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Creation of Healthy Eating Out Messages as Part of the You Can Ask Project

Background Paper

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Copies of *Creation of Healthy Eating Out Messages as Part of the You Can Ask Project: Background Paper* can be downloaded from
<http://www.nutritionrc.ca/web-resources/index.html#uask>

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Nutrition Resource Centre commissioned a research project to address the potential gap left in programming as a result of the conclusion of the Eat Smart!® Restaurant Program. The result of this work was the development of the You Can Ask project – a consumer education resource to encourage families to ask for healthier choices when dining out. This report is a summary of the research conducted between April 2009 and February 2010 which helped to inform the messages and format of the You Can Ask project.

The research process included:

1. An environmental scan of existing resources promoting healthy eating when dining out (for consumers and restaurants)
2. An email survey of public health units to determine current practices and existing resources for both consumers and local food establishments
3. A literature review and online scan of:
 - Consumer choice when eating out
 - Creating effective healthy eating messages
 - Website message design
4. Consultation with foodservice industry representatives
5. Development of draft messages on making healthy requests
6. Consumer focus groups (three) on acceptability of draft messages

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FORMATIVE RESEARCH AND CONSULTATIONS

I. Consumers

Consumer research on eating out behaviour in relation to healthy restaurant programs is scarce. Some research indicates that while consumers are interested in having nutrition information available, they will not use it at every eating occasion. However, consumers indicated that an icon on labels and menu boards that signalled more healthful options would be helpful.¹

Key drivers of the consumer restaurant experience are taste, time and cost. When comparing restaurants that labelled entrees as healthier or not, taste was the primary reason given by patrons for their entrée choice, regardless of whether it was labelled.² Patrons were apparently more open to information about the palatability of the food than its healthfulness.³

Extensive research with UK consumers indicates that the main criterion for choosing a restaurant is getting quality food at a reasonable price.⁴ People feel that it is difficult to make healthy choices when eating out; unacceptable compromises have to be made (taste, cost). Consumers feel that cutting back on fast food is a common way to eat out more healthily. This body of research goes on to provide further insights:

- Restaurant patrons suggested a restaurant indicate on its menu that they respond to requests.
- Patrons are reluctant to make special requests because this might slow down the order and because of the poor attitude of their server.
- Patrons were annoyed with extra charges for equivalent substitutions and lack of healthier beverages in fixed price meals.
- Some patrons would like smaller portions at lower price.
- Parents are concerned about children's menus: they offer too much fried food, sugar, food additives and little variety. Also, unhealthy meals typically come with a prize on the children's menu.

Further UK research showed that restaurant patrons felt that healthy options should be presented in such a way that consumers do not have to ask, and are not made to feel they are departing from any norm.⁴ In addition, the idea of discretely flagging healthy options in the way that vegetarian choices are sometimes marked with a 'V' was often preferred to a healthy section where all the healthy options are presented together. There were also calls for any 'unhealthy' elements to be added 'by request', rather than being the 'default' selection wherever possible, with mayonnaise in sandwiches the most frequently cited example.

The International Food Information Council (IFIC) has conducted research on consumer choice and provides interesting insight to consider when developing messages.⁵ Consumers don't just want information; they want to know how to use/implement the information. Consumers also see food and nutrition as two separate things i.e. food is enjoyed; nutrition gets in the way of good food. When looking at consumer messaging they recommend:

- Be positive: Encourage and Empower
- Be Clear: Keep it short and simple
- Personalize: Create it just for me
- Facilitate Implementation: Make it specific and manageable
- Maximize Potential Motivators: Provide the payoff

- Talk food -- NOT “nutrition science”
- Make it fun!

Several strategies from message theory have shown promise for communicating dietary advice.^{6,7} These strategies include:

- Using persuasive messages that have an explicit conclusion
- Addressing why people do or do not engage in certain behaviours
- Advocating a specific course of action rather than offering general guidelines
- Conveying practical “how to” and “when to” information
- Encouraging new behaviours rather than discouraging undesirable behaviours
- Appealing to emotion rather than intellect

Research conducted by the Food Standards Agency in the UK indicated that internet driven awareness of healthy restaurant items is primarily confined to younger, primarily female, and office based workers who “stumbled” on the information while looking for nearby restaurants to frequent. People did not actively seek information on healthier restaurant choices.⁴

II. Consumer Resources

There is a lot of good information available online about how to make healthy choices when eating out but what is not clear is what strategies are most effective. The messages and amount of content vary but generally focus on the following topics:

- Enjoy eating out but watch for hidden salt, calories and fat
- Benefits of eating right
- How to choose lower fat (fat/calorie content of foods, how to decipher a menu)
- Choose foods from this list more than foods from another list
- How to choose more vegetables
- How to manage large portion sizes
- How to make better choices at different restaurant types (Mexican, pizza, food court, coffee shops etc.)

