

Consumer Engagement on Strategic Plan – Manchester 2nd June 2009

1. This event was designed to provide consumers in Manchester with an opportunity to comment on the Strategic Plan consultation. The areas of the Strategic Plan that were closely linked to consumer behaviour and consumer influence were focused on during the two hour meeting.
2. The opportunity was also taken to explore with consumers their understanding and knowledge of other key Agency messages around campaigns that the Agency has run, nutritional labelling and salt.
3. Approximately 65 consumers came to the event and there was a good mix of consumers based on their socio-economic, age, ethnicity and gender classifications.
4. The Agency used radio adverts for the first time to advertise the event to invite participants to attend. Three local radio stations advertised the event for four days. The majority of participants either heard the adverts or were told about it by friends.
5. Participants were in groups of eight or ten and had a member of the Agency or Manchester Food Futures (who helped with organisation) facilitate the discussions. Annex A is a more comprehensive reflection on the discussions held on tables. An accompanying DVD of the discussions has also been produced.
6. The event began with an overview of the Agency's strategic plan and then consumers were asked a series of open questions to generate debate and allow them to comment on the Agency's Strategic Plan.

Overview

7. There were concerns about the consistency / format / reliability of information generally available on healthy eating.
8. A sense that the Agency should be providing trustworthy, basic information. Advice on healthy eating was not always acted upon as some consumers did not recognise the source of information. This lack of clarity sometimes led them to ignoring all the information that was around and not being engaged with it.

Healthy Eating

Consumers suggested several things for the Agency to work on:

- Education in schools and wider community;
- General awareness raising and specific campaigns;
- Provision of clear, consistent labelling and information at point of sale;
- Influence the food industry (especially the fast food industry) to provide and promote healthier choices;
- Work to reduce the cost of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Food safety

Consumers suggested the following for the Agency to think about in relation to food safety

- Education in schools and wider community;
- General awareness raising and specific campaigns; most people seem to be aware of the Change for Life campaign and Traffic Light labelling;
- Is there too much emphasis on food safety?;
- Perhaps a lack of knowledge in the wider population;
- Publicity of food hygiene results and information in relation to food premises;
- Confidence in hygiene standards through support of environmental health work;
- A high level of trust in supermarkets, they would not sell food that was not safe.

General Themes

9. Education was a clear theme that came out of discussions with consumers. There was a desire to want information in small easy to grasp messages. The need for an overall message rather than campaigns on specific nutrients was highlighted as being of more benefit.
10. Consumers were also more inclined to take more of an interest and aimed to provide a more balanced diet for their children rather than themselves. Comments were received from the majority of tables that starting the education process with younger people would be a good thing to do so that healthier eating became the norm.
11. The impact of the credit crunch was not surprisingly mentioned several times and the perceived cost of healthy foods was seen as barrier to eating more healthily. There were interesting discussions around the cost of healthier foods and cooking from scratch.
12. The prevailing thought was that healthier foods were expensive, however with more information some participants began to realise that these views were not always correct. With 'shopping savvy' healthier foods could be bought even on a tight budget.
13. Convenience was also highlighted as very real barrier, often with both parents working cooking was seen as inconvenient and having a take-away easier. There was also a strong view that consumers should know what they are eating from all types of restaurants so that they can choose healthier meals when eating out. The Agency's programme of improving nutritional information at catering outlets was welcomed.
14. The Agency's work on reformulation was also covered especially in relation to reducing salt. Consumers welcomed this approach but some argued that more regulation was the real key to solving some of the issues around obesity.

Annex A – Table Facilitator Notes

Healthier Eating - what does it mean?

- Low fat, low calorie, organic food with lean meat and lots of fruit, veg and salad
- “Dead expensive” – you have to be well off to diet
- Worried about pesticides and their impact on the healthiness of food. Feeling that food is being grown too quickly and needs to be a perfect shape and that this is taking precedence over health (now growing their own).
- Health of food being affected by customer demand and convenience
- Sweeteners – are they healthy?
- Importance of choice and providing alternatives
- healthier options not always obvious - lots of hidden ingredients
- Feeling that healthy eating is the crux of everything we do and therefore we should be investing time in it. No focus on food as fuel or on what we are putting in our bodies (makes own lentil Bolognese and freezes it rather than buying ready meals)
- It’s all about cost and convenience – it is difficult to cook from scratch for your family when you have to work.
- Other comments related to cutting out red meat as it is high in cholesterol.
- A little of everything is a healthy, balanced diet. Generally discouraging biscuits and encouraging fresh fruits for snacks.
- There were mentions of salt, as people were aware that they should be reducing their salt intake, but they add salt for flavour.

Safe food – what does it mean?

