

Companion Shoppers – An Experiential and Educational Public Health Outreach

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Purpose

The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss the underutilization of public health nutrition educators in the retail market and to suggest possible venues for expanding their role.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated consumers with high nutrition knowledge are more likely to purchase products with a higher nutritional value, while consumers with lower nutrition knowledge are more likely to purchase products of lower nutritional value (Burton, 1994). High nutrition knowledge has been found to be related to higher levels of accuracy in identifying products that contained more than the recommended amount of nutrients associated with health problems (Burton, 1994). Yet even knowledgeable food shoppers may misinterpret and overgeneralize when comparing nutrient content claims on labels (Andrews, Netemeyer, & Burton, 1998). Overall, while food labels are an important step in helping to educate and guide the public, consumers may ignore or not understand food labels and claims without training (Burton, 1994). Nutrition knowledge has been positively related with educational achievement (Fusillo, 1977). Nutrition knowledge, food beliefs and reported shopping behavior were found to be positive and linear (Fusillo, 1977; Cluss et al., 2013). Lower socioeconomic and older age groups tend to be the highest risk groups in that they tend to have the poorest nutrition knowledge (Fusillo, 1977; Moynihan et al., 2007; Cluss et al., 2013). Shopper's comprehension and subsequent application of nutrition labels could be enhanced with the use of interpretational aids (Cowburn, 2004). An interpretational aid or educated companion shopper, could help customers evaluate the nutritional make-up of foods, including those without labels, and appraise their role in the overall diet (Cowburn, 2004).

From the marketing perspective research has long recognized the role store employees play in affecting the quality of the shopping experience (Lindsey-Mullikin & Munger, 2011). Store employees have opportunities for building relationships with customers. The interactions between store employees and customers can impact customer perceptions of the organization (Gremier & Gwinner, 2008). The goal of these relationships is to enhance customer satisfaction

and improve loyalty to the store. It has been demonstrated that reference group members' influence purchases (Miller, 1998). Companion shoppers are typically shoppers who are acquainted with the customer such as friends, family members and co-workers. The companion shopper can have pronounced influence on the shopping experience. They have the unique capability to interact with the consumer at the point of purchase thus providing either a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down" to the consumer's shopping decisions. They can provide the last input before a purchase takes place and can guide the actions of the consumer (Lindsey-Mullikin & Munger, 2011). While First Lady Michelle Obama has made food literacy a top priority on a national level, a 2012 Consumer attitudes survey towards food safety, nutrition and health presented by the International Food Information Council Foundation found that 52 percent of Americans indicate that doing their own income taxes would be easier than knowing how to eat a healthy diet (Foodinsight, 2012). Findings from the 1970's suggest that consumer nutrition education must be improved if consumers are to benefit from the efforts of nutritional labeling. (Fusillo, 1997). While many nutrition label changes have taken effect since the 1970's, research demonstrates the public is still confused.

This leaves a wide open door for the area of Nutrition Education. As Public Health Nutritionists look to the future, there are untapped areas in the retail industry. In light of technology and time constraints that accompany fast-paced lives, many grocery stores are beginning to offer a variety of shopping services including on-line grocery stores and on-line shopping services. High value is placed on convenience shopping when it comes to millennials (AlixPartners, LL. Jefferies & Company Inc., 2012). While most of these services advertise convenience other benefits also exist. For Baby Boomers Nutrition Education is the bridge that spans the gap between the doctor's orders and the grocery store shopping cart, and for millennials it is the missing link between their willingness to pay for fresh and healthy food (Hoffman, 2012) and their expectation of convenience through use of social media and other channels (Peregrin, 2015). Employing Public Health Nutritionists as companion shoppers to engage on-line consumers and fill orders is a unique way stores can separate themselves from the competition. As suggested in previous research, interpretational aids, such as a public health nutritionists, could help consumers evaluate the nutritional content of foods (Cowburn, 2004). The Public Health Nutritionist would complement the roles store employees play in affecting the quality of the shopping experience. They would create an opportunity for building relationships with the customer. Positive relationships impact customer perceptions and enhance customer

satisfaction. While this improves store loyalty with baby boomers this approach also allows stores to tailor products purchased to specific dietary needs and have a general health-focus which is important to millennials (AlixPartners, LLP, Jefferies & Company, Inc. 2014).

