies. There is a live sushi bar. Instead of another coffee bar, there is a freshly-made smoothie bar and a corner where you can order high-quality organic coffee with soymilk and vegan muffins and cookies. Everything screams freshness and health. In a similar fashion, Leaping Salmon here in the UK has balanced our need for prepared meals with our quest for health by offering "semi ready-to-eat" meals on the go, with fresh ingredients that you can see when you buy them, packed nicely in an environmentally friendly green box.

Conclusion

For many, the challenges that the healthy food and overall well-being market present appear to be tremendous - with pending government restrictions, regulations and continually evolving definitions. But as with every great challenge there is an even greater opportunity hidden. Courage to paint outside the lines will be key in the future. So, be bold: don't compete with competitors but only seek to outdo yourself. Look at the emerging trends outside your category's parameters. Remember that your colleagues, family, friends and neighbours are also consumers and listen carefully to the words they use when they speak about healthy food and well-being. And the inspiration to evolve the healthy food debate forward will come.

About the author...

Yannis Kavounis is the multi-cultural creative thinker at London, UK-based marketing agency *Onesixtyfourth*. He has been in the industry of marketing and strategic planning for more than ten years, working in many major cities around the world. His articles on brands and planning have been published in several well-respected publications including the *Financial Times*.