

CONSUMER CHOICE: NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION ON MENUS

The Mystery Dining Company sought the opinions of 300 restaurant-going consumers to find out their thoughts on the inclusion of nutritional information on menus.

Results included:

- 63% of consumers surveyed said they regularly check the calorie information on products that they purchase to consume at home and 71% said that they would be likely to look at nutritional information on menus when eating out of home some or most of the time.
- Three quarters of people also said they felt that they paid more attention to nutritional information now than they did five years ago.
- 64% agreed that food outlets should be made to disclose nutritional information on menus (this is up from 58% 12 months earlier).
- 68% said it would impact what they ordered when eating out (down from 75%) and 51% said that they would change their ordering behaviour if nutritional information was included on a drinks' menu.
- When asked how the nutritional information would change their purchasing behaviour 44% said they would choose dishes with fewer calories per course (previously 49%) and 27% said that they would opt for the main meal they wanted but forgo a starter or dessert to reduce calorie intake (up from 24%). 18% said they would order what they wanted regardless.
- 43% said they thought nutritional information should be included on all menus and menu boards, while 39% said they would like to have an option of menus with and without nutritional information. When previously asked these numbers were 33% and 44% suggesting that consumers are becoming more open to having these details automatically disclosed. 15% said they would prefer to look online, which remained unchanged from last year.

- Respondents were asked what they would do if presented with a situation where the menu item they most wanted was 2,000 calories, while most of the items on the menu were between 750 and 1400 calories:
 - 22% said they would order the dish without hesitation
 - 29% said they would think twice but still order the dish
 - 27% said they would choose something with fewer calories and feel virtuous
 - 9% said they would choose something with fewer calories and feel irritated
 - 9% said that as a rule they look for healthier options so would not have wanted the dish in the first place.

Steven Pike, director at The Mystery Dining Company said:

“Consumers do appear to be warming to the idea of having nutritional information included on menus – we’ve seen increases in the number of respondents who support the move to make it compulsory to make details available to customers, as well as those who are happy to have a blanket-style approach to communicating the information, rather than a more optional approach as favoured by the majority a year earlier.

“I think many restaurateurs, especially chains and those whose trade centres around everyday eating as opposed to special occasions, have already recognised the need to offer lighter or healthier options in order to appeal to a growing percentage of their customers.

“The widespread introduction of nutritional information could have a serious impact on restaurateurs – both in terms of the time needed to ensure details are accurate and the cost required to reprint menus. It would be hugely detrimental to the industry if chefs no longer had the flexibility to change menus on a regular basis and independent operators had to become more dependant on pre-made products which were supplied with nutritional information, rather than cooking from scratch.

“Getting the right balance in a menu will be one of the biggest challenges moving forward; as we have seen from these survey results, the presence of nutritional information will have an impact on purchasing habits. A venue’s most popular menu item may suffer from a 50% decrease in orders if it is perceived to be the most

fattening thing on the menu. Likewise, with many consumers looking to balance their own diets, if nutritional information was included, and I expect we will see customers looking to tighten their belts when it comes to ordering starters and desserts.

“Value for money is generally perceived as the most important thing for consumers when they are eating out. I think that if this is combined with people being more conscientious about their menu choices, operators will need to look at how their menus are structured and the types of dishes that are on offer. Starters, desserts and side orders may suffer in popularity, and therefore impact on profit margins, however, dishes that can be shared amongst two or more people may be embraced as they are seen as a way to ration calorie intake without compromising on the eating out experience.”