- Before it reaches the consumer it is the responsibility of manufacturers and wholesalers. There is a lot of trust on the part of shoppers – they trust their brands/retailers to provide safe food – although there was discussion of how cost is now eradicating any loyalty they may have had to particular brands in the past
- Perceived lack of knowledge in the wider population of food safety – would like to see tips of how to keep food safe more widely available.
- There was mention of too much emphasis on keeping food safe. In times of war, there were no fridges and ate old food. Not many people getting food poisoning; “A little resistance in your tummy is good”. Food was judged good/bad through smelling it, looking at it or saw mold on it.
- Thermometer in the fridge so you are aware of temperature to keep food at the right temperature.
- Location of the food in the fridge; meat at the bottom, vegetables on top shelves. It was emphasised that manufacturers should not put the salad/vegetable tray on the bottom shelf.

Healthier Eating Campaigns – which ones are you aware of?

Change 4 Life

- Unprompted mentioned the brightly coloured 'jelly' figures – though thought the campaign was called either 'eatwell' or 'change your life'
- Liked the primary colours and the little steps that can be easy fit into people's lives.
- Change 4 Life – Healthy life style. Some participants felt this campaign connects well with families. Makes you realise you need to do more with the kids. If you want to be healthy, you need to make the changes.

Traffic lights

- Mentioned this unprompted – led to conversation about how people still need to be 'canny' when reading labels and frustration about the variety of portion size used to give nutritional info and the need to do maths to calculate exactly how much you are eating of particular nutrients
- Said that they all make an effort choose more green products
- Remembered seeing adverts on buses, in magazines, via direct mail and in supermarkets
- Felt that campaign materials are most helpful either on packaging or in the supermarket – at locations where they would be making choices about food
- Belief that manufacturers can't print something on packaging that isn't true – though this comes back to trusting that particular company, complicated labelling systems suggest that they are trying to hide something
- Liked front of pack labelling
- Frustrated at the range of labelling schemes – 'why don't we have one system?' clear labelling should be mandatory.
- Belief that people generally make decisions based on cost rather than healthy eating and that retailers and manufacturers exploit this – basic range in Sainsbury's doesn't have FOP labelling on it

General Discussion

- Cholesterol advertisement (not from FSA) – "Lets not talk about weather, lets talk about cholesterol" campaign.
- There are contradictions in some healthy eating campaigns, including fish, should we eat fish or not? Eggs, 2 litres of Water etc – what is the FSA doing about contradictions?
- People changing the way they eat and drink. Participants commented from personal experience that the desire to lose weight helped them to make changes.
- It was generally agreed that people have to want to do it. The role of FSA/Government can only be to offer advice, the public need to make the changes.
- It was suggested that rather than being told what is good/bad, advice and encouragement is a more effective way to help the public.
- Weight Watchers was mentioned as it encourages a healthy diet that needs to be followed and adhered to for a healthy lifestyle.
- General confusion around fat – not a clear sense of which fat was unhealthy or why. Remembered the sat fat campaign ad when prompted.

Nutritional Information

- Want to make choices based on clear information, calories, fat, salt, etc

- Colour-coded is good because it helps those who have visual impairment or difficulty reading. Labels are too small to see; the traffic light labelling is clearer than the other labels to see and read.
- Want to be able to choose whether to use information or not when making decisions about what to eat
- Where possible they already look on the internet and choose what they are going to eat before they go out to eat
- Good chains are leading the way
- Alcohol drives the appetite for salty foods
- January is the only time that there are BOGOFs on healthy options – feeling that shoppers are penalised for wanting to eat healthily
- Three of the participants had been to venues which had traffic lighted their menus surreptitiously using dots – which they all had liked and found helpful
- Strong feeling that there should be uniformity of labelling across retailers and restaurants
- Generally, people were aware of the traffic light labelling and tended to use the labels and understood that if there is more yellow and green it's OK, if there are reds – leave it alone!
- Could get in the habit of using traffic light labelling.
- Too much information on nutritional information. Need something simple, used friendly, easy to understand.
- There was a general agreement that people look at the calories and fat when dieting. Calories, fat and sugar is the information that people need. The other information is not essential.
- The information on the side of the packaging is too small and complicated. It's not necessary and it was suggested to get rid of the information and replace it with simpler labelling, rather than that as well as the traffic light labelling.
- There was a suggestion to use percentages rather than colours. All the main ones, use colour and percentages.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables – traffic light labelling is not particularly useful. Also the question of “how fresh are the fresh fruits and vegetables?” was raised.
- There should be a unified labelling system across all supermarkets and products, so there is no confusion.
- Further information on country of origin on the front labelling was well perceived. People felt this was a good idea. There was also an interest in knowing where the products were sourced, how long ago, how many days have they been in the supermarket store rooms – particularly on fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Calories on menus will make people aware or think about what they are having, but not necessarily change their choice as going out to eat is seen as a ‘treat’ amongst most of the participants. It was agreed, that calorie counting would be useful on fast food rather than fine dining.
- A point about choice was raised. If they make you aware of the nutritional information and you still choose to eat it, you've made that choice.
- It was highlighted that the current generation eat out a lot and therefore calorie counts on menus would be useful, Pizza Hut was mentioned as a restaurant that should implement calories count on menus. However, it was mentioned that calorie count on fine dining menu is not necessary.
- Basic information (not just calories) such as the traffic light labelling would be useful on fast food. Boots packaging was mentioned, as their sandwiches are colour coordinated - marked out high/medium/low. It was suggested that people do not add up the calories, therefore, emphasis should be placed on fat and sugar.
- There was mention of no calorie counting on alcohol.

