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Young Adults Interest In Nutritious Fast Foods

Abstract

The nutritious concerns of young adults are of particular importance to fast food operators. The author reports on a study of this population designed to determine whether young adults are concerned about healthier menu items and if that would affect their choice to eat at fast food places.

Keywords

Sandy Kapoor, Young Adults' Interest In Nutritious Fast Foods, Healthy foods, Health conscious

Young Adults' Interest In Nutritious Fast Foods

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The nutritious concerns of young adults are of particular importance to fast food operators. The author reports on a study of this population designed to determine whether young adults are concerned about more healthy menu items and if that would effect their choice to eat at fast food places.

Consumers' interest in health and nutrition continues to be strong.¹ This is reflected not only in consumers' interest in healthy eating when at home but in dining out situations, as well.² While research has been conducted in this area, there are few studies which evaluate the interest of specific groups of consumers in nutrition when dining out at particular types of food service operations.

This study examines the interest of young adults in nutrition when dining out at one type of food service, fast food places. It was designed to determine whether young adults will reduce their visits to fast food places if they learn most menu items are poor nutrition choices, whether young adults will increase their visits to fast food places if more healthy menu selections are offered, and how important nutrition is when young adults choose to eat at a fast food place.

Young adults' interest³ in athletics, their involvement in dieting, and their preoccupation with appearance suggest consumers in this age group will be concerned about the nutritional and caloric value of menu items when they dine out.

The nutrition concerns of young adults are important to food service operators because this age group is eating out in greater numbers than in previous years; they make up a substantial part of the dining out market. About one-fifth of all lunch and dinner customers are young adults.⁴ The nutrition concerns of this market is of particular importance to fast food operators because young adults account for an even larger proportion of their market; 30 percent of dinner patrons and 26 percent of lunch customers at fast food places are young adults.⁵

Young Adults Surveyed in Twin Cities

A questionnaire, developed to analyze whether young adults are interested in nutrition when eating at fast food restaurants, asked how

concerned they are about specific nutrition factors related to health when dining at fast food places. The instrument was pre-tested with 15 young adult students and found to be acceptable without revisions.

Twelve Minnesota Twin Cities schools were selected from all the area schools offering classes for students in their early young adult years. This sample was selected for a number of reasons. First, test market figures reported by one of the nation's largest advertising agencies indicate the Twin Cities area is the most average, most nearly perfect microcosm in the entire United States.⁶ Second, a very high percentage of young adults in the Minnesota Twin Cities area attend school during their early young adult years.⁷ The administrator of each school was contacted and asked to participate in the study; five schools agreed. Participation required that teachers at each of the five schools request that their students complete the brief fast food questionnaire; 560 subjects or 65 percent of the students in their early young adult years at the five schools filled out the questionnaire. The sample was 47 percent male and 53 percent female.

Ten percent of the sample was currently on a special diet, 8 percent of males and 11 percent of females. A weight reducing diet was the special diet of 5 percent of the subjects, more female (8 percent of all female subjects) than male (3 percent of all male subjects). The special diets followed by the other 5 percent included diabetic, vegetarian, or athletic diets. Only males reported being on a special diet for athletic purposes. Fewer than 5 percent of the sample indicated being allergic to any foods or food ingredients.

Over half the students reported they had bought food from a fast food restaurant in the previous seven days. Few (6 percent) indicated they bought food more than five times at a fast food restaurant in the previous seven days. About an equal number said they bought no food (20 percent) and food 3-5 times (22 percent) at a fast food restaurant in the last seven days. The number of times males and females reported buying food in the previous seven days was similar. Males reported slightly more fast food purchases than females.

Subjects indicated dinner was the meal they ate most frequently at fast food places, followed by snacks, lunch, and breakfast. Males and females reported eating the four meals at fast food places about equally as frequent, with males reporting slightly greater frequency at all meals.

