

For restaurants, healthier menus may mean healthier bottom line

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Increasing lower-calorie choices improves sales growth and traffic, study says.

(HealthDay)—A leaner menu may lead to a fatter wallet for those invested in the restaurant industry, research suggests.

According to a new analysis, business improved when restaurant chains offered more low-calorie fare.

After monitoring 21 of the largest restaurant chains in the United States for five years, researchers found that those that increased the amount of reduced-calorie options they served had better sales growth, greater increases in customer traffic and stronger gains in total servings than their competitors who offered fewer lower-calorie options.

"Consumers are hungry for [restaurant meals](#) that won't expand their waist lines, and the chains that recognize this are doing better than those that don't," the report's lead author, Hank Cardello, said in a news release from the nonprofit Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"The bottom line is that it's good business to sell more lower-calorie and better-for-you products," said Cardello, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and director of the institute's Obesity Solutions Initiative. "This holds true for major food and beverage companies and for restaurants."

The researchers analyzed market research data and the annual reports of [fast-food chains](#), such as McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King and Taco Bell, as well as sit-down chains, such as Applebee's, Olive Garden, Chili's and Outback Steakhouse. They also developed calorie criteria to assess the chains' menus with the help of colleagues from the Nutrition Coordinating Center at the University of Minnesota.

Lower-calorie main-course menu items had no more than 500 calories. Drinks were considered lower-calorie if they had 50 or fewer calories per 8 ounces. Appetizers, side dishes and desserts with no more than 150 calories were also considered lower-calorie options.

The analysis revealed that between 2006 and 2011, lower-calorie foods and beverages outperformed other menu items in 17 of the 21 restaurant chains. The chains that increased their reduced-calorie options saw a boost in business, including a 5.5 percent jump in same-store sales, a nearly 11 percent increase in customer traffic and about a 9 percent increase in total food and beverage servings.

Meanwhile, the chains that offered fewer lower-calorie servings had a 5.5 percent drop in same-store sales, a nearly 15 percent decline in traffic and about a 16 percent reduction in total servings, the investigators found.

The report, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, also revealed that lower-calorie food servings increased as a percentage of total servings across all 21 chains. Over the course of the study, the chains had an increase of roughly 472 million orders for lower-calorie foods and beverages. Meanwhile, servings of items that did not meet the lower-calorie criteria dropped by 1.3 billion.

Dr. James Marks, senior vice president and director of the Health Group at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said the report "shows that companies can serve both their interest in healthy profits and their customers' interest in healthier eating. We need more companies to make this shift, and now they have even more reasons to do so."

The researchers pointed out all the chains included in the report have a combined \$102 billion in annual U.S. sales and 49 percent of the revenue of the top 100 restaurant chains.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [healthy food environments](#).

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