Resource content varies widely along with the resource type. Some examples include; online tips, articles, videos, restaurant meal calculators, and quizzes with feedback; posters; pamphlets (1-16 pages); books; newsletter articles and nutrient analysis of menu items.

There are a few educational campaigns to take note of; none appear to be evaluated.

- New York City has an interesting educational campaign accompanying their restaurant nutritional labelling initiative.
http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cdp/cdp_pan-calorie.shtml
- The National Restaurant Association in the US has the Healthy Dining program, which promotes over 60,000 restaurant locations nationwide. Healthy Dining’s signature website, www.HealthyDiningFinder.com, provides consumers with hundreds of Healthy Dining menu options, along with corresponding nutrition information (calories, fat, etc.) served at participating restaurants.

III. Restaurants

In a US survey of restaurant operators, growing sales and increasing profits were the most important drivers of the business, mentioned by 61% of respondents.⁸ Health and nutrition were noted as important by 21%. Restaurants may try to avoid losing the “health seeker” customer by offering healthier foods (low in fat and calories, more fruits and vegetables) (27% of chains), but operators believe demand for healthier foods is not

widespread. Obstacles to include healthier menu items are short shelf life of produce (46%), increased preparation time, low sales, and high labour costs.⁸ These themes were also reflected in research with former Eat Smart![®] restaurants.⁹

Consistently, restaurants claimed that they would make changes if consumers demanded it. Limited data available for review from the NPD Group's restaurant research indicates some of the trends (e.g. breakfast sandwiches) may offer some opportunities to influence healthier offerings. Despite this trend, the top three menu items continue to be fries, chicken/poultry entrees and salads.¹⁰

The biggest challenge in supporting restaurants appears to be motivating restaurant managers to participate in a healthy restaurant program.¹¹ Eat Smart![®] research showed that getting an award of excellence was cited by 80% of participants as an important reason to participate in the program.¹² Restaurants need a compelling reason to offer healthy choices on their menus.

A previous Eat Smart![®] review and consultations with the food service industry identified the following components as things restaurants are willing to try:^{12,13}

- Attending/receiving education including cooking tips, general nutrition, eating trends, substitutions, lower fat ways to enhance flavours and cooking techniques
- On-site training in food safety and healthy eating (for chefs and wait staff)
- Strategies that don't interfere with profit goals
- Strategies that offer cost advantage to restaurant and consumers
- Ongoing support through personal communication and /or newsletter
- Simple point-of-purchase interventions
- Channels to collect customer feedback

The focus group held with foodservice industry partners also provided further details on what menu changes would be easier to implement (e.g. sauce on the side) and what menu changes would be more difficult to manage (e.g. reducing sodium, smaller portions).

There were a few, mixed responses when asked what healthy options consumers are requesting. It was pointed out by participants, there are many types of restaurants and that consumers are not a homogenous group, which may have led to the lack of responses to this question. At the same time, a lack of responses may indicate that this type of information is simply not widely known or available.

There was general agreement by food service industry partners that not everyone wants to eat healthy when eating out, as evidenced by the growth of the gourmet burger market. There was also agreement that consumers should have some healthy options, particularly on children's menus. However, consumers may define "healthy" in different ways, which can make it difficult for operators. It was pointed out that consumers may want to eat right but don't know how to put that into practice. An alternative point of view was expressed which is that consumers know what's healthy and not healthy and they still often choose the unhealthy choice, e.g. McDonald's French fries.

The focus groups revealed that food manufacturers have a large role to play since very few restaurants prepare food from scratch. This point was raised in relation to a comment that consumers need to be armed with nutrition information (with sodium as an example) so they can make wise choices.

There were three main ideas agreed upon as feasible options for restaurants to make it easier to eat healthier; however, there was a clear consensus that the consumer must drive any change. This is consistent with results of the public health survey and previous Eat Smart!® reviews. The options considered most favourable were:

- Adapting recipes (e.g. choosing a lower sodium salsa sauce as an ingredient);
- Allowing/offering substitutions (e.g. salad instead of fries); and,
- Reducing/altering portion size (e.g. “smaller portion” menu item section and/or offering half portions).

Overall, it was agreed that even making small changes (e.g. sourcing a lower sodium chicken breast) can have a significant impact at the population level and that having a goal to make food “healthier” is likely more feasible than making menu items “healthy” in a strict sense.

The feedback on how to support operators again came down to first driving the change with consumer demand. It was suggested that operators need one source of information and that there not be different “healthy eating” programs such as Health Check and another provincial program to replace Eat Smart!®. Print resources such as manuals and staff training resources were strongly discouraged in favour of online resources for operators possibly on the EatRight Ontario website with industry partners promoting this link. There was some interest in point of purchase materials, particularly if they could promote sales.

