

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THE OPPORTUNITIES TO EAT MORE FOOD, MORE OFTEN, ARE GREATER THAN EVER BEFORE. BUT A NEW ACADEMIC PAPER AND BOOK SHOW THAT TACTICS CAN BE EMPLOYED TO AVOID MINDLESS OVEREATING. BY JANE BAINBRIDGE

Consuming food used to be a simple matter of sustenance and survival, but now it is political and big business. As nations across the world – especially the developed world, led by the US – grapple with an obesity epidemic, eating has become the focus of attention for everyone from governments to the media, and from food manufacturers to health professionals.

As more people consume more calories than they need, and so much of the over-eating debate focus has been on the type and quantity of food consumed, researchers are now pointing to another factor that must be considered – the importance of environment. By ‘environment’ they mean everything from who you’re eating with to the size of the plates and cups used.

Pierre Chandon, L’Oréal chaired professor of marketing – innovation and creativity, and director, INSEAD Social Science Research Centre, says: “If you ask people why they overeat, most say it is hunger or emotions. They overestimate the impact of hunger and underestimate the impact of the environment. All the things we take as cues to know if it’s appropriate to eat, those norms – social or personal – influence what we eat more than we realise.”

Mindless overeating is taking place within a context where food is more affordable, attractive and available than ever before. “The solution is to change our habits, so we can deal with an environment like that,” says Chandon.

He points to changes in society that make it harder for us to monitor our hunger and consumption – in particular, the number of eating occasions, larger portion sizes, and what he calls the “health halo”, where foods claim credentials such as ‘low fat’ and ‘light’.

Many of the social norms that used to limit our consumption – such as not eating on the move – have been abandoned. “It’s the

omnivore’s dilemma – there is so much opportunity to eat all the time. It’s almost impossible to go somewhere without sipping something. In some countries – such as Japan, which still has the lowest obesity rates in the world – it’s taboo to walk and eat,” says Chandon.



Part of the problem, he says, is that humans can’t detect small changes in what we eat – either in terms of too much food or too little – and this effect gets worse the larger the quantity.

“An extra 100 calories per day means 3kg in three years, more or less – and 100 calories is nothing,” says Chandon. “Our body is so good and efficient that even a slight difference can make a big difference.”

Chandon collaborated on a recent paper with Brian Wansink – the John Dyson professor of marketing, and the director of the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University, in Ithaca, NY. Wansink has published several books on the subject of overeating, his most recent being *Slim by Design: Mindless Eating Solutions For Everyday Life*, with the corresponding website slimbydesign.org.

While so much of the obesity crisis has focused on policy changes, both men believe it is possible to meet the twin objectives of getting people to eat better and of companies making profits.

“There are many win-win solutions. When I first met Pierre, in 1995, I was working on pack-size research, and I came up with the idea of a 100-calorie pack,” says Wansink. “I presented that to companies. Initially they said it was crazy, because it wasn’t part of their mindset. Nabisco finally called me back and – once it was convinced – 100-calorie packs came out within three years.”

“Our goal,” he adds, “is to make it a consumer movement that tells companies, ‘there are easy things you can do to make more money, and I can be happy’. It doesn’t take laws – it takes enough consumers saying what they want.”

Chandon says there is an assumption that the driver for food companies is to sell more food, but that this is wrong – their aim is to make money. “Typically, the easiest way to make money is with food high in salt, sugar and fat, because that’s what people like – and highly processed food is cheap. But if you find a way to sell less for more – [such as to] downsize portion size – how do you do it in a way that’s less conspicuous? One simple trick is to elongate [the pack]. You can reduce the size by 25%, but elongate and people won’t notice; you still tell people the right amount, but that’s all it needs, because people select mindlessly.”

Wansink argues that – as decisions around eating are affected by so many factors – people can focus on some specific, do-able, scalable solutions that can help them to avoid mindless eating.

“There are basically five areas in our food radius where we make decisions about what we eat: our home; two or three restaurants we go to most frequently; where we shop most often; where we work; and where our kids go to school,” he claims.

“By coming up with specific things that can be done in these areas, all of a sudden that’s do-able.”

The article *Slim by design: Redirecting the accidental drivers of mindless overeating* is published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. ■

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What people
think, feel
and do.

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