

Navigating the Grocery Store:  
Obstacles, Influences, and Consumer Choice  
Oakland University

Navigating the grocery store can be just as perplexing to the highly educated and well trained nutrition professional as it is to the average consumer. With marketing messages bombarding the senses and the sheer amount of choices that abound, grocery shopping can be downright overwhelming. While nutrition professionals such as dieticians are equipped to educate and help patients make better choices including making sense of nutritional claims, it is not always practical or realistic to assume that every citizen will have the opportunity to meet with a nutrition professional in their lifetime. How do we effectively educate the average consumer to navigate the minefield that is the grocery store, to empower them to make healthy choices? Whose responsibility is it? Are grocery stores and food manufacturers setting consumers up to fail based on design?

How grocery stores and food manufacturers may be setting up consumers to fail is an issue that deserves evaluation. While it might be argued that consumers have made their choice and food manufacturers are just catering to the demand of the market, there is an increasing conscientious shift in public awareness of the link between nutrition and health. According the Food Marketing Institute, 96% of shoppers say nutrition is a “somewhat” or “very important” factor when they shop for food (Food Marketing Institute [FMI], n.d.). Ultimately, this may signal a desire for healthier options and easier to understand labeling with less convoluted marketing. Yet, consumers are faced with a quandary simply by walking through the automatic doors of the local supercenter. Understanding nutritional claims, reading nutritional labels and making sense of marketing messages can drive any well intentioned consumer straight to Aisle 5 for some aspirin.

It is of interest to note that after nutrition, the FMI study points out that only two other concerns were of significant importance after nutrition in over half of respondents: “price (71

percent) and product safety (70 percent)" (FMI, n.d.). Price is a very real concern for most consumers, and it influences their buying habits. There is a common misconception that eating well means spending more money, but that is not necessarily the case. A recent study from the Department of Agriculture found that most whole foods cost less than processed foods (Hananel, 2012). This measurement was based a per ounce or weight scale, not per calorie as traditionally measured. According to Andrea Carlson, scientist at the USDA's Economic Research Service and author of the study, "Using price per calorie doesn't tell you how much food you're going to get or how full you are going to feel" (as cited in Hananel, 2012). Thus, according to Wootan, a \$2 bag of apples may in fact be a better value than a \$2 Supersized bag of potato chips (or a bag of baked potato chips, an oft-perceived "healthier" alternative, for that matter) (as cited in Hananel, 2012). Could this misperception be the result of strategic marketing, designed to convince consumers that the purchase of certain processed foods ensure them more bang for their buck? Perhaps it is the placement of these super sized products—generally front and center in any grocery store—that grab consumers attention with the promise of value before they even reach the fruit and vegetable section.

Another quandary that consumers face is that of confusing nutrition labels. Unless you are highly trained in the field of nutrition, it can be difficult to make sense of the jargon on the back of the soup can. Instead, consumers may rely on flashy marketing and advertising messages rather than attempting to decode the label. According to the FMI, most consumers have in fact purchased groceries solely due to nutritional claims on the label, specifically those declaring "low fat" (n.d.). About 60 percent have purchased an item because of "low cholesterol claims," and just as many have bought an item due to a "natural" label (FMI, n.d.). An article in the *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* (Llorente, 2011) has this to say:

The influence that labels have on food—both on the names and origins of a food, and the impact that an ambiance and mood give to the flavor of food, all affect consumption.

Yes, consumers are paying attention to nutritional content and labeling, and food manufacturers and marketers are well aware of this fact.

Is this simply a matter of nutrition education? Who is responsible for conveying and clarifying the message? Interestingly, almost half of consumers surveyed in the FMI (n.d.) study believe that the responsibility of understanding food labels lies primarily with them, while about 25 percent hold food manufacturers and marketers responsible, with 15 percent believing the government should play a part. Only 5 percent believe the grocery stores are responsible. This is encouraging from a public health standpoint as most consumers are seemingly willing to take personal initiative to understand nutrition for their own health and the health of their families. Yet, the quarter of respondents holding food manufacturers to task is unexpectedly low. This compels the question: are grocery stores getting a free pass? After all, they are in the business of sales—their primary responsibility is to stock food items and move them off the shelves. But should they be void of any responsibility?

