Chapter 15

Meat Myths and Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how marketing uses the creation and perpetuation of myths to reinforce demand for meat amongst mainstream consumers. It explores advertising misinformation including with regards the place of meat in our culture, its nutritional value, its association with affluence, masculinity and the benefits of small-scale production. The power of marketing is within the context of whether marketing has a role to play in decreasing rather than perpetuating meat-consumption.

INTRODUCTION

Myths in society, whether related to food or any other aspects of everyday life, convey particular messages. Associated with notions of morality, heroes or natural phenomena, they are stories enlivened by people who accept them as valid and meaningful guides of behaviour. Myths can be used to justify and guide beliefs and cultural practices. This acceptance may be society-wide or limited to particular groups.

Consumer behaviour is as influenced by myths as any other aspects of life and this produces a variety of conscious or unconscious responses and decisions often expressing particular worldviews, values and lifestyles. According to Geertz (in Chernus, 2012, n.p.), a myth says: “because the world is the way it is, living as we do (or ought to) is uniquely satisfying and fulfilling”.

Myths often contain elements that are both true and false blending fiction with empirical facts. The more truth they hold, the more convincing they are, the harder they are to contest, and therefore the more influence they have (Chernus, 2012). Marketing often contributes to both the establishing and reaffirming of myths and in so doing, encourage certain actions that become part of accepted normative thoughts and behaviours. Consumers may think that advertising is harmless and appealing only to some. However encouragement to perform certain actions, misinformation and myths repeated often enough become part of the accepted norm and steer certain behaviours.

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This chapter looks at marketing myths related to meat consumption. Dispelling such messages is important not only for the benefit of the individual consumer but also for the collective good because of the heavy social and ecological footprint meat consumption and production have. Through consumer behaviour, marketing myths assume a physical reality that impacts human health, social wellbeing and the natural environment. This chapter analyses several popular meat myths created or exploited by the marketing industry, including: “We were meant to eat meat”; “Meat is good for you”; “Real men eat meat”; “Meat is part of our culture”; “Meat is affordable” and “Organic meat is much better”.

**MYTH 1: “WE WERE MEANT TO EAT MEAT”**

Hunting, domestication, killing animals, socialising and eating meat in many forms have been important components of human progress (Smil, 2002; Pobiner cited in Kasper, 2013) including our intellectual and physical growth. Scientific evidence suggests that meat consumption may have contributed to our evolutionary heritage and is linked to key characteristics that have made us human mammals with larger brains, smaller guts and developed language (Smil, 2013b; Choi, 2012; Dominguez-Rodrigo et al., 2012). Smil (2013a, n.p.) explains: “Larger brains benefited from consuming high-quality proteins in meat-containing diets, and, in turn, hunting and killing of large animals, butchering of carcasses and sharing of meat have inevitably contributed to the evolution of human intelligence… and socializing”. The ability to secure meat played a major role in human evolution. With the domestication of livestock, hunting was gradually replaced by the planned slaughter of livestock (Burket, 1983). Cooking allowed humans to develop more sophisticated tastes for meat. Nowadays 70 billion animals are slaughtered each year to be consumed by 7 billion humans.

In the contemporary industrialised world we have a very simple reason to eat meat – because this is what we’ve been taught to do. As Joy explains: “We do not need meat to survive or even to be healthy... We eat animals simply because it is what we have always done, and because we like the way they taste” (Joy, 2011, p. 29).

The large numbers of animals raised to support these dietary habits are putting enormous stress on the environmental limits of the planet and changing its ecological balance. Researchers are increasingly calling for reduction of meat consumption, promotion of more rational meat eating (Smil, 2013a, 2013b) and flexitarian diets (Raphaely & Marinova, 2014; Verain, Dagevos & Antonides, 2015). This is not a simple task as, in addition to habit and socialisation, marketers use the interrelatedness of human evolution with eating animals to further lure and guide consumers in the direction of high meat intake.

Meat-eating behaviour is a habit developed throughout the years passed to children not only by socialisation – including parents, friends and schooling - but also reinforced by advertising. Meat myths are prominent among the cluttered messages of contemporary food marketing whether it tries to build up, change or expand present or future habits and consumer preferences. It relies on our willingness to adopt, or reject, certain behaviours. Samuel Johnson is credited with the words: “The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken” (Esar, 1968, p. 363). The historical truth that humans had to eat meat for their survival no longer applies but the message continues to be used in marketing and it will take tremendous effort for the chains of the habit to be broken.
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