National Menu Labeling: What’s Up? What’s Next

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Objectives

At the end of this presentation, you will be able to:

- Describe the history of menu labeling, the basics of the proposed National Menu Labeling Regulation and the results of the current menu labeling literature
- Explain why there is variability in restaurant reporting and give examples of what restaurants do to control for it
- Summarize the impact of false information and negative media on the consumer
- Identify the nutrition expert’s role in menu labeling and generate positive messages for communicating on this topic
Agenda

- **Section 1:** Why is menu labeling important and what does the regulation entail?

- **Section 2:** What do consumers think about menu labeling? And what can we learn from published literature to date?

- **Section 3:** Knowing education and positive messaging are important to the success of menu labeling, how do we talk about this?

- **Section 4:** Why is there variability of calories reported vs. calories served in restaurant meals? And what impact will it have on the consumer if we sensationalize this reality?

- **Section 5:** What is the role of the food/nutrition communicator?
Section 1:
Why is menu labeling important and what does the regulation entail?
“...people need nutritional information to manage their weight and reduce the risk of, or manage, heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure, which are leading causes of death, disability, and high health care costs; it is difficult for consumers to exercise personal responsibility and limit their intake of calories at restaurants, given the limited availability of nutrition information at the point of ordering in restaurants...”
The regulations are not final, but based on the proposed regulation we can expect:

- Calorie disclosure on menus, menu boards, and drive thru menu boards for restaurants and similar retail food establishments with 20 or more locations
- “Calories” or “Cal” posted next to the declared calories
- A statement of suggested daily calorie intake
  - “A 2,000 calorie diet is used as the basis for general nutrition advice; however individual needs may vary.”
- Nutrition information for other nutrients (fat, sodium, etc.) must be available upon request
- Preempts all state and local menu labeling requirements
Areas of uncertainty include:

- Definition of a “similar retail food establishment”
- Inclusion of alcoholic beverages
- Definition of compliance (e.g. “reasonable basis” standard)
- Direction on disclosure of the information (ranges, averages, etc)

We anticipate the final regulation will be released some time this year
Section 2:
What do consumers think about menu labeling? And what can we learn from published literature to date?
Most consumers say they want calories on the menu

- The majority of consumers have positive perceptions of menu labeling
- Most consumers say they will use the calorie information when posted

“**I usually try to choose healthier options. The labeling will enable me to have a better idea of the calorie count.**”

“The more informed we are, the better choices we can make. I see this as very positive.”

“I think it’s a great regulation. When I go to the restaurant I am never sure what to buy on the menu because I don’t have the information available.”
Based on a review of the literature, results are mixed on whether calorie labeling has an influence on immediate food choice.

- Approximately ½ of studies showed a positive impact; ½ showed no impact
- Barriers to usage includes confusion and a general lack of understanding of calorie values
- Nutrition information is most impactful when consumers are provided with the context of how calories and nutrients fit into their overall diet

Education will be critical to help consumers understand and use the calorie on menus.
Section 3:
If education is important to the success of menu labeling, how do we talk about this?
How do we talk to consumers about calories on the menu?

- We conducted 4 focus groups to understand consumer perceptions of menu labeling and evaluate consumer reactions to different response messages.

- Each focus group was comprised of six consumers who met the following criteria:
  - Men and women, ages 25 to 60
  - Annual household income of $30K or more
  - Have eaten at least three times in a casual dining restaurant within the past three month

- We used a “rapid response” technique
Example 1

**ORIGINAL**

Knowing how many calories you need and how many calories you eat each day is an important step in managing your health. Eating more calories than you need can lead to weight gain and other health problems.

**REVISED**

Knowing how many calories you need is an important step in taking charge of your health.
Example 2

ORIGINAL

Calories are like a budget - you could only eat so many in a day. Knowing the amount of calories in your food will help you “spend” your daily calorie budget wisely.

REVISED
Example 3

ORIGINAL

A simple rule of thumb is that most people need 2,000 calories or less a day. To find out how many calories you need, visit www.choosemyplate.gov.

REVISED

Although the number of calories people need varies, a simple rule of thumb is that most people need 2,000 calories or less a day. More information about your individual needs is available at www.choosemyplate.gov.
Example 4

ORIGINAL

The calories on restaurant menus can help you choose a meal that is right for you, whether you feel like indulging or choosing something lighter – it is up to you. If you want to choose something more indulgent, you can take half of it home in a to-go container.

REVISED

Calories on the menu can help you choose a meal that is right for you.
What we learned:

- Keep messages **POSITIVE**: Messages that preach the consequences of too many calories or contain negative words and phrases will be ignored.

- Emphasize the **YOU**: Everyone wants to feel in control, so remind them that having calories on the menu puts them in the driver’s seat.