To address this and other questions raised in this paper, an integrative approach to answering them is required. The disciplines of community health and nutrition, sociology and the marketing sector should come together to address the problem. If a problem is approached from only one perspective—nutrition education only—we could be missing a potentially better way in empowering the average citizen to live a healthier lifestyle. The best way to come to a solution may be to apply “disciplinary knowledge,” which essentially is demonstrating an understanding of the overall perspective of each relevant discipline and what each discipline

contributes to the problem and solution (Repko, 2008, p. 126). All disciplines can and should work together to create the apt metaphor that Repko (2008) illustrates of a smoothie instead of a fruit basket, where all of the constituent parts contribute to achieving an integrated result. Ultimately, there may be no clear cut solution to simplifying the challenges of navigating the grocery store and making healthier food choices when conflicting marketing messages abound and grocery store design is more of a landmine. Tackling this problem does require an element of personal initiative on the consumer's end, along with continued public nutrition education, but accountability in responsible marketing from food manufacturers and grocery store retailers is an issue in need of addressing.

### **The Grocery Store**

The history of the grocery store is a relatively recent one. The first grocery store, a Piggly Wiggly, opened in 1916, and in the last century a modest local grocery store “has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry, [with other store brands such as Kroger, Meijer, Safeway, and the like] with supermarket sales exceeding \$562 billion in 2010” (as cited in Lorente, 2011). The grocery industry has certainly made its mark on society as not just a luxury, but a necessity. It has been successful in bringing food to the masses in a usually convenient manner, with options ranging from wholesale clubs to corner stores, to supermarkets and even upscale, gourmet chains. Given the prominence and presence that the grocery industry has, it is no wonder they have come under scrutiny from public health officials, dieticians and other medical professionals as a potential contributor to the United States’ obesity crisis. While the issue of obesity is a complex, multidimensional problem with many contributing factors, grocery stores and marketing of products sold in these stores are rightfully being examined as part of the dynamic.

It may or may not be common knowledge that grocery stores are often designed and laid out to entice customers to purchase certain products; but a little known fact is that manufacturers can pay a premium for the best spot on the shelf, usually at eye-level. Often times, these products that are easily within reach are usually the least healthy choice. In fact, “major food and beverage companies spend ~ \$200 million a year on marketing and promotions” (Grigsby-Toussaint, Moise, & Geiger, 2011). The same study by Grigsby-Toussaint, Moise, and Geiger (2011) notes that about 98% of grocery stores were likely to feature marketing for noncarbonated drinks (juices, sports drinks), about 77% had marketing for fruit and cereal bars, and 62% had featured marketing for soda. Dairy (71%) and cookies and crackers (54%) were also significantly promoted on grocery store shelves. All highly processed, generally unhealthy choices, yet these are the majority of featured marketing on grocery store shelves. One would be hard pressed to find such promotion in the fruit and vegetable aisle, as I discovered during a recent visit to the local Kroger supermarket.

### A 3 Hour Tour

The sliding automatic doors welcomed me right into the fruit and vegetable section, and an array of colors greeted my eyes – stacks of apples, oranges, various lettuces—that from afar appeared fresh and inviting. I deeply inhaled the scent of freshly watered produce; a wonderful, earthy smell mixed with – fried chicken? Yes, to the right of the produce which comprises only a modest quarter of the store at best, was a large winding counter that spanned to the other end of the store, with hot food delights and every part of a chicken that is socially acceptable to bread and fry, along with cold deli selections. My senses were overwhelmed and... confused. I browsed the fruits and vegetables and noticed they appeared lackluster and wilted upon closer inspection, and humorously noted a sale for Apple Chips (freeze dried, sweetened “real pieces”

of apple) underneath the actual apple stand. With the condition of the apples in the store, the Apple Chips sale wasn't necessary in convincing me it was a preferable purchase. I noted a few sales for produce, but the seemed to blend in with the colors of produce and all seemed strangely expensive compared to the promise of a 99 cent bag of apple chips.