IV. Restaurant Resources

Public health units did not seem to support or encourage restaurant owners to offer healthy choices, other than through the Eat Smart!® program. There is, however, a lot of information and training on safe food handling from public health units and other organizations. One exception is the Thunder Bay District Health Unit’s booklet, *Your Customers Want to Eat Smarter – a restaurateur’s guide to healthy menus, special diets and food safety* for restaurants that provides tips for restaurants to provide healthier choices.

There are a few food service industry resources for restaurants on incorporating healthier choices into their menu.

- The CRFA (Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association) offers restaurants information on how to participate in the voluntary nutrition information program and how to reduce trans fat in restaurant foods with several resources.
- Kraft Works is a website that provides recipes, tools, tips and more to help build foodservice business. There is a culinary centre with articles such as “6 easy to adapt profitable menu ideas” (which speaks to the needs and interests of owners).
- Gordon Foodservice Canada has similar services to entice owners to use their brands. For example, they claim to have market intelligence from over 30 sources that can be used to guide decision making about the Canadian market place.

V. Public Health Unit Feedback

Twenty-one of 36 health units participated in an online survey to provide feedback and direction on a new consumer and/or restaurant resource. Most health units (86%), when supplying restaurants with resources, used only Eat Smart!® materials. The remaining 14% of health units provided simple resources such as:

- *Your Customers Want to Eat Smarter – a restaurateur’s guide to healthy menus, special diets and food safety* (Thunder Bay District Health Unit)
- *A Matter of Fat* resource (Beef Information Centre)
- Nutrition information/in-servicing during food handler training

When provided with a list of format options for a consumer resource, most were interested in a provincial consumer awareness campaign followed closely by a provincial website (possibly EatRight Ontario). An equal number of respondents chose short videos to post on health unit websites and PowerPoint presentations to use in consumer workshops with the least preferred formats being fact sheets, brochures and pamphlets. The suggestion was made that a variety of strategies would be suitable such as PSAs that point to a website to get more information. Listing calories and fat on menus was also suggested.

When asked about what format was most suitable for restaurants, the single most popular response was online resources for restaurants to use independently to develop healthy menu choices. The next most popular choice was a resource (toolkit) to be used by health units that provides tips and suggestions for working with restaurants and tools that can be used by restaurants with or without support from health units. The third most popular choice was short videos restaurants can use to train staff.

DEVELOPMENT OF DRAFT MESSAGES

Based on the information gathered from the literature, consultations with public health units and the food service industry, the Nutrition Resource Centre decided to pursue development of a consumer education resource.

Based on consumer feedback, it was determined that a website would be the most feasible and efficient way to convey the information. In an attempt to use existing resources, which health units are already directing consumers to, the Nutrition Resource Centre partnered with EatRight Ontario (ERO) to house the information on the ERO website. As a first step, messages and tips were designed and tested with key stakeholders for acceptability. The revised messages and tips were then used to form the basis of three webpages on the ERO website that focused on healthy eating when dining out.

At this time, pursuing an education resource for restaurants or a point of purchase resource for consumers (to be used in restaurants) was not deemed feasible, despite consumer interest in having information available at the time of decision making.

Draft messages and tips were designed in each of the following three areas:

1. Portion Size
2. Boosting Vegetable Intake
3. Healthier Kids' Menus

Messages were intended for families with children who dine out frequently, a similar target audience to the Eat Smart!® Restaurant Program.

Messages were reviewed by foodservice stakeholders and tested with consumers before being finalized. Below are the results of those consultations.

I. Foodservice Industry Consultation

The You Can Ask messages were sent out to all participants from the Spring 2009 foodservice focus group. A reminder email was sent to encourage these stakeholders to provide feedback. Only a small number responded.

Some key points that came from the industry feedback were to be consistent with existing healthy dining out messages, such as Health Check and the “eat local” movement. Restaurants also recommended avoiding ‘preachy’ messages and to just provide the simple facts to consumers.

Restaurants generally preferred messages around “take half home” rather than “order small portions” or “share with a friend” as these latter options impact their bottom line. Along these lines, restaurants responded positively to having consumers ask for healthy vegetable sides as it increases sales.

II. Consumer Focus Group Feedback

Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 18 participants. Participants were a convenience sample of health conscious women with children 12 years of age or younger, who ate out (including take out and order-in) at least once a week.

The Restaurant Experience

Most participants stated that eating out was a treat for their families and a break from cooking; thus, healthy eating was not the primary concern when choosing menu items.

