

# Consumer's Food Choices - Trends and Challenges

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## Abstract

*Nowadays, the rapid changes taking place in every activity domain facilitate the deepening of consumer's choice issues, as the consumer meets obstacles trying to answer these permanent challenges. Today more than ever before, the extension of knowledge's frontiers, beside huge benefits, brings along potential risks for the consumer.*

*The paper approaches a series of aspects concerning consumer's food consumption behavior, factors and his food choices in the present stage of social development, underlining and analyzing key-points of consumer's vulnerability.*

**Key words:** *trends, consumer food choices, healthy food*

## Introduction

The world of food and the ways in which people dine have changed significantly in the past ten years. The old traditions and habits of the 1980s have ebbed in favor of convenience, speed, and nutritional concerns that are factored into almost every food-buying decision.

More and more, consumers are consistent in the message they are sending to manufacturers and retailers: they are looking for healthy, convenient products that should provide them with good value for money.

Mostly in the developed countries, the consumer has taken control of the food industry, and is driving a significant re-engineering along the food chain. This change has been driven by various factors – prices, consumer income, convenience, new products, more imports, more eating away from home, more snacking, expanded advertising programmes, smaller households, more two earner households, an ageing population and expanded scientific base relating diet and health.

Although today's market place is undergoing dramatic changes, fundamental shifts in consumer lifestyles and attitudes are slow to influence purchasing habits [2]. Significant shifts in demographics, psychographics, and consumer food preferences - taste, price, nutrition, convenience, health and technological innovation will continue to take over.

## Key-Factors Influencing Consumer Food Choices. Trends and Challenges

Researchers examining the role and influence of economic factors, defined rather broadly, on consumer food choices and nutritional outcomes established that several *key-factors* interfere with consumer food choices [1]:

1. prices, especially as they relate to the affordability of food and act as a policy lever;
2. incomes, as a driving force behind changes in eating habits, in particular increasing the demand for convenience;
3. time constraints and time preference, as links to healthy eating habits and as forces behind current trends in eating patterns;
4. information and knowledge, having a prominent play as counter balances to economic forces driving eating habits.

Studies examining the impact of sociodemographic and nutrition/health related factors on consumers' use of nutritional labels while food shopping, at home, and when comparing nutrients for different brands of the same food suggested that unemployed individuals and those who place greater importance on nutrition while shopping and following the dietary guidelines are more likely to use nutritional labels while shopping, at home, or when comparing brands. Findings also indicate that education has a positive impact on the likelihood of using labels at home [7]. The amount of time a consumer spends on shopping, primary source of nutritional information, special diet status, and consumer's perception of the importance of price and taste when shopping are also significant factors.

A far more complex set of factors are now driving food consumption patterns in high income countries than economists have traditionally analyzed in demand studies [9]. Food consumers have moved up Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid from satisfying basic physiological needs. If the traditional focus was on quantity demands for homogeneous commodities, attention needs to increasingly be given to the demand for quality-differentiated food products.

Although the income elasticity in terms of quantity may be low, the elasticity for many food attributes, such as nutrition and health, safety, convenience, and diversity, are quite high [9].

Where people buy food, the form in which they buy it and where they eat it are all changing. To simply distinguish between food consumed at home and away from home is no longer adequate [9]. Rapid demographic and socioeconomic changes, such as the massive entrance of women into the workforce and increasing multi-ethnicity, are a fundamental driver of food buying and dietary patterns.

With people of all ages traveling around the world as never before, culinary horizons are broader or more diverse than ever before. Today, in this field, we witness several *changes* as follows [6]:

- ethnic foods begin to be assimilated into foreign cultures;
- people are not as likely to try and cook the foods themselves;
- the market is abundant of products intended to help the home cook in the form of pre-made sauces, spice mixes, and other ingredients;
- stores are featuring an ever-expanding array of international ingredients and partially prepared foods that enable consumers to enjoy exotic treats at home;

- people are willing to spend more money on buying gourmet gifts for special occasions through personal commitments, such as paying extra for organic or all-natural foods.