Product placement and promotion is critical in influencing consumer purchases. Indeed, consumers most often take notice of end of aisle displays, department signage, and merchandising displays, even stating that the products on those shelves are most influential on their purchase decision making (Glanz, Bayer, & Iyer, 2012). Passing the deli and produce section, I took note of the end kiosks throughout the store. In my estimate a solid 70- 80% of these kiosks featured a sale on fruit juice (Old Orchard), soda (Pepsi products) or sports drinks (Gatorade). Other products with significant end of the aisle promotion included instant, individual portions of macaroni and cheese ("10 for \$10!") and potato chips for 50% off. Don't forget to stock up on all of the ingredients for s'mores—a huge center kiosk undoubtedly paid for by Nabisco and Hershey's enticed. The center aisles didn't fare any better. Just as the research from Grigsby- Toussaint, Moise, and Geiger (2011) indicated, healthier (or less offensive) options were almost always placed on the top two shelves. Buttermilk pancake mix front and center, with the whole wheat pancake mix requiring a step stool to reach. The same applied to the soup aisle; a Campbell's extra beefy noodle extravaganza was eye level, with a search for a reduced sodium soup being more difficult to pinpoint in the sea of soup can placement.

Because grocery stores decide which products to stock, the appropriate quantities, and how much of an assortment to offer, grocery stores could very well be an ally in the "war on obesity" instead of a perceived opponent. Suggesting that grocery stores simply stock less of unhealthy choices is not practical and somewhat tyrannical; instead, grocery stores could focus

on adjusting marketing and placement strategies in the store, deemphasizing the less healthy choices and promoting the more wholesome ones (Glanz, Bayer, & Iyer, 2012). In fact, Glanz, Bayer, and Iyer (2012) found that “there is limited evidence that simply increasing access to health food products in stores increases healthful eating.” I tend to agree with this concept. Simply increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables or whole grains in a store wouldn’t have much of an impact. You can lead a customer to an apple, but you can’t make him chose it over Apple Chips. Research concludes that any adjustment of grocery marketing strategies to positively influence consumer choice would be to specifically “alter the placement and promotion of less-healthy foods, rather than merely on increasing access to healthier options” (Glanz, Bayer, & Iyer, 2012). Instead of having Apple Chips marketed right next to apples, place them in the snack food aisle, and entice customers with equally tempting promotion of the actual fruit.

### **Food Labels: Instruction Manual Not Included**

What if the majority of grocery stores were to stock for the greater good, instead of for whichever manufacturer paid to play that week? It still wouldn’t address the issue of confusing labeling and nutritional claims. There is a difference: there are nutrition labels, which are regulated by the FDA, and nutritional claims, which are not regulated and often interpreted as a matter of fact. Those splashy blurbs about being a “good source of vitamins and minerals” on the front of the Fruit-O’s cereal box are anything but regulated and often distract from a less than impressive nutrient content. “The majority of products (about 67%) with nutrition marketing did not use a regulated health claim,” according to the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (Colby, Johnson, Scheett, & Hoverson, 2010). Such unregulated claims include (in order of most commonly used) “good source of calcium,” “reduced fat/low-fat/fat-free,” “made with

real...” and reduced/low/trans fat free.” The deviousness of these claims is that they are effective in making the consumer believe they are making a “healthy” choice, when in fact a staggering 48% of 9,000 plus products surveyed with these messages contained high levels of “saturated fat, sodium, and/or sugar” (Colby, Johnson, Scheett, & Hoverson, 2010).

Take, for example, one of many products I examined during my expedition: a simple box of wheat crackers. Front and center in the cookie and cracker aisle was the Nabisco product promotion blitz, with Wheat Thins being at eye level. The box is bright and yellow, eye-catching, with several cheerful stalks of wheat decorating the front cover. “100% Whole Grain!” the advertisement shouted. Turning the box over to inspect the label, I noted a laundry list of ingredients that seemed like an awful lot to compose a wheat cracker. Knowing that the often misused whole grain claim doesn’t carry much weight in terms of nutritional value, I noted that the first ingredient was “unbleached, enriched flour”—which completely negates the claim of wholesomeness from Nabisco, and proves that the “whole grain” claim is misleading. Sure, the wheat starts out as a whole grain, but once it is processed heavily, it removes nearly all of the nutrition. I moved on to the top shelf, where a neutral, cardboard colored box with soft green and brown colors declaring “Back to Nature: Whole Grain Wheat Crackers” gave me a safe and cozy feeling. Upon further inspection, I noted that the ingredient list was a lot shorter, but the first ingredient being unbleached enriched flour, and the buzz word ingredient of the moment, sea salt, a bit further down the list. If one is looking for a snack cracker, this would be a more desirable choice, but who has time to painstakingly evaluate each product that goes into the cart? Shouldn’t nutritional claims be more accurate and straightforward?

