

Opportunity For Restaurants, But Numbers Are Hard To Measure

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It is not precisely correct to say that consumers have rarely purchased “better-for-you dishes.” In fact, every day consumers make what they believe to be healthy choices, purchasing fish rather than meat, grilled or baked food, rather than fried, and ordering salads.

What is true is that consumers rarely buy food in restaurants that is marketed as “healthy.” In fact, chains that create special “healthy” menus are typically giving the kiss of death to these items as the consumer reads such a menu as proclaiming, “Here are the items that don’t taste good enough to be on our regular menu.”

So if the restaurant industry is serious about being part of the answer to the obesity crisis, it has to create new categories of “healthy” foods that taste good. It has to use the proper ingredients and the proper culinary techniques to create food that is both good enough to be featured as part of the regular menu and healthy at the same time.

If consumers have actually shifted the way they define healthy to “fresh” and “natural” from “low fat” and “low calorie,” this makes the marketing job easier, but it is not clear that it will really help in the battle against obesity. The problem is that calories and carbohydrates are real things that can be measured. Fresh and natural are merely marketing slogans. In many cases, say frozen seafood, the quality can sometimes be better than fresh.

A focus on fresh sure will help the fresh fruit and vegetable industry, and certainly many will prefer the taste and flavor of fresh fruits and vegetables, but there is just no indication that, say, pizza made with fresh produce toppings, rather than canned or frozen produce toppings, is somehow “healthier” or more likely to reduce obesity in the population at large.

The wish is father to the thought, and so it is nice that so many consumers think “restaurants can offer healthy food in a way that will still taste good.” It is also great to know that “more than nine out of 10 consumers agree that menu items containing a

full serving of vegetables are more healthy.” But it is unclear whether these beliefs are new. For generations, mothers have told their kids to eat their vegetables, so for a very long time people have thought vegetables are healthy. So this can be true without leading to any change in consumption.

Equally the buzz on vegetarianism and flexitarianism is real, but some of it is labeling. People have often alternated meals, with one night being soup night, another spaghetti, fish another night, chicken still another. We don’t really have any quantifiable evidence that these eating trends are actually boosting fresh produce sales. One can be a vegetarian and just eat a lot of pizza and pasta.

Equally, although it is interesting to know that consumers tell us that 18 percent, or nearly one out of five meals, do not contain meat, it is not clear if that is a big change or any change at all. People have been eating bowls of cereal or pancakes or French toast or eggs for breakfast for a very long time. A grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup for lunch is hardly an innovation.

Sometimes our own marketing efforts change the numbers. For example, that the number of people who tell us they consume “local” foods at least once a week is up from 47 percent to 56 percent in the past two years may tell us less about eating habits than about the number of retailers and restaurants promoting food as local.

Today many retailers only sell organic versions of low velocity items. It is just not worth stocking an extra SKU. So many consumers wind up buying organic, but it may not be because they are really looking for it.

Back in 2010, the National Restaurant Association, the International Foodservice Distributors Association and the Produce Marketing Association made a commitment to double produce usage in foodservice by year 2020. One problem: There is no baseline number from which to measure progress. So, in the absence of meaningful data, people have started talking a lot about menu mentions. It is, of course, nice to know that menu mentions of produce have

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increased by 13 percent since 2009, but it is not clear what this means. It may just indicate a change in the way menus are worded without indicating higher usage of produce at all.

Equally, while noting increased mention of specific items on the menus, such as sweet potatoes, beets, kale, avocados and broccoli, is intriguing and may speak to culinary trends, it tells us precious little about the total produce purchases at restaurants and even less about consumption. If kale replaces creamed spinach, that may not change total produce procurement. Adding broccoli to kids’ menus is exciting, but often it is an option and the kids still choose fries; and even if the kids must take the broccoli, until the children eat it, it is not consumption.

The kernel of really good news here is the broader idea that restaurant eating has become so common that people are no longer generally viewing it as an indulgence occasion. That opens the door for selling more healthy and delicious food. The challenge is for the produce industry to partner with chefs and restaurants to make sure the offerings are as delicious as they are healthy.

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