

Nutrition Marketing:

Valuable Tools for the Restaurant Industry

By Maureen Doran RD, LD

As a member of the foodservice industry, you undoubtedly know that high quality foods, prepared in delicious ways, as well as competitive prices and great service are tremendous marketing tools for your eating establishment. Perhaps you've also heard the statistic from the National Restaurant Association that 40% of restaurant patrons are trying to eat healthier (*Restaurants & Institutions, May 2000*).

Demand for reliable nutrition information in restaurants is growing. Currently at least six states, as well as Washington D.C. have proposed legislation requiring chains with at least 10 restaurants to make nutrition information for standard items available to customers. The bills vary; however, they share a common call to action: provide printed nutrition information for menu items. Supporters of the bills, including the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society, say the bills would help people make good decisions about their eating habits and cut down on obesity, heart disease and other health problems.

The drive to eat healthier is led by baby boomers who take their health more seriously as they grow older. In growing numbers, aging baby boomers are being diagnosed with elevated cholesterol levels, diabetes and high blood pressure (*American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association, 2003*). Often a diagnosis of diabetes or heart disease triggers a desire to change behaviors. A trend

in self-care is on the rise as well, including an effort to manage disease with food (*Food Marketing Institute, 2001*). Eating healthier can help improve or control many medical conditions.

According to a recent American Dietetic Survey, obesity tops the list of consumers' awareness and concern. And for good reason. The majority of Americans are now considered overweight according to medical experts. Nearly 64% of Americans are overweight (defined as a Body Mass Index of 25 or higher), and of this population, approximately sixty million people are considered obese (defined as a Body Mass Index of 30 or more, *Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2002*). Many who are overweight are looking for ways to eat healthier in order to lose weight and feel better. The ADA survey also shows that consumers are seeking nutrition information, getting the health messages and making changes (*American Dietetic Association, Nutrition and You: Trends 2002*).

The typical American age 8 and older consumes more than four meals away from home each week, according to the National Restaurant Association. That figure translates to more than one billion meals eaten away from home weekly. These findings provide foodservice establishments a unique opportunity to fill a consumer need.

As a restaurateur, it can be challenging to translate these findings and behaviors into menu offerings. How do you best respond to the health needs of a growing

list of patrons who want to eat more healthfully? Do you perform a complete overhaul of your menu? Cut out some of your best-selling items because they are fried? Eliminate beef from your menu altogether? Stop offering desserts?

The answer may be “none of the above”. Consumers today want options. They also want reliable information so that they can make their own choices.

How are Restaurants Increasing Their Sales by Selling Health?

- *A national casual dining chain and a weight loss program have co-branded items on the menu that fit into the diet plan.*
- *An upscale gourmet restaurant has developed a duplicate menu for those asking nutrition questions, complete with calories and fat for each item.*
- *A national Italian casual dining restaurant has developed their own signature dishes low in fat and saturated fat.*
- *A national fast food restaurant chain has reviewed the nutrition information for their existing items and are promoting those that are lower in fat and cholesterol.*
- *A national foodservice provider is bundling menu items that are low in fat and marketing them as healthier choices.*
- *A national buffet chain is providing nutrition information on their menu items to widely published eating-out guides for consumers.*

Many have confidence in their ability to manage their health, especially short-term health. In order to do this, they need accurate information.

Recent research has been conducted on the effect of providing nutrition information on the restau-

rant menu. The studies, performed by the University of Arkansas, proved that nutrition information on the menu influences customers' evaluation of menu items. Both health claims, such as “heart healthy” and nutrition information such as the amount of calories and fat for an item, were studied. Both have been shown to have positive effects on consumers' response to the menu item. However, if a health claim is made, it was shown that the nutrition provided must be consistent or the credibility of the restaurant is diminished.

The studies also showed that misleading health claims could have significant negative consequences for the restaurant. “Claims that cannot be substantiated or are perceived as questionable can cause considerable harm to a marketer's reputation” according to the researchers. Further, it is significant that customers evaluate the information presented within the context of other offerings.