For example, while most were disappointed with the kids' menus at restaurants, what was equally important was that their kids actually ate whatever was ordered and that everyone could enjoy their meals without many disruptions. Sodium was not raised as a concern, nor was getting enough vegetables at restaurants because participants felt that they ate healthily for most meals at home. While portion sizes were definitely mentioned as a concern, it did not stop participants from ordering specific larger portion items.

Even though most participants were somewhat resigned to the unhealthy nature of restaurant meals and accepted this when they made the decision to eat out, many participants did express a desire to have restaurants offering healthy choices as the norm. For example, participants felt that French fries should be a request, rather than automatically part of most choices. Other participants commented that it would be easier if restaurants could offer smaller portions for a lower price.

The primary considerations for participants when making choices when eating out included:

- Taste
- Freshness
- Money

"It's a treat to eat out for our family so I get the most delicious thing I want no matter what it is."

~Focus Group Participant

"Sometimes when going out, I care less about the fat and sodium content, because I am very careful at home. But if I knew it was really high, I would think twice. Also the foods need to be kid friendly, otherwise it's too stressful."

~Focus Group Participant

Overall, participants said it would be easier to make healthy choices when eating out if:

- Kids' menu choices were healthier e.g. smaller portions of the adult menu
- Restaurants offered smaller portions
- Restaurants posted nutrition information in a visible place where/when the order is being made (i.e. point of purchase)
- Healthier and tastier entrees and side dishes were offered

It was generally felt that the onus should be on the restaurants to offer healthy choices; while participants have no trouble asking for healthier choices, they didn't feel that they should have to.

You Can Ask Message Feedback

Participants were asked to provide their thoughts on the draft messages and to rate their favourites. In general, participants did not want to see messages that were negative (e.g. "cut the fat" or "skip the fries") or that make them feel guilty (e.g. "your kids don't need more sugar").

They weren't interested in messages that mentioned calories (but were interested in calories and nutrient information being posted on menus). They preferred messages that were short, realistic, positive, fact-based and not preachy.

In terms of how participants would like to see this information presented, participants consistently had a strong preference to see it in restaurants, where they are making decisions on what to order. Stickers on menus might encourage them to think about making healthier requests, but actual nutrition information would have the most impact in terms of helping them to make better choices.

Participants all agreed that they would not actively seek out this information on a specific website. They might read this type of information if it were placed on a website where they were searching for something else (e.g. healthy kids' foods, recipes). If the information were presented on a website, they do not want to work through lessons, watch videos or do quizzes. They would like to see specifics about what foods would be healthier choices or specific menu information from restaurants. This relates back to the reality of the target groups' busy lives.

As these participants were all parents of younger children, they were most concerned about getting healthier menus for their kids, but also about educating children about making healthier choices. They mentioned contests, posters and education in schools, all as appropriate ways to engage children in making healthier choices.

YOU CAN ASK MESSAGES

The following messages are a result of fine-tuning the draft messages based on the participants' feedback. These messages and tips form the basis of three webpages on the EatRight Ontario website, which can be accessed at www.EatRightOntario.ca/en/EatingOut.aspx.

You Can Ask.... for smaller portions

Key message: Enjoy the taste but keep huge portions in check.

Tips:

- Get all the taste. Enjoy half now and half for lunch the next day.
- Make it easier to watch your waistline. Drink water or choose a small drink.
- Ordering dessert? Share the taste – one dessert, many spoons.

You Can Ask... for more veggies

Key message: Add some freshness to your plate.

Tips:

- Veg out! Ask for extra veggies in anything you order.
- Love fries? Order half fries, half green salad.
- Be savvy about salads. Choose leafy green salads and ask for the dressing on the side.
- Get baked! Ask for your potato baked instead of mashed or fried.
- Get steamed! Enjoy the fresh taste of tender-crisp steamed vegetables.

You Can Ask...for healthy foods for your kids.

Key message: Fuel your kids with healthy foods.

Tips:

- When possible, split an entrée off the regular menu with your kids.
- Quench their thirst with water or milk.
- Add colour and crunch to your kids' plate. Order raw veggies and dip.
- Fuel your kids with a side of fresh fruit.

WEB BUTTONS

Recognizing that consumers do not go searching for this type of information, a series of web buttons were created. These web buttons can be used by organizations such as health units and other health-promoting organizations. The buttons can be used to link people to the You Can Ask section of the ERO website from an organization's own website. It is hoped that through the use of the web buttons, internet users who may not be searching for this information, but might be interested in it, will access the webpages.

Buttons are available in two background colours (blue and white) and three sizes, depending on the needs of the organization downloading them. Below is an example of the button in both background colours. The web buttons are available for download, free of charge, from the Nutrition Resource Centre website <http://www.nutritionrc.ca/web-resources/index.html#uask>.



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