Nutrition Makes A Difference

Subjects were asked whether they would reduce the number of times they visited fast food places if they discovered their sandwich and main course selections were low in one factor associated with good nutrition or high in five factors associated with poor nutrition (see Table 1); more than half responded negatively in each case, regardless of sex. Yet, when subjects were asked if they would eat at fast food restaurants more frequently if menu selections were offered that were low in four factors associated with poor nutrition and high in one factor associated

with good nutrition (see Table 2), about half responded positively in each case. Further analysis revealed large differences between males and females. Only about one-third of the male subjects said they would eat at fast food restaurants more frequently if menu items were made more nutritious, compared with two-thirds of the female subjects.

When asked to rank how important (very important, important, not important) convenience, cost, nutrition, and taste are when subjects chose to eat at a fast food restaurant (see Table 3), more total subjects considered taste very important than they did convenience, cost, or nutrition. Convenience and cost were identified as very important by slightly less than half the total subjects, regardless of sex. Few subjects said nutrition was very important in choosing to eat at a fast food restaurant. It was, however, ranked important by more subjects than not important. Female subjects ranked nutrition very important and important more often than male subjects and not important less often than male subjects. While almost three-fourths of the female subjects ranked nutrition important or very important, only slightly more than half of the male subjects ranked it likewise.

The study showed the majority of young adults would not visit fast food places less frequently if they discovered fast food menu items were poor in nutrition. Further, young adults said when they choose to eat at fast food places, they rate nutrition less important than taste, cost, and convenience. These findings suggest fast food operators will be able to continue attracting young adults to their restaurants even if they don't improve the nutritional value of their menu items.

However, the results of this study also showed the majority of young adults said they would eat more frequently at fast food places if they offered more nutritious menu items. While young adults didn't rate nutrition as important as taste, convenience, and cost when they chose to eat at fast food places, the majority rated it important or very important in their decision. This data suggests fast food operators may attract a bigger share of the young adult market by improving the nutritional value of their menu selections. At the same time, the data indicate the success of fast food operators offering nutritious menu items may depend on their ability to offer nutritious items that compare in taste, cost, and convenience with their current fast food menu items.

Operators may gain the most by marketing their nutritious menu items to young adult females. More young adult females than males said they would eat at fast food places more often if nutritious menu selections were offered. This included items that were low in calories, low in sugar, low in sodium, low in fat and cholesterol, or made from whole grains.

This study did not evaluate young adults' interest in menu items high in protein or vitamins. Menu items designed with these characteristics may also appeal to this age group, particularly to males. At this age there is high interest in athletics and physical fitness. It also did not evaluate young adults' interest in vegetarian selections or special menu items created for young adults with food allergies or diabetes.

However, there were few young adults on these special diets. Fast food operators may be able to accommodate these dietary needs with offerings created to meet other nutritional interests. For example, a menu item designed to be low in calories and contain no added sugar, such as fresh fruit on a skewer, may also appeal to young adults on diabetic diets.

Operators May Add Meals Gradually

One way operators may add nutritious items to their fast food menus is one meal at a time. Some operators have noticed their patrons are more concerned about nutrition when dining out at lunch than dinner. A study conducted by the National Restaurant Association also found that consumers are most interested in nutrition when making routine (i.e., business) versus non routine (i.e., social, fun) restaurant visits.⁹ Routine visits are more likely to be during breakfast and lunch than dinner. On this basis, young adults will probably be more concerned about the availability of nutritious menu items at fast food places during these two meal periods than during dinner.

Breakfast followed by lunch were also the meals young adults ate least often at fast food places. Lack of nutritious menu selections during these two meals may partially explain why young adults didn't eat these meals more frequently at fast food places. Offering more nutritious menu items may be what is needed to attract them to visit fast food places more often during these meal periods.

Items may be added to menus in the order of priority young adults gave them:

1. low in fat and cholesterol
2. low in calories
3. low in sugar
4. low in sodium
5. made from whole grains

However, it is likely operators will obtain a similarly good response regardless of in which order they add any of these types of nutritious items to their menus. There was little variance between the number of young adults who said they would eat more frequently at fast food places if items were offered low in fat and cholesterol versus low in calories, low in sugar, low in salt, or made from whole grains.