Another untapped area in retail industry is as a face to face, in-store companion shopper. As research has already reported, the companion shopper has the unique capability to interact with the consumer at the point of purchase providing the last input before a purchase takes place (Lindsey-Mullikin & Munger, 2011). The educated companion can interpret nutrition facts labels and health claims with shoppers, help identify various healthful options among food groups, explain ingredients and even offer samples of new food items the shopper normally would not try (Ruhs, 2015). Ideally, the Nutrition Educator would pair-up with those with low nutrition knowledge or those whose physicians have given them dietary changes they don't understand. The nutrition educator could be a positive influence at a time when decisions are made. Marketing research suggests a priority for retail stores interested in attracting new patrons should be designing a low-stress shopping atmosphere (Baker, 2002). An educated shopping companion could significantly decrease the stress the general public and consumers feel when trying to decide how to eat healthier.

Another alternative to individual shopping companions is group grocery store tours. Grocery store tours encourage active participation and are cost-effective nutrition interventions facilitated by nutrition educators. Tours provides structure, ensure appropriate nutritional content, and empower customers to realize healthy food selections (Baic & Thompson, 2007). Studies show improved nutrition knowledge and positive behavior changes for grocery store tour participants (Nikolaus, Muzaffar, Nickols-Richardson, 2016; Escaron, Meinen, Nitzke, Martinez-Donate, 2013; Baic & Thompson, 2007; Lafferty, Marquart, Reicks, 2006; Crawford & Kalina, 1993; Silzer, Sheeska, Tomasik, Woolcott, 1994). Tours encourage active sharing and input from participants while providing opportunities to ask questions and sample new food items. Establishments that offer tours can promote themselves in a positive light in the public's eye as they demonstrate their concern for public health by being a reliable source of nutrition information. As such these tours are not only beneficial to customers who desire to make healthier food choices, but also to the supermarket and the food industry. Data show consumers purchase healthier foods especially when product availability and affordability are combined with target marketing and nutrition education such as grocery store tours (Escaron, Meinen, Nitzke, Martinez-Donate, 2013).

Millennial shoppers have been found to be both “vocal consumers,” tending to influence the purchases of others, and more likely than previous generations to seek out desired specialty food items from a range of retail locations (Fromm, 2014, AlixPartners, LL. Jefferies & Company Inc. 2012). As a result, perhaps more grocery stores should accompany the long and growing list of schools, corporations, health insurance companies, food manufacturers and health care companies who employ nutritionists due to the rising demand for help with designing healthy menus, recipe substitution suggestions, helping to manage diets, leading grocery store tours, interpreting food labels, defining ingredients and assisting customers in making healthier choices. Many people indicate they want to eat better, feasibly all they are lacking is a nutrition educator to bridge the gap; a companion to walk beside them show them how to fill their grocery cart with the essential, nutrient dense foods.

In the meantime, offering nutrition students the opportunity to educate shoppers and facilitate tours is a creative way to engage students in real-life, hands-on activities that make a pronounced impact on all involved. Many nutrition students are, after all, millennials themselves and in tune with the food movement and recipe-based shopping currently trending among millennials (AlexPartners, LLP, Jefferies & company, Inc. 2014). They are comfortable using their smart phones, health and shopping apps and are often well versed in the various social media networks. Partnering with local grocery store chains and supporting their efforts to impact public health while increasing retail business in the form of healthy food choices creates a win-win situation. The supermarket can truly be a meaningful learning laboratory. When combined with interesting and active educational strategies that effectively function to overcome the confusion and overwhelmed feelings that plague many shopping for health, the retail food environment – nutrition educator duo can become an additional line of defense in preventing chronic disease and keeping healthy people healthy.

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