Chapter 7
Good Treats: Eating Out not Just for Joy but also for Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

With economic development in countries like India comes an increasing appetite to eat out, and, as a consequence, more prevalent obesity. Eating out does not have to bring joy at the cost of wellbeing. Prosperity in India does not have to lead to obesity, as it has in the United States with 62% of its people being diagnosed as clinically obese. Suggesting a balance between hedonism and personal care, in this chapter, the authors identify what motivates people, restaurant patrons in particular, to find this balance. Using research on decision-making in behavioral economics, theories of motivation and perspectives in positive psychology, they identify alternative ways for consumers to achieve this balance—and for service providers to enable them to do so. Based on the idea that good business, ethical and caring business, enables stable and growing markets, the authors advocate that restaurant managers market their businesses as providing not just treats but good treats! The recommendation, they explain, is even more pertinent for emerging economies than it is for developed economies.

INTRODUCTION

Food and Wellbeing

In the United States 60 million adults, 20 years and older, are obese. Nine million children, 6 to 19 years, are overweight. Obesity causes diabetes, hypertension, cancer, heart disease and sleep apnea. A positive sign that this epidemic may be mitigating is that among preschool, 2 to 4 years, low-income children obesity rates may have stabilized to about 14.5% (Get America Fit Foundation, n.d.). India owns a quarter of the world’s hunger. Preventing malnutrition and starvation is the priority; preventing obesity is not. With a fast clip economic growth rate, relative to the United States and the rest of the developed world,
the epidemic of obesity and its accompaniment, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, is approaching India. Growing urbanization, with it the lack of physical activity, and growing prices on fruits and vegetables forecasts growing obesity (Ard et al., 2007; Aubrey, 2012). There is little reason to wait for obesity to become an epidemic before taking any action.

India has a rapidly growing middle class. Those that are moving into the middle class, thanks to urban migration, better jobs, a better economy, begin to adopt the habits of their new class. The middle class certainly favors eating out more than the class lower by one level in income. Beyond this, there is an increasing trend to eat out among the middle class. According to consumer outlook, an annual survey of 10,000 consumers, over half of the urban middle class eats out once a month or more while 30% eat out twice a month or more. Eating out is 7% of consumption expenses while entertainment is only 1.5% (Bamzai & Dangor, 2005). Restaurants constitute a very large part of the service industry in India and have a strong growth potential.

Common advice to overweight and obese Americans by increasingly frustrated doctors is cut back on eating out. It has to be the first thing you do, they say, even before you begin eating more fruits and vegetables and become less sedentary. Why is eating out so closely linked with bad eating? Eating out is a treat, just like watching a movie is a treat, watching a sporting event live is a treat and taking a walk by the seaside is a treat. While walking by the seaside is a “good treat”, gives us pleasure and gives us good health, eating out seems to be, more often than not, considered a “bad treat”—gives us pleasure at the cost of health. If so, should we not be thinking about converting this service offering into something good?

Ever since customer satisfaction became an important metric for “good” business, providing hedonism, quite undiluted, became acceptable. Interestingly in education, where customer satisfaction is often measured through teaching evaluations, there is a highly talked about moral dilemma: should I be entertaining my students or educating them? Do we not have the same dilemma in the eating out business: should I be providing highly tasty food or should I be ensuring my customers keep or improve their health?

Hedonism, Joy and Well-Being

In a treatise on consumer behavior, one of the wisest expositions written, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) distinguished between pleasure and enjoyment. In contrast to pleasure, which is the pursuit of hedonism, enjoyment requires the pursuit of more challenging goals. Consumers are more uplifted, they suggested, when they pursue a difficult hobby like rock climbing than when they pursue easy consumption like watching television. There is a sense of emptiness, they pointed out, when you turn off the television set to go to bed; quite the opposite after a rock-climbing expedition. Eating out, other than the occasional irritating long wait to get seated or to be served, does not include challenges. Following a highly pleasant feeling of good taste, there often is recognition of being over-full. This consumption experience provides the opposite to a sense of emptiness! But, rarely, following a meal eaten out is there a sense of exhilaration that can be called feeling “flow”; a concept described in great detail by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

Could eating out be converted from a pleasurable experience to an enjoyable experience? Could the challenge of balancing gastronomic delight, or taste, with wellbeing, or long-term health, be made a challenge that consumers relish, much like great teachers who balance learning, or education, with entertainment, or pleasant listening? Thus, the primary focus on this chapter is to identify and understand what enables consumers to achieve a balance between healthy and tasty food. Although the need to achieve this balance is being emphasized in developed countries like the US, it is also a growing and potentially important need in emerging economies like India.