

The Consumer's Experience of Obesity and Its Avoidance

A new understanding about the causes and possible resolution of obesity by addressing the core problem of sensory and stimulation deprivation based on an in-depth psychological study across three continents

A major four country consumer research study, across three continents, conducted throughout 2006 by leading Taste Optimisation Consultancy, The Marketing Clinic, uncovers a new understanding of the basis, and possible resolutions, of the obesity epidemic. Based on forty In-depth Interrogation Focus Groups in the UK, USA, France and China, the survey uncovers the perceived experiences, conscious and unconscious opinions, of those who have been on the edge of, within and especially those who have escaped from obesity.

The core problem emerges as one of sensory and stimulation deprivation. Today's foods lack strong, natural and fresh taste and the developed cooked flavours are too simplistic, and are texturally far too bland. Its preparation today precludes the production and appetite enhancement of positive learnt emotions driven from the preparation and consumption activity and, more powerfully, from the aromas.

The four countries were chosen to represent the full range from traditional, represented by food production in China, through the ingredient and process-aware French via the deteriorating UK to the most advanced flavour and texture deprivation society, the USA.

The study, called "Stimulation Loss – Weight Gain", traces a pattern of consumers' journeys from normality through craving to loss of control. All is not lost, however, because the "escapees" also demonstrate a common pattern of ascent to restoration.

The process springs from a lack of excitement in work, relationships, family and pastimes, so that the individual both becomes bored and disconnected from others – with resultant time on their hands. They seek occupation and entertainment. They turn to the television for involvement and through the 'soaps', acting as family substitutes and to reality TV providing the fun of watching others at work. Other excitements beckon – gambling, new transient relationships, incessant holidays and aimless travel. If they are younger, then recreational drugs and alcohol play a powerful part.

If these do not succeed, and for most of the respondents interviewed they did not, the best stimulation comes from food and drink – available to anyone at any time and on the surface consumable without damage. At least at first. The greater the stimulation impact, the better. This means flavour and texture experience that is extensive in quantity, and duration of eating multiplied by the intensity of taste and texture. This is compounded by the need for instant gratification. This means a strong taste that meets an appropriate emotional need with the consumption of which lasts for a reasonable duration of time. From which one can readily see the first beginnings of craving and addiction.

Good quantity of food of persistent flavour, firm texture to extend time in mouth and aftertaste, it needs moments of high intense flavours that trigger positive learnt emotional memories that form the basis of preference. For example, high salt and fat snacks.

The best carrier of flavour is sweetness with sugar as its foremost performer and sucrose as the finest of sugars. This drives the consumer to use more and more sweet items, at first usually in a carbohydrate format. Sadly, stimulation requires ever higher crests of impact and both taste buds and the receiving of messages by the brain easily become inured to the same taste impact level. Therefore, with sweetness of itself delivering pleasure, demand increases for a

more intense or longer duration of that sweetness experience such as chocolate accompanied by nutty, crispy texture and/or soft gooey fillings in confectionery or desserts.

So we now see in the UK that the leading Pizza variant for the 14 - 18 year old segment is Thin Crust Pepperoni. This is a low effort yet high impact taste delivery - whilst Pepperoni as an ingredient was virtually unknown in UK as little as 15 years ago. This perfectly encapsulates the drive for faster gratification - the peppery spice intrusion from the Pepperoni is rapid whilst the thin & crispy base requires little chew effort - this is moving the Pizza into a snack rather than a food - the direction of travel for most 'Modern' foodstuffs to satisfy the consumer drivers.

Here is hedonism that not merely takes over the senses and mind but delivers deliciousness and destroys, at least for the present, dullness and monotony. This extends to more frequent use until it is a constant craving. On goes the weight and the respondent then begins the search for a taste delivery substitute for sweetness.

In the USA the government along with diet fashion, once this problem had been superficially appreciated, recommended avoidance of too many carbohydrates. They, therefore, pushed against an open door of a consumer ready to move on and they evolved their delight into fat foods. The second best carrier of taste is saturated fat!

The food industry could use this technology in a positive way. But what tends to result is a combination of fat combined with carbohydrates to carry the flavour and deliver absolute maximum impact. Think here of crisp snacks or potato chips, or almost all of the fast foods. In any quantitative research, often used to make such decisions, the right high intensity flavour carried by fat and high sweetness will always beat, at least on a superficial preference, a more healthy balanced food. The manufacturer is, therefore, led to believe this is the best way forward as the usual superficial market research endorses this view.

This has been taken up by, of all sectors, the toothpaste industry. Here the technological arms race has not been about improving the dental hygiene - rather it has been about developing newer and faster flavour release agents. As the tastebuds become overloaded and dulled by foodstuffs so the cut-through impact of refreshing toothpaste is lessened. This has been met by High Impact toothpaste developments - particularly in US but also now UK and elsewhere. The terms used tell all - 'Extreme' is certainly an accurate description - and these products, our research shows, are almost unpalatable for senior generations whilst the teens and twenties find these mainstream.

Texture is important too – soft textures spread throughout the mouth – the premolars can cope so the flavour is released at the moment of the bite and reaffirmed in early chewing in the mid mouth. Thus more taste buds are hit and the flavour impact and stimulation is greater. Crisp foods that shatter also work well and spread successfully through the mouth with high intensity. Finally, a heavy sticky drink that adheres to the mouth and tongue maximises flavour delivery.