A description of how these nutrition factors can be translated into menu terms follows:

- **Fat or cholesterol.** Fat or cholesterol may be reduced by
 - cooking without added fat—broiling, roasting, steaming or poaching
 - cooking with polyunsaturated vegetable oils

- using lean meat, fish and poultry products
- trimming visible fat from meat before cooking
- offering cholesterol free egg substitutes, margarine, and low fat milk, cheeses and yogurt
- **Calories.** Calories may be reduced by
 - offering low fat and sugar menu items (see above and below)
 - serving reduced or low calories alternatives—salad dressings, sodas, gelatins
 - adding vegetable salads and side dishes
 - providing reduced size menu portions
 - giving sauces on the side when requested
- **Sugar.** Sugar may be reduced by
 - serving artificial sugar substitutes or items sweetened with them
 - enhancing the sweetness of recipes with vanilla, nutmeg or cinnamon
 - sweetening recipes with naturally occurring sugars such as undiluted fruit juice concentrate (frozen orange or apple juice, thawed) or fruit (ripe bananas or raisins)
 - using less sweetener in recipes
 - making fruit, fresh or canned without sugar, available for dessert
- **Sodium.** Sodium may be reduced by
 - using fresh rather than processed foods
 - seasoning menu items with herbs and spices
 - offering salt substitutes or herb and spice blends to flavor menu items
 - omitting or decreasing salt in recipes
 - allowing customers to salt menu items themselves
 - regulating the use of high sodium sauces as soy sauce, meat sauces, mustard, cooking wines, catsup, chili sauce, and commercial bouillon
 - serving reduced or low sodium menu items
 - cutting back on use of luncheon meats, ham, bacon, frankfurters, sausage and other smoked, pickled or salted foods
 - avoiding ingredients with Na or sodium listed on the label

- **Whole grains.** These may be increased by
 - adding more bran or whole grain cereals for breakfast
 - replacing white flour with whole wheat, whole meal, stone ground, cracked wheat or rye flour in recipes.
 - serving whole grain buns, bagels, bread, waffles, pastas, crackers, rices, and muffins

It is likely fast food operators will continue to attract the young adult market with items that are high in calories, fat, cholesterol, sodium, and sugar, like egg and sausage biscuits, hamburgers, French fries, and ice cream shakes. At the same time, it is likely fast food operators offering lighter, healthier items like whole grain bagels with light cream cheese, grilled chicken sandwiches, vegetable salads, and yogurt shakes, in addition, will attract a greater share of the young adult market.

Table 1
Effect of Poor Nutrition in Fast Food Main Course Items and Sandwiches on Restaurant Visits

	Percent		
	Males	Females	Total
High in fat or cholesterol			
decrease	29	50	41
not decrease	71	50	59
High in sodium			
decrease	22	37	30
not decrease	78	63	70
High in calories			
decrease	16	47	33
not decrease	84	53	67
High in chemical additives			
decrease	37	49	43
not decrease	63	51	57
High in sugar			
decrease	18	42	30
not decrease	82	58	70
Low in fiber			
decrease	18	29	24
not decrease	82	71	76

Table 2
Effect of Poor Nutrition in Fast Food Menu Items
on Restaurant Visits

	Percent		
	Males	Females	Total
Low in calories			
increase	31	77	56
not increase	69	23	44
Low in sugar			
increase	32	69	52
not increase	68	31	48
Low in sodium			
increase	35	65	51
not increase	65	35	49
Made from whole grains			
increase	35	60	48
not increase	65	40	52
Low in fat and cholesterol			
increase	41	73	58
not increase	59	27	42

Table 3
Importance of Four Factors When Choosing to Eat
at a Fast Food Restaurant

	Percent		
	Males	Females	Total
Convenience			
very important	48	44	45
important	43	50	47
not important	9	6	8
Cost			
very important	45	44	44
important	47	47	47
not important	8	9	9
Nutrition			
very important	18	22	20
important	34	51	43
not important	48	27	37
Taste			
very important	73	73	74
important	23	24	24
not important	2	3	2

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