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Obesity- who's fault? The relationship between restaurants and obesity



Robert Ancill, CEO and founder of The Next Idea (International) LLC, argues that consumer choice and technology trends are major forces behind the obesity challenges facing the US population

AMERICA – THE LAND of the free and also...the land of the fat! The stark reality is that the USA is possibly the fattest

country in the world! More than a third of US adults (35.7 percent) are obese. Approximately 17 percent (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents aged 2-19 years are obese.

Over the past 30 years, the prevalence of obesity and obesity-related diseases in the US has risen sharply. Since the early 1970s, the share of children age six to 19 classified as overweight has more than tripled, from five percent to 17 percent, while the share of adults classified as overweight or obese rose from one half to two thirds of the population. Over this same period, the number of fast food restaurants more than doubled. Exposes

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such as Supersize Me and Fast Food Nation, along with reports in the popular press, have frequently suggested that fast food is at least partly to blame for the US rising obesity rates.

Despite the popularity of this view, it has been difficult to empirically establish a definitive link between fast food and obesity. The simple fact that fast food restaurants and obesity have both increased over time is insufficient proof of this connection, as are studies that rely on differences in fast food consumption across individuals, since people who eat more fast food may be prone to other behaviours that affect obesity.

Of course, over recent years the US media has gone to great lengths to share the risks of obesity and the new concept of wellness, but while there's a better awareness of the side effects of eating, there is little to show in the way of statistical improvements.

So what's the problem?

Interestingly, while Americans point the finger at the fast food restaurants, it's probably not so much the fast food restaurants that are at fault but the consumers themselves and, believe it or not, technological advancement. Remember – a free economy is set up where supply meets demand, not the other way round, and there is no economy as free as in the USA!

Consider the potato: Americans ate large amounts of potatoes in the early part of the 20th century, in most cases boiled, baked or mashed. In those days potatoes were generally consumed at home. French fries were not generally available. This was because French fry preparation required work in peeling, cutting and cooking, and given the cost of expensive machinery, these activities took a lot of time. In the post-war period, a number of innovations encouraged the centralisation of French fry production. Since then, French fries have been typically peeled, cut and cooked in a few central locations using sophisticated new technologies. They are then frozen and shipped to the point of consumption, where they are quickly reheated either in a deep fryer (in a fast food restaurant), in an oven or even a microwave (at home). Today, the French fry is the dominant form of potato and America's favourite vegetable. This change is prevalent in consumption data. From 1977 to 1995, total potato consumption increased by about 30 percent, accounted for, almost exclusively, by increased consumption of potato chips and French fries. Given that the calories in French fries are around 40-50 percent higher than a regular baked potato, it is quite simple to see the problem.

However, lifestyle is also to blame. Greater economic demands on families have generated enormous lifestyle challenges for individuals and families. America's consumer-driven economy is largely to blame. The economic

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realities of running a home in the US usually require that the husband and wife work in fulltime jobs. Single parent homes generally have broad pressures as well, so the US consumer lifestyle requires a fine balance between work and family time. This balancing act is what created an entirely new food culture – fast, affordable and tasty – wrapped up in one single word: ‘convenient’. Since the end of WW2, Americans have migrated towards anything that shaves time from their busy lives. Given that food is a life necessity – here lays the golden egg – corporations took advantage of this without considering the ‘side effects’. Indeed, the restaurant industry must take a degree of responsibility in the weight of the nation –many times, they are serving consumers products such as sugar-coated burger buns and French fries intentionally to create cravings. Or, adding corn syrup to a high number of items. Corn syrup has been proven to slow the metabolism and has many other side effects contributing to the problem of obesity.

Bear in mind that the US restaurant industry captures 50 percent of Americans’ food dollar, according to the National Restaurant Association.

It is worth noting that many people disagree with the fact that the consumer is indeed its own worst enemy, and it’s always going to be difficult for a percentage of the human population to take responsibility. However, you only have to look at the tobacco industry which actually tells you that smoking will kill you yet this industry continues to thrive. However, just as the consumer is broadly at fault for its expanded waistline, it appears that demand is shifting. Consumers spent US\$61 billion to trim down in 2010— US\$200 for every man, woman and child in the US. Diet pills and meal replacement solutions accounted for just US\$3 billion of that, while the remainder was spent on exercise-based products and low-calorie or health-based foods.

In addition, the government is taking an interest, and there are a number of government-sponsored proposals in place which are intended to help consumers make up their minds. Among the most controversial of the recommendations communities could consider a tax on sugary drinks and offering price breaks for healthier beverage choices.

Unsurprisingly, that prompted outrage from the American Beverage Association.

“Advocating discriminatory policies that uniquely focus on sugar-sweetened beverages is the wrong approach,” said an association statement that added that such drinks account for just seven percent of calories in the average person’s diet. This point was seriously subject to tainted statistical weighting and was of course factually incorrect, but the great thing about America is that you can always be assured someone will believe you! However, the big change, as with many things these days, has been driven by the internet. The internet is a restaurant’s best friend and its worst

nemesis. Love it or hate it, the internet has been the largest platform to channel concepts such as wellness, healthy eating and the health implications of fast food and prepacked/processed products.

The information age, which has accelerated consumers' understanding of good and bad food, has driven two major changes:

Consumer awareness has forced changes in demand –McDonald's now serves salads!

Underground movements have become main stream– for example the 'Farm to Table' movement has created its own websites and associated restaurants (which are becoming chains). Any well-known chef in the US is promoting sustainability and locally farmed produce, meats and fish as well.

Today, just over a third of US adults are obese. By 2030, 42 percent will be, according to forecast released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The data paints something of a mixed picture on the obesity battle. There's some progress: clearly, the skyrocketing rises in obesity rates of the 1980s and '90s have ended, but Americans aren't getting thinner.

That's not nearly as many as experts had predicted before the once-rapid rise in obesity rates began levelling off. But the new forecast suggests even small increases will add up.

Over the past decade, obesity rates stayed about the same in women, while men experienced a small rise. That increase occurred mostly in higher income men.

About 17 percent of the nation's children and teens were obese in 2009 and 2010, according to the latest available data. That's about the same as at the beginning of the decade, although a closer look by the study shows continued small increases in boys, especially African-American boys.

The obesity epidemic may be slowing, and while it is too early to identify a reversal, a 'slowdown' in a fast-growing disease is better than nothing. Clearly, while there are many variables within the modified eating habits of Americans and the obesity challenge, given that 50 percent of dollars are spent on eating out, the restaurant industry's impact is enormous. Nonetheless, businesses serve what their customers want, so it will be down to the consumer to champion their own health!

Incidentally, the CDC forecast that is mentioned in this article also suggests 32 million more people could be obese in 2030— adding US\$550 billion in health spending over that time span. Another great thing about America is their innate ability to quantify everything into monetary terms – so let's just consider this:

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US\$550 billion over 18 years is around US\$30.5 billion a year, which at, let's say, US\$1 million a restaurant is 30,500 restaurants. Let's say the restaurant industry can demonstrate statistically that its efforts in serving healthier foods will reduce the country's obesity levels, then maybe the government will give some of those billions of dollars in health costs to the restaurant industry to build more healthy cost-saving eateries! One can dream, but you never know, maybe it's the next idea!

Contributors:

Larry Potischman, Associate Partner The Next Idea (International) LLC

Beth Tarbell, Technical Writer and Systems Consultant, The Next Idea (International) LLC



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