Researches showed that in 2007, health and wellness still ranked among the top consumer concerns, as consumers looked to functional foods and beverages to aid in areas such as weight management, heart health, anti-aging/cosmeceuticals, immunity, and digestive health [8]. Because of this, the following *ingredients*, due to their reported benefits and innovative food science, found increased presence in healthful foods and beverages [8]:

- Slow digesting carbohydrates for their role in weight management;
- Omega-3 fatty acids for heart health and anti-aging;
- Probiotics for immunity and digestive health;
- Green tea for its role in weight management, immunity and cosmeceuticals;
- Cinnamon for its role in blood sugar control;
- Peptides for heart health, immunity, and weight management;
- Whole grains for heart health, weight control, immunity, and digestive health;
- Acai for its overall antioxidant properties and anti-aging and immunity;
- Fiber for its role in weight management, heart health, immunity and digestive health.

Several trends in consumer packaged goods for 2008, outlined by Datamonitor's Productscan Online, include increases in buying *products* as [5]:

- Probiotics (Beyond Yogurt);
- Organic Foods and Beverages for Kids;
- Fresh products;
- "Superfruits" (acai, goji berries, noni pomegranate);
- African ingredients, dishes and flavors;
- Products containing hotter, spicier and bolder flavors.

According to experts, 2008 could be called the year of ethical eating [10], as consumers are looking for more locally grown foods that support a healthier environment and a healthier lifestyle. According to experts, *food trends* for 2008 were the following [10]:

1. Eco-Friendly Foods: increasingly, consumers want to know more about their food - where it was grown, what ingredients it contains, how it was packaged, and the footprint its production left on the earth;
2. Local, Natural, and Fresh Foods: more locally grown foods are present in mainstream grocery stores. Consumers are also said to be scrutinizing imported foods more carefully these days, and looking for those from countries that have very high safety standards.
3. Concern About Food Safety: consumers are demanding safe food and want the government to update the food safety system they can have confidence that the food supply is safe.

Other studies have shown that consumption patterns are changing [12]. According to the motive analysis conducted by RollAMA in 2003, 54 % of respondents have changed their food patterns in the last 10 years: more fruit and vegetables, a stronger focus on healthier and increasingly low-fat diets, more organic food, less meat and fewer sweets.

Yet the decline of the average household size, the trend towards more single households and different life-style habits have, however, led to a growing market for convenience products and snacks as well as for fast meals consumed at the workplace. Away-from-home consumption is

on the increase as an option replacing home cooking. Some 20 % of young women do not eat meat anymore. Pizza, pasta and ethnic food have replaced traditional cuisine. Individualization and the desire to enjoy food without feeling guilty for it are the challenges which the farm and food industries will have to tackle in the years to come [12].

Research needs give more attention to the demand for differentiated, frequently branded food products, to disaggregation of the population, and to admit that traditional demographic factors may have limited explanatory power.

Food consumption patterns in the United States and Europe, as well as other high-income countries, are increasingly being driven by a much more complex set of factors than economists have traditionally analyzed [9]. Food preferences could be successfully captured in demand analysis with demographic factors, such as region, age, and household size, for example.

However, this traditional demand analysis model is no longer adequate to understand the complexity of consumer food behavior in advanced, post-industrial societies. Consumers buy differentiated, frequently branded food products, at a specific time and location, not an undifferentiated, homogeneous commodity. Their food purchases and consumption are increasingly motivated by information, attitudes, perceptions and other complex psychological factors, and less by prices and income [9]. Traditional, culturally determined food preferences, passed on from one generation to the next, have broken down.

In advanced, modern societies individuals' diets have become far more varied from one day to the next and food consumption patterns within a society across individuals are far more diverse [9].

The household or family is no longer the key decision making unit in terms of food consumption in most cases. More and more meals are eaten away from home, or at least prepared away from home, and even for many at-home meal occasions family members eat very differently. Unquestionably, dinner, the main meal of the day, is the most traditional and one at which household members are most likely to share the same food.

## **Ways to Enhance Consumer Food Choices**

Point-of-sale interventions make nutrition information available at the places where people buy their food. Through strategies such as labeling items on store shelves and restaurant menus or offering free samples of healthy foods, grocery stores, cafeterias, and institutions that house vending machines can help consumers choose healthy foods. Although people receive nutrition information from a variety of sources, studies [11] suggest nutrition education offered at the "point of sale" is more likely to influence their food purchasing behavior.

