

Food nutrition labels influencing health-conscious consumers to choose more calories

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In a recent study, Colorado State University marketing Professor Gina Mohr has uncovered facts about nutrition labeling that might change how food purchasing decisions are made.

Mohr, working in tandem with University of Colorado Professor Donald R. Lichtenstein and University of Florida Professor Chris Janiszewski, found that by adopting a smaller serving size, [food manufacturers](#) are able to reduce the reported [calories](#), fat, sugar and carbohydrates in a product serving, which in turn can influence the buyer's feelings about purchasing and consuming that [food](#) item.

The researchers published the findings of three separate studies on nutrition labeling and health communications in the American Marketing Association's most recent edition of the *Journal of Marketing*. The study found that systematic changes in the number of servings per package, and thus the number of calories reported per serving, can affect [consumers'](#) anticipated guilt of consuming the food and intent to purchase it.

Since the Nutritional Labeling and Education Act of 1990, the Food and Drug Administration has been authorized to design nutritional labeling for packaged food items. The labels are mandatory on almost all packaged food items sold in the United States, with the nutritional information on the labels reported on a "per-serving-size" basis.

The goal of the NLEA was to improve accessibility of nutrition

information at the point-of-sale so that consumers could make healthier food choices and improve their diets. However, many consumers are unaware that current FDA regulations allow manufacturers some discretion in setting serving sizes.

Consumers may believe that serving sizes are standardized, but manufacturers are allowed to vary both the size of their product offerings and the suggested serving size, a practice known as “health framing.” Consumers who wish to compare nutritional information across product choices are confronted with a complex task, making it very difficult for the average consumer to make informed decisions.

“Given that consumers make food choices several times per day and many of those choices involve packaged foods, it’s very important that people are well informed,” Mohr said. “Manufacturers are increasingly using visual cues and package labels to promote various nutritional attributes of their products. For example, ‘Front of Package Labeling’ has received much attention in recent public policy discussions, but unfortunately, consumers tend to focus on these cues and fail to examine all the information carefully.”

For U.S. consumers, guilt is one of the dominant emotions that emerges from purchasing rich, calorie-laden foods. By framing serving sizes, companies are able to increase consumers’ intent to purchase higher calorie foods while reducing the anticipated feelings of guilt for consuming them.

Interestingly, the effect of framing foods appears to influence consumers who are most concerned about their diets. Health-conscious shoppers pay the most attention to nutrition labels, making them more susceptible to being influenced by health framing effects.

The study notes that for people with low dietary concern, framing had

little influence on feelings of guilt and thus had little impact on purchasing decisions.

“We were very surprised by the finding that nutritionally vigilant consumers were affected the most by nutritional framing,” Mohr said. “We assumed that health-conscious individuals would pay close attention to the information provided on the label, but that’s not so. People notice the calories, which is important, but fail to do the math. So, a consumer may decide that a product is a sound nutritional choice, even though that product may be less than ideal.”

According to the research, it is only when health-conscious shoppers are warned about how serving sizes can be manipulated by manufacturers that consumers make the necessary adjustments for serving sizes. The researchers note that supplementing [nutrition labels](#) with messages about the potential for health framing effects should be an effective way to mitigate this bias.

Authors of the study also noted that if the FDA were to mandate that nutritional information be presented in a standardized way (such as on a per gram or ounce basis), comparisons across product versions would be much simpler for consumers.

More information: The full report, “The Effect of Marketer-Suggested Serving Size on Consumer Responses: The Unintended Consequences of Consumer Attention to Calorie Information,” was published in the most recent edition of the American Marketing Association’s *Journal of Marketing*.

Provided by Colorado State University

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