- Participants were made aware of nutrition information of companies on their websites - they stated that a leaflet in store would be more convenient, discrete and immediate – the information is immediately available, rather than having to remember to go back on the website.
- It was also stated that basic food is no longer from home, buying ready made meals are more common – life styles have changed. It was also highlighted by a member of the group that government has introduced a new scheme to teach children how to cook and prepare food safely rather than food technology in schools.

What do you think about salt in our diet?

- 6g of salt – participants remember seeing something in magazines about this
- Mentioned unprompted
- ‘Most people don’t cook with salt.’
- Aware that there is more salt hidden in foods
- ‘The only food we add salt to is chips.’
- Discussion on cost differences of lo-salt and salt
- Chefs on cooking programmes use lots of salt – this caused confusion, ‘Are we meant to use it to favour food or not?’
- Understanding that too much salt can cause high blood pressure (though this did come from someone who worked in the health sector – not sure in what sort of role – so don’t know if this was generally known on the table or not)
- Admission that when they ate food they don’t look at how much salt is in it
- Due to the different ways that salt/sodium is labelled ‘you need to be good at maths to work out how much you are eating’
- Should be labelled differently ‘you need a calculator’ at the moment
- One solution would be to cook from scratch – old fashioned cooking but time and work get in the way, especially as different family members may be eating different meals at the same time (ready meals enable this).
- ‘Salt is something you forget is there, so it is hard to keep track of.’

Barriers - What are the barriers to healthier and safer eating food?

Cost – perception vs. reality

- Healthy eating ‘considered’ to expensive
- Cost of fresh fruit and vegetables/ food. Budget of some people – promotions tend to be mainly on processed foods.

Time – planning, shopping and preparing

- Change in lie-style: lack of time – Not enough home cooking.
- Lack of time

Complexity of information – marketing/information/messaging

- FSA to implement and enforce single, standard system of labelling/information for all food outlets.
- One of the barriers that was commonly agreed amongst the group was conflicting info on packaging and in the media. Media portrays confusing messages.
- List of ingredients in the labelling that people don't know about.
- Lack of knowledge and skills in the younger generations and lack of food understanding.
- Issue of access to fresh foods

FSA awareness – 60:40 knowledge

Need to make people aware of FSA and its work. Perhaps make eatwell plate leaflets more widely available (direct mail/with council info/GP surgeries) and presentations in supermarket foyers. Suggested an FSA day which could focus on healthier eating and the Agency's work and generally raise its profile.

Solutions - What would you like to see the Government doing to remove them?

Cost of fresh fruit and vegetables

- Introduce local buying scheme
- There were suggestions for all supermarkets to look-out for consumers and work together on labelling.

Time – planning, shopping and preparing

- Education - understanding of food, how to enjoy cooking, where to buy fresh produced etc. Use simpler terms, small, simple ads to give information. Go back to basics with labelling – take Poly and Monosaturated Fat etc information out.
- Similar products (healthier and standard versions) should be similar prices. People need to be educated so that they understand that healthy food doesn't need to be expensive and can be just as tasty.
- Liked 'feed your family for a fiver campaign'. Thought supermarkets could do more – perhaps have cooking demonstrations of the recipe cards and give people the opportunity to taste them in store.
- Schools to focus on cooking lessons more to get children into habit of cooking
- Being positive about finding time and encourage changing life-styles. Simple, straight forward advice.

General points

- Desire for clear, basic information about food which individuals can choose to use or not – want to be empowered.
- Feeling that we need to get back to basics where food is concerned – teach people the basics of nutrition and food safety.
- Need to be taught/conveyed in a fun way in order to shift the perception of healthy food as dull and uninteresting.
- Thought that good routes to reach people were through GPs, info being sent out with council tax bills or even in fast food outlets like McDonalds.

- Really liked the eatwell plate and felt that we should be focusing on the whole diet not just specific nutrients. FSA should be giving people the whole picture and making it easier for them to understand what makes up a healthy diet as a whole.
- Belief that it would be better to talk to people directly rather than just giving them a leaflet.