This brings into question the efficacy of current nutrition labeling and the regulation of labeling. “The U.S. Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) standardized the provision of

nutrition information in the United States and led to the creation of the nutrition facts panels found on all manufactured food items” (Berning, Chouinard, Manning, McCluskey, & Sprott, 2010). Yet there is still one caveat, and that is that consumers must be able to interpret this nutrition information. The Berning et al. study supports this thought:

A strong interest in labels is not always matched with an understanding of the quantitative information, (and) shoppers may be influenced by qualitative information more than quantitative. [... And] although (there is) evidence that nutrition labels alter behavior, we still find that consumers experience difficulty distinguishing between nutrient claims and health claims. (2010)

“In 2010, the Food and Drug administration (F.D.A.) sought to redesign nutrition labels placed on the front of packages,” in conjunction with the Grocery Manufacturers Association and Food Marketing Institute, but the negotiations fell flat and resulted in the Association and Institute creating new standards without the help of the FDA (Llorente, 2011). The resulting new label—called the Nutrition Keys—focuses on marketing the overall caloric or sodium content of the food; in other words, it’s a more specific summary, but still allows for up to two of eight approved nutrients to be highlighted on the “coveted spot” at the front of the box. It is important to note that inclusion of the Nutrition Keys is voluntary and based on the manufacturers’ discretion (Helmich, 2011). As such, the new labels are being criticized heavily as it viewed as a defiant move on industry’s part in forging ahead without FDA approval or oversight. Industry sources argue they are only responding to government urging, specifically from First Lady Michelle Obama, to include summaries on the front of the package. Additional prompting from the Obama administration has the FDA and the Institute of Medicine currently working together

to come up with a more “ideal” labeling standard (Helmich, 2011). Whether any improvement results from this partnership remains to be seen.

### **Navigating the Grocery Store: For the Health of Our Nation**

Thus far, I have highlighted only a few glaring obstacles that consumers face when attempting to shop healthfully at the grocery store. Indeed, the problems are too numerous to exhaustively explore within the confines of this paper. The amount of research being done by the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics, independent researchers, public health officials, and even marketing agencies is extensive and some may very well dedicate their careers to this field of study. This problem, like so many others related to the status of our food supply and health, is multi-faceted, with plenty of blame to go around. It starts at the top with our government; from the farm subsidies that subsidize cheap ingredients like corn and sugar, creating a surplus, which then leads to food manufacturers utilizing these cheap ingredients in an effort to increase profit while churning out nutritionally deficient foods. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), while purporting to protect the consumer, is just as much a part of the problem rather than advocates for a solution; allowing known dangerous agrichemicals to be used in the processing of our food, food additives that are banned in most other countries are allowed without regulation in our food supply, and questionable food processing techniques are accepted without further investigation. This food ends up on our grocery store shelves, packaged exceptionally with promises of nourishment and sustenance, carefully stocked in its likely bought and bargained for prime spot, so that you don’t pass up that sale on Honey Graham Crackers (an “excellent source of calcium!”).

If ever a guide was needed, it would be to navigate the grocery stores in America today. And perhaps that is essentially what can be done. It would take massive policy overhaul, insight and collaboration from multiple disciplines, and of course, support and cooperation in the trenches: the grocery store itself. Below, I offer a summary of some idealized proposed solutions, based on my own thoughts and the research from authors cited in this paper:

- **Grocery store shelf labels.** The consumer's time is valuable. From the frantic mother trying to get dinner on the table in an hour to the tired businessperson who just wants to pick up a few things on the way home after a long day, consumers don't always have time to analyze labels, despite the desire to make healthy choices. "Grocery store shelves may be an ideal location to provide shoppers with nutrition information" (Berning et al., 2010). Of course, this would require a simplified version of key nutrition information, and research could be done on what consumers believe is the most pertinent and desirable information. A simpler nutrition label provided on the shelves of the grocery store would provide useful on the go information to consumers. Perhaps this is pie-in-the-sky, but it could also eliminate, to some degree, the buying and selling of shelf space, as it may be more cost effective for the stores themselves to keep certain products in a regular space. This could be an intriguing and challenging opportunity for future research.
- **Dietician influence in grocery stores.** While it's true that some retail grocery store chains (like Meijer) employ dieticians full time to head nutrition programs for the stores, there could be more. Dieticians are highly trained nutrition educators whose job it is to interpret nutrition data, and they also have a vested interest in public health. A dietitian's influence could really help to correct some major flaws in the system. Research has shown that optimal placement of healthier foods and less emphasis on nutritionally empty

