

# Who is responsible for healthy food?

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Offering unhealthy products at unattractive places in the supermarket is one way of nudging consumers towards a healthier life style.

Unhealthy food causes obesity, diabetes and heart problems and costs society money. But who is responsible? Consumers who overeat or use too much fat, salt and sugar? Or producers who make all of that unhealthy food and market it? The two parties seem to have a stranglehold on each other. For the NWO's research programme Responsible Innovation an innovation scientist, a health expert and a social psychologist are trying to unravel this complex chicken-and-egg problem. They are charting how food producers can be persuaded to change their behaviour and at the same time how consumers perceive

measures aimed at letting them eat more healthily. The foresight studies have now been completed. The researchers hope to be able to come up with concrete recommendations in a year's time.

## Soft pressure

Which stimuli are companies sensitive for and to what extent do they adapt to society's wishes? To gain an insight into this, PhD student Larissa Shnayder delved through the [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR) sections in the annual reports of food companies. 'She discovered that soft pressure from society had at least as much effect on the course that food companies took as hard legislation', says research leader professor Marko Hekkert. 'However, we see that many initiatives are presented as socially responsible behaviour when in fact they are just aimed at optimising company processes. We hardly see any radical changes that the companies really felt. Companies are mainly focussing on the low-hanging fruit. In the last phase of the project we will dig deeper. We want to find out how [food companies](#) weigh up the different CSR aspects such as publicity, costs and stakeholder interests. By doing this we hope to discover which influences companies are most sensitive to, as then we can make concrete recommendations to influence their behaviour.'

## Golden thread

And what does the consumer think? To tackle the growing problem of obesity, companies and governments have launched many initiatives to encourage consumers to adopt a healthier eating pattern. These range from information on labels to taxing unhealthy products, banning advertisements for unhealthy products or offering unhealthy products at unattractive places in the supermarket. How people respond to this in terms of behaviour has been investigated in the past, but so far little is

known about what they find to be acceptable and honest. The researchers started with a foresight study based on interviews and focus groups. This yielded a global idea about consumers' opinions and that is serving as input for a larger-scale quantitative study. One golden thread has already emerged, says researcher Frank van Rijnsoever. 'Consumers believe that they themselves are quite capable of deciding what they want to eat but think that others need guidance in that area.'

## **Popular and unpopular measures**

The provision of clear information on labels is a measure that can count on a lot of support. This information should preferably be in the form of a traffic light system with 'green', 'orange' and 'red' products. Clear labelling is a sympathetic measure and desirable because at present consumers find themselves confronted with conflicting messages. Everybody knows that fresh fruit and vegetables are healthy, but light products for example, are controversial. Reducing the advertisements for unhealthy food – just like cigarette advertisements – is another measure that would encounter few objections and for which many consumers expect positive effects.

A more controversial measure is making unhealthy food more expensive. During the interviews it was clear that junk food is extra attractive because it fills your stomach cheaply. Taking away this stimulus by taxing such food is something that most consumers would only find acceptable if the income generated from this flowed back to the consumer. For example, by making [healthy food](#) like sandwiches or salads cheaper. And even then many people would find it objectionable to take away the freedom of people with a limited budget to eat what they want.

## **Segments**

Besides similarities there are also many differences in what consumers find honest, effective and acceptable with respect to [food](#) interventions. Researchers will now try to chart these different segments. That will give policy makers and companies leads to approach each group of [consumers](#) in a way that they find sympathetic and acceptable. Such leads are more than welcome. They might even inspire an innovation that at last calls a halt to the advance of [unhealthy food](#).

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