By changing their diets, people can reduce their risk of cancer, heart disease, and other chronic diseases. Yet many people do not know which foods are high in fat, salt, and cholesterol. Because families cook at home less frequently than in the past, they eat more ready-made convenience foods and are often unaware of how these foods have been prepared. Businesses can guide consumers to healthy cooking ingredients and pre-prepared foods by strategically placing nutrition information [11]. Businesses benefit by winning the loyalty of their customers, while consumers gain by learning healthier purchasing habits. This shows one more time that health organizations and businesses should encourage consumers to select healthy foods by making nutrition information available wherever people buy food (i.e., at restaurants and grocery stores).

There are a variety of point-of-sale interventions, such as efforts to label meats and poultry as low or high-fat, restaurant interventions, and grocery store shelf-labeling programs. Studies [11] concluded that strategically placed information about nutritious food choices can increase purchases of healthier items. Signs have a greater impact on consumer behavior when they

compare brands based on harmful ingredients (such as sugar or fat) as opposed to health-promoting ingredients (such as vitamins and minerals).

Another perspective on possible interventions useful in promoting healthy habits for the consumer rely on environmental interventions, those being an important part of efforts to improve health in populations. With respect to strategies to encourage positive nutrition behavior, environmental approaches help create opportunities for action by removing barriers to following a healthy diet. *Interventions* may include [4]:

- changes in the food supply;
- point of choice nutrition information;
- collaboration with private sector food vendors;
- worksite nutrition policies and incentives;
- changes in the structure of health and medical care related to nutrition.

Environmental approaches to dietary behavior change can reach large segments of the population through increased availability of nutritious foods, provision of quality nutrition services in workplace and health care settings, and accessible information about healthful food choices. Nutrition intervention can also serve as a model for other types of health promotion initiatives using multidimensional environmental and educational technologies.

## Conclusions

Driven by a variety of socio-economic and lifestyle changes, consumer's demand in the 21st century are expected to gravitate around a mix of three major "mega-trends" [2]:

- *Convenience* - increasingly individual and fast paced working and family life implies that consumption moments will involve less expert people, be less planned, more individual, less formal but more frequent, and occur in more different locations. This will drive demand for more individual (portion) control and more control over speed and quality of preparation.
- *Health* - growing health awareness, concerns about food safety and the environment and anxiety about physical appearance will drive demand for 'food minus', 'food plus' and natural products, which allow better control over nutrient intake, as well as more user-friendly information and more evidence supporting health claims.
- *Pleasure* - an increasingly adventurous and demanding or 'spoilt' consumer with a growing need for reward, comfort and guilt-remedy products, who is intent on optimizing limited leisure occasions, will drive demand for more ethnic and exotic, fun and entertaining, premium and indulgent products.

The socio-economic and lifestyle drivers behind health, convenience and pleasure exert their effects constantly and simultaneously on consumers. As a result, every purchasing decision is influenced by all three trends. What differs is the degree to which each is relevant, the balance of health versus convenience versus pleasure, in different occasions. Depending on the specific eating occasion, aspects of one trend will receive a higher priority in the eyes of the consumer than the other trends. These can help inform what trade-off between health, convenience and pleasure is desirable.

Today consumers have an unprecedented array of foods to graze on while working, playing, surfing the video and web, or just taking time out. Foods for each of these times will be increasingly required. The challenge to the manufacturers and retailers today is how to follow and address these trends in appropriate products.

Researchers in the US [3] state that in order to help control chronic disease, local public health agencies have a special and underdeveloped role which is to design feasible local programs and partnerships to improve consumers' food choices. Studies have shown that, in spite of the public awareness efforts and guidelines, few people have adopted healthy eating behaviors.

As a part of food and nutrition policy, public health officials should establish and develop collaborative relationships with local supermarkets to influence consumer behavior using point of sale materials endorsing healthy food choices. This partnership with food retailers could be beneficial in supporting and improving the nutritional status of the public. Thus, corporate entities and public health can and should collaborate to influence consumer behaviors.

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## Alegerile alimentare ale consumatorului – tendințe și provocări

### Rezumat

În prezent, schimbările rapide în toate domeniile facilitează adâncirea problematicii alegerii consumatorului, acesta aflându-se uneori în dificultate, în încercarea sa de a răspunde acestor provocări permanente. Astăzi, mai mult decât oricând, extinderea frontierelor cunoașterii, pe lângă beneficiile imense, generează și riscuri potențiale pentru consumatori.

Articolul abordează o serie de aspecte privind factorii, comportamentul și opțiunile alimentare ale consumatorului modern în etapa actuală de dezvoltare a societății, semnalând și analizând punctele-cheie în care consumatorul este vulnerabil.