foods would be a beneficial change for grocery stores to make (Glanz, Bayer, & Iyer, 2012). Dieticians working as a part of the management team could be instrumental in revamping a store layout, as they are just the professionals that can determine what foods ought to be front and center and those that can take a backseat. If full time employment isn't a feasible option, dieticians could offer their services on a consultation basis. A study reported in 1992 showed that about half of grocery store managers believed that nutrition was important to their customers (Carson, Lansing, & Mullis, 1992). This shows that there may be an even greater opportunity for dieticians and grocery stores to work together. More research can be conducted on the influence of dieticians currently in the field.

- **Clear, concise labeling.** There is sufficient evidence that labeling does in fact impact consumer choice and influence behavior (Colby, Johnson, Scheett, & Hoverson, 2010). This includes health claims and “healthy choice” declarations. These need to be more tightly regulated—or at the very least, monitored—plain and simple. Perhaps the FDA isn’t the best choice to monitor these claims as in my opinion they are just as susceptible to lobbying as industry is. In an ideal world, a separate non-partisan group of healthcare and nutrition professionals, acting in the name of consumer protection, would have a say in the monitoring of food claims. It would be optimal to allow nutrition practitioners a greater say in the determination of the validity of such claims. They could then work consult with food manufacturers to insure accuracy and truth in advertising. Where the FDA may be beneficial would be in actually enforcing penalties to manufacturers who still choose to feature misleading or false health claims on their products.

Navigating the grocery store shouldn't require a roadmap, seem like an obstacle course, or be akin to preparing for battle. Too often, it can seem that way to the average consumer. What I hope I have successfully communicated at the conclusion of this paper is the magnitude of obstacles that consumers face at the grocery store, and how the problem really is larger than the grocery store itself. There is great opportunity for more research in this area, and it is vitally important that this research continues to be conducted as what we discover can directly impact the health of our nation, if it can successfully affect industry as well as policy. Fortunately, there is a unique opportunity for a variety of disciplines to come together to make the grocery store a more direct route to health and wellness for the average consumer.

## References

- Berning, J. P., Chouinard, H. H., Manning, K. C., McCluskey, J. J., & Sprott, D. E. (2010, May). Identifying consumer preferences for nutrition information on grocery store shelf labels. *Food Policy*, (35), 429-436. doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2010.05.009
- Carson, C., Lansing, D., & Mullis, R. (1992). Putting nutrition on the grocery store shelf. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 92(2), 159.
- Colby, S. E., Johnson, L., Scheett, A., & Hoverson, B. (2010, November 2). Nutrition marketing on food labels. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 42(2), 92-98. doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2008.11.002
- Food Marketing Institute. (n.d.). Nutrition [PDF]. Retrieved from <http://www.fmi.org/docs/facts-figures/nutrition.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
- Glanz, K., Bader, M. D., & Iyer, S. (2012). Retail grocery marketing strategies and obesity. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 5(42), 503-512. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2012.01.013
- Grigsby-Toussaint, D. S., Moise, I. K., & Geiger, S. D. (2011, May). Observations of marketing on food packaging targeted to youth in retail food stores. *Obesity*, 19, 1898-1900. doi:10.1038/oby.2011.120
- Hananel, S. (2012, May 16). Health eating cost less, study finds. *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/201205/D9UPVBBG0.htm>
- Hellmich, N. (2011, January 24). New nutrition labels coming to the front of food packages. *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/food/diet-nutrition/2011-01-25-foodfight25\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/food/diet-nutrition/2011-01-25-foodfight25_ST_N.htm)
- Llorente, J. (2011). The politics of food: did you really choose what's on your plate? *Journal*

*of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(3), 129+.

Repko, A. F. (2008). *Interdisciplinary research*. Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage.