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Leveraging restaurant menus to combat obesity

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Customers at chain restaurants throughout the United States will start to see more menus that list calorie counts for different food options on the list, but will this motivate people to order healthier items?

The new information on menus is the result of an Affordable Care Act rule that was formally implemented on May 7, 2018 in an effort to tackle the country's obesity epidemic. Researchers have been studying the answer to this question in early-adopter states that rolled out the policy prior to 2018, but the results suggested that the calorie counts had little effect on consumer behavior.

Rather than concluding that Americans are unwilling to opt for lower calorie items, behavioral scientists hypothesized that the location of the calorie information—to the right of the food item's name—could explain the ineffectiveness of the calorie labeling legislation.

"There is a lot of research showing that the first piece of information people see seems to be given greater weight as they process details, and we wondered if this could have implications for the calorie counts on menus," says Steven Dallas, Ph.D., who conducted the studies at New York University. The results were published online in June in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

To test the hypothesis, the researchers initiated an experiment at a casual chain restaurant in which they asked customers waiting in line to order from a paper copy of the restaurant's menu. The paper menus had calorie information to the left of the items, to the right, or no calorie information, and they circled the items they planned to order. The results showed that participants with menus showing calories to the left of the food items ordered food with an average of 24 percent fewer calories than participants who ordered from the other two menus.

"We were surprised to find such a significant difference between the groups," Dallas says. One explanation for this finding may be a cognitive pattern called predecisional distortion in which people draw initial conclusions and then view subsequent information through that lens, Dallas says. If consumers initially read calorie information that leads

them to believe an item is unhealthy, then they may process the following information about that option with the same negative bias.

In another experiment, the researchers gave the three types of menus to a group of Hebrew-speaking Israelis who read from right to left rather than the left to right. As expected, they found the effect was reversed: Participants who received menus with calorie information to the right were more likely to order lower-calorie foods.

"What this paper shows is that a trivially simple intervention could increase the power of the calorie information on menus," Dallas says. "The calorie labeling policy should not necessarily be deemed a failure and could in fact become a powerful tool in combating the obesity epidemic."

More information: Steven K. Dallas et al. Don't Count Calorie Labeling Out: Calorie Counts on the Left Side of Menu Items Lead to Lower Calorie Food Choices, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1053

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