- Provide a **RULE OF THUMB**: The general guideline of 2,000 daily calories provides context consumers need.

- Remind them of their **RESOURCES**: … but don’t be too ‘bossy’ about when and how to use them.

- Respect the **OCCASION**: Dining out at a “sit down” restaurant is usually a special occasion—analogies that sound like too much work (like label reading or budgeting) aren’t likely to be successful.
Section 4:
Why is there variability of calories reported vs. calories served in restaurant meals? And what impact will it have on the consumer if we sensationalize this reality?
Why is their variability between calories reported and calories served?

- **Extreme variability is not okay** … but some variability is to be expected
- Our meals are **handcrafted and made to order**— unlike a highly-controlled assembly line of a manufacturing plant (like packaged foods) … and even unlike “fast food” (which is more about assembly than cooking)

**Ingredients:** Even at its most basic form, many single ingredient foods are not exactly alike.

**Nutrition analysis:** Any food analysis – even when done in a lab – is not an exact science.

**Food preparation:** From cooking to portioning, preparing hand-crafted, made-to-order meals can also contribute to variability.
Imagine …

- Making a pot of stew for your family…
- Making chocolate chip cookies for your colleagues in the office…
- Cutting a fresh piece of fish to serve to your guest …
- Selecting sweet potatoes that are all roughly the same size …
What do we do to control variability and ensure accurate nutrition reporting?

- Approved suppliers
- Clearly defined product specifications
- Rigorous nutrition analysis process, including both chemical and calculated
- 5 new full-time employees
- Standardized recipe cards
- Extensive training for restaurant staff
- Restaurants equipped with scales, spoodles and other measuring devices
- Line & alley checks
What happens if we sensationalize the variability in nutrition reporting?

Beware! Calories on Menus

Calorie Counts: How Accurate Are They?

When Nutrition Labels Lie

The New York Times
COUNTING OF CALORIES ISN’T ALWAYS ACCURATE

The Boston Globe
CALORIE COUNTS FOUND LACKING
We fielded an online study to find out

We exposed two groups of consumers to one of two news messages: either ‘positive’ or negative.

Negative Coverage (Shown to ~250 people)

“...You can’t trust everything you read, especially if it is calories on a menu. Restaurants are serving up false information that could sabotage your diet. *”

Positive Coverage (Shown to ~250 people)

“...The calories restaurants report can never be exact every time, but they are accurate and provide consumers with valuable information that can inform their ordering decision. *”

Measured Intent to Use Menu Calorie Labeling
Negative messages = negative impact

- Negative coverage significantly decreases the intent to use the information
- Consumers who heard positive messages said they were 2.5 times MORE LIKELY to use the calorie information they see on the menu

GROUP OF 250

41% Are less likely to use menu calorie labeling

GROUP OF 250

50% Are more likely to use menu calorie labeling
Some variability in the final prepared dish is unavoidable, which means a little variability in the calories listed on menus is to be expected.

**The calorie information on menus is reliable and valuable in guiding a consumer’s choice.**

Consumers need help understanding and using the calories they see on the menu. Focusing on the potential variances will not benefit public health goals and may make some consumers less likely to use the information.
Section 5:
What role can food and nutrition communicators play in menu labeling?
Food and nutrition educators can:

- Help consumers understand what calories are and why they are important
- Teach consumers how many calories they need each day, so that the calories they see on the menu have context
- Show consumers how to use the calorie information to select a meal that works for their needs on that occasion
- Educate consumers and the media on why some variability in calorie reporting is to be expected
- Ensure you have appropriate training, accurate ingredient and recipe/sub-recipe information, quality control measures in place for ingredients/menu items, and adequate assumptions to do calculated (software) analysis for restaurants (this is complex work!)
In Summary

Adding calorie content to menus is an important step to empower Americans when they dine out.

Consumers will benefit most from this information if we teach them how to use it through positive, relevant messages.
Resources for You

http://www.nutrition411.com/education-materials/menu-labeling

- **Restaurant Reality**: a closer look at the inherent variability in restaurant food
- **Calorie Confusion**: a review of the literature
- **Mixed Messages**: exec summary of the media study by Sonar Strategies
- **Communicating Calories**: consumer tested messages about menu labeling
- **Turnkey media toolkit** that provides idea starters for communication

Also:

- For an overview of FDA Proposed Labeling Requirements:
  http://1.usa.gov/1a6Gp9f
- www.restaurant.org
QUESTIONS?

Thank you for your time!
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- **Benefits of membership**
  - Professional Member - $190/year
  - Associate Member - $95/year
  - Student Member - $60/year
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- Free access to live and recorded webinars
- Deepest discount to attend the SNEB Annual Conference
- Membership in an SNEB division
- Connection to other professionals through SNEB listserv
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