Consumer Trends: Shoppers Face the Battle of Brains vs. Bellies

(Newswise) — Kelly Haws has keener insight into the world of marketing than most, with a job as an assistant professor of marketing at Mays Business School and a reputation as a top researcher of consumer behavior.

Yet, making the right choices when shopping for her family – especially for her young children – can be tricky, even for Haws.

She dons her marketing hat to read labels and determine if the advertising is accurate, but still feels instinctually attracted to the items she knows are not the healthiest, and is confused by claims that foods are healthy, when clearly there are better choices. Fat free? Sugar free? Zero trans fats? The claims seem endless, and are becoming more and more prevalent on supermarket shelves.

So what is a good researcher to do?

Haws is one of a small but growing number of marketing professors worldwide who study food-related decision making and the role that marketers and public policy have in influencing these important and common decisions. She researches consumer behavior, with specific focus on issues relevant to consumer welfare, and teaches consumer behavior at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

A paper she co-wrote, “Eating with a Purpose: Consumer Responses to Functional Food Health Claims,” was published in the Journal of Public Policy & Marketing. It says although marketers of food products claim their products provide more than basic nutrition, very little is known about consumer responses to these claims – particularly when inconsistent information is available about a particular ingredient. For example, if a consumer doesn’t know what “gluten” is, how can he/she make a decision about whether an item that is “gluten free” is a smart food choice?

Over two studies, Haws and her fellow researchers demonstrated that consumers with lower health consciousness are particularly sensitive to conflicting information about the validity of functional food health claims; the presentation of conflicting information significantly lowers their likelihood of choosing a functional over a nonfunctional food. Thus, if a consumer with low health consciousness becomes confused by the claims made by food marketers, or if they feel the claims contradict each other, they are less likely to purchase that product.

Consumers with higher health consciousness, though, are not as subject to the same phenomenon. When a consumer with high health consciousness is confronted with conflicting information about the function of a food, their likelihood of purchasing the food is not reduced.

This seems contradictory. The more a consumer knows about health, the more likely they are to purchase a food that is marketed as “healthy,” even if the claims conflict. The reason? The study shows consumers with high health consciousness are driven by a confirmatory bias to believe the functional food health claims. They want to believe the foods are healthier – so they are more likely to be swayed by health claims on food products.

This is a critical finding for food marketers, policy makers and consumers. Food marketers are interested in understanding the bias of consumes so they can more effectively market their products. Policy makers are tasked with analyzing if practices need to be further regulated, and consumers want to arm themselves with the correct information so they make good food choices.

Haws says though the latest scientific information should be disseminated to the public, public policy should ensure the claims that marketers use are not confusing to consumers. “Such confusion has the potential to lead consumers –particularly those who are less health conscious to begin with – to conclude that because they don’t know the best thing to do for their health, they will just do whatever they want instead. In line with recent efforts, the more simply useful nutritional information can be presented, the better.”

Focus on flavor, not health, makes the sale

Haws’ colleague at Mays, Distinguished Professor Leonard Berry, is a marketing professor and a board member of the Darden Restaurants, America’s largest casual-dining chain with a portfolio of seven brands. One of Darden’s most successful restaurant brands is Seasons 52, which features fresh grilled entrees under 500 calories. “Finding success in marketing more healthful food is tricky,” says Berry. “If the food doesn’t taste great and isn’t filling, forget it.”

Leonard Berry

Food marketers and restaurant owners have discovered that persuading consumers to make sacrifices when it comes to eating is a tough sell. “Seasons 52 is successful in part because it combines healthfulness and taste – and doesn’t hype the healthfulness part, which would scare customers away,” Berry said.

The restaurant chain is part of a trend to offer small-portioned indulgences such as mini-desserts or appetizers. On the other end of the spectrum, a good strategic move could be to offer larger portions of healthy fare, such as vegetables.

This aligns with a paper Haws co-wrote, “Healthy Satiation: The Role of Decreasing Desire in Effective Self-Control,” which the Journal of Consumer Research has accepted for publication. The paper demonstrates how some people – those with higher levels of self-control – are better at getting their fix of unhealthy foods faster while continuing to enjoy consuming steamed broccoli for longer than their low self-control counterparts.

The study shows that paying attention when you eat unhealthy food – savoring the

sweets or salty snacks – will make you feel satisfied sooner. In one study, people who counted the number of times they swallowed while eating an unhealthy snack felt full sooner than those who didn't.

"Consumers can 'save' their self-control resources by not monitoring consumption of the most healthy of foods – in other words, they can keep on eating the broccoli or carrots if they don't want to think about quantity control," Haws explains.

Observing a supersized world

Another area Haws is studying centers on the concept of "supersizing" – pricing structures that reward consumers for buying more. The fast-food industry is the most prevalent user of this strategy, but evidence shows it can also work for healthy foods such as baby carrots. "People were more likely to buy a larger bag of carrots if it were more of a bargain," she explains. "There are trade-offs between thrift and health that lead you to scrap your health goal because you're accomplishing another goal: saving money."

Haws found that the pricing strategies lead to greater purchase and consumption – the bigger the discount for purchasing a large quantity, the greater the chance that a consumer will purchase the larger quantity, regardless of the potential health impacts.

Haws calls this "nonlinear pricing." Specifically, as the quantity of the product increases, so does the discount per unit. But instead of sharing the larger quantity, the purchaser generally consumes the entire larger quantity – which is typically not the best choice for either the wallet or the waistline.

An example of a reaction regulators and policy makers have taken is a ban in New York on large-sized soft drinks sold by restaurants. Soft drinks can now only be sold in 16-ounce or smaller containers – although consumers can purchase multiple containers if they choose.

"While consumers may seek to consume food in moderation to achieve a goal of being healthy," Haws explains, "financially, they may also desire to obtain good value for their money," – a prime example of the battle between the brain and the belly.

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