These collective consumer experiences are neatly encapsulated and delivered in many of the fast food meal experiences. It is no surprise that they succeed.

How do people escape?

Cause and effect and its impact on their weight and social discourse leads the consumer to seek a serious reduction in sweetness or at least some elimination of sugar followed by a serious down-grading of their saturated fat intake. But the resultant taste palate will lead to a

serious loss of taste stimulation. In that situation the food that they are eating can no longer provide the mental impact and stimulation deprivation sets in. What else can stimulate? Sex and physical activity, both are available in gyms and through sports, shopping is good too, travel even better. The internet, iPod and mobile phones all stimulate successfully and strongly.

The television works less effectively today, hence the 'couch potato' desperate for intense involvement finds solace in the snacks that balance so well on today's wide armed sofas.

For those who can afford to make up for the stimulation loss elsewhere their flavour requirement results in a decrease in the sweetness of the palate and concerns about the heavy impact of substantial weight within the stomach. They now seek complex high taste but with low sweetness food impact. For example, certain pasta sauces (?). However, for those who cannot afford such expensive excitement it is back to the 'soaps', reality TV, smoking, drinking and fast foods. Government exhortation is pointless; it will not fill the stimulus gap. For some of our young respondents, aggressive behaviour now provides the natural excitement previously provided by the now vanishing playing fields.

China shows one way out. There cooking and food preparation take time, trouble and release a multitude of activities, noises and aromas. The process, because of this theatre, involves the family, even the passive ones have their taste buds tickled by the familiar noises and smells that they have learnt means that food, and foods that they enjoy, is on the way. In this fashion the meal is extended in its duration forward and the stimulation with it. Many societies select food from centre table common dishes thus creating interactive eating with courtesy and consideration for others being demanded. Mixed textures and inefficient eating utensils also extend the experience further. Their meals last far longer than those in the west. However, many European countries also eat like this with extended meals and some measure of shared selection; most of those have so far avoided the more extreme obesity problem.

Consider this with the emergence of an entirely new form of dining - spreading from the lone driver through to the family. This is the advent of 'Dashboard Dining'. The consumption of food - even a whole meal - whilst in the car. Modern lifestyles have helped to fuel the desire of parents to get the kids delivered to school in the morning to release them to go on to their daytime jobs. This has extended the Dashboard Dining phenomenon from how the travelling rep. may have had their lunch to how many children now receive their breakfast. The cereal bars are handed out by the career Mother as she drives the children to school to be dropped off more than an hour before the start of the school day where the child goes to a 'Breakfast Club' with fellow early arrivals.

Contrast this UK & American cultural phenomenon with the French model. The child is welcomed home from school by the Mother who offers a review of the day and a conversation with Le Gouter - a little snack to be consumed on returning home (and which keeps the child sustained so that they can 'Last' until the whole family meal later in the evening). Although Le Gouter (the clue is in the name - the 'Tasting') is cake and biscuit based the rituals make this a sociable interactive and rewarding moment rather than an indulgent guilty treat. The child has a conversation with their parent whilst this 'Snack' is consumed together. The products are eaten slowly - even to the extent that the iconic Veritable Petit Beurre biscuit - ubiquitous in French households - is consumed in a certain, paced way. Here the rectangular butter biscuit has the corners broken off by the child and eaten in turn - the ears are consumed before the 'Body' of the biscuit is eaten. This simple food interaction slows the whole consumption process - ensuring the product is savoured and enjoyed - the child thinks they are having fun and this is how to eat the product - actually they are learning respect for food and how to let taste and texture develop. Oh, and they also learn how to have a conversation. Simple, really -

and yet this is just a snack. The French approach to dining reinforces these underlying message and behaviours.

The Americans and the Brits guard their individual plates from marauding fellow diners and increasingly eat alone with quickly heated pre-prepared foods. The stimulation of total meal time experience in China could reasonably last for two hours and provide much pleasure and enjoyment together with full involvement. In the UK it might be a lonely ten minutes followed by stimulation from other sources. Once the meal is over 'something' else is required.

Escape

It would appear that we need to eat food that takes more preparation time and involvement. Food should not be easily chewed or digested. Cooking needs to be done from scratch and, therefore, through the aromas so developed cause the total meal stimulation to last longer. Fat should not be removed from meat as its loss significantly reduces its flavour impact and also speeds up its consumption.

The natural foods which have more taste without resorting to fats or added sugar, which carry the impact, should be used wherever possible. So greater usage of spices and complexity of flavours that involve the mind into enquiring quite where they recall that particular taste experience and the emotional messages that it delivers, will add complexity and internalisation into the eating experience.

Stop eating alone! We need to go further than that; we need to share the food. We require multiple dishes with a wide variety of taste, textures and flavours from which we select for our own plate. This creates a meal in which each mouthful is actually different. This heightens the emotional journey both in terms of impact and duration. The table should be cleared by the team, and this encourages discussion of the food and issues raised at the table.

The task, in this scenario, of the government and supermarkets is to make this type of eating fashionable. Similar food prepared and eaten in this fashion will enable people to get the stimulation they need and avoid having to eat foods that are high on stimulation but bad for the waistline.

The food manufacturers need to provide food higher, and more complex, in taste impact targeted at a taste palate that is less sweet than historically and with extensive use of textural variation to provide greater chewing response and duration within the mouth.

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