Bottom line: if you provide the information, your customers will use it! However, the information must be accurate, reliable and consistent with the health claim made (*Journal of Marketing, April 2003*).

Some restaurants already make nutritional information about their food available, either at the restaurant or on their web site. Some have further promoted this service by publishing their data on other reliable, credible health web sites and books published by national health experts such as the Mayo Clinic and the American Dietetic Association. Including nutrition information in these well-respected resources typically costs nothing to the restaurant and provides positive, “healthy halo” complimentary advertising.

Another route is to develop an advertising campaign based on nutrition. The recent campaign by a national fast food sandwich chain, which promotes lower calorie and lower fat sandwiches as a means for consumers to obtain substantial weight loss and health benefits, is one example of how nutrition has been used for effective competitive positioning.

Many in the foodservice business agree that providing nutrition information on their menu offerings is a great marketing tool. However, most do not know how to obtain this information or lack the skills and time re-

quired to calculate it. Moreover, once the information is determined, many food establishments do not know how to use the information in order to increase sales and service.

MEDALLION CAN HELP YOU FIND NEW AND DIFFERENT WAYS TO SELL HEALTH.

Providing consumers with the nutrition information for your menu could be as easy as a phone call to Medallion. Whether it be as simple as testing fat content or as complex as analyzing for the full nutritional breakdown, Medallion offers fast, reliable results. Personal customer service is what sets Medallion apart from the rest of the industry. "Have it your way".....let us customize a testing plan for your

menu to save money and time. Once the nutrition analysis is complete, we can offer you access to consultants who will help to market the information through health organizations and publications and also to your guests.

Medallion realizes that offering nutrition information is new to many restaurants. Let our expertise in this field help you to offer consumers what they want...information. Feel free to call Medallion with any questions or if you would like to get started today. Let Medallion's expertise in the nutrition analysis field help you find new and different ways to **SELL HEALTH!**

1. *Have accurate, reliable nutrition information for your menu items available to your customers. Provide it on-site, on your web site, in reliable publications.*
2. *Consider making FDA approved health or nutrition claims on appropriate menu items and have the documentation for such claims readily available to your customers.*
3. *Consider adding some items on your menu that are lower in fat and calories while still delivering great taste. Bake or broil lean cuts of marinated meat, poultry or fish, then top with low fat fresh fruit or vegetable salsas or sauces.*
4. *Consider offering smaller portions of menu favorites. Lunch portions could be offered at dinner or half-portions could be offered.*
5. *Consider bundling several lower fat favorite items to create "to your health" combo meals. For example: offer a low fat (broth-based) soup and small lowfat chef salad along with freshly baked crusty roll.*
6. *Listen to your customers and respond to their special requests when possible. Research has shown that once a customer with a special nutrition need finds a restaurant he or she can trust, they become extremely loyal and often spread the good word to others. Fostering this positive word of mouth will further enhance your bottom line.*
7. *Develop your own 'signature' name for health-focused items on your menu. Your customers will learn to trust this 'brand image' if the claims are solid.*

Ace's Grill Menu	
Juicy Ace Hamburger	\$4.99
27g fat	
512 calories	
40 carbohydrates	
87 cholesterol	
Ace's Fruit Yogurt	\$1.49
0g fat	
159 calories	
32 carbohydrates	
3 cholesterol	
Ace's Baked French Fries	\$3.99
15g fat	
396 calories	
62 carbohydrates	
0 cholesterol	
Ace's Turkey Noodle Soup	\$2.99
2g fat	
68 calories	
9 carbohydrates	
5 cholesterol	
Ace's Crazy Taco Salad	\$5.99
43g fat	
279 calories	
23 carbohydrates	
43 cholesterol	

Resources:

American Dietetic Association

www.eatright.org

The National Restaurant Association

www.restaurant.org

Food Marketing Institute

www.fmi.org

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