

# Even the "Healthy" Choices at Fast-Food Restaurants Are Unhealthy

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In response to sharpening criticism from nutrition advocates, fast-food franchises have added supposedly "healthy" options to their menus. For instance, McDonald's has launched a line of "premium" salads and now offers apple slices and apple juice or milk with its Happy Meals as alternatives to fries and sodas. However, these new menu items are anything but healthy. Besides being labeled with misleading dietary information, one of the worst-offending McDonald's salads has as many calories and grams of fat as a Big Mac. Also, the new Happy Meal option, which includes a sugar-loaded caramel dipping sauce, does nothing to offset the high calories and dismally low nutritional value of McDonald's hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and Chicken McNuggets. Moreover, the profits from the more-healthy fast-food options do not add up to those of the millions of burgers served every day, and so the more-healthy choices are often discontinued.

Let's be honest. McDonald's french fries taste good. Really good. Founder Ray Kroc didn't turn the fast-food chain into such a phenomenal success by selling lettuce. Good nutrition was about the last thing on the milkshake salesman's mind. Kroc's 1950s vision of dining has since spread to thirty thousand restaurants in 120 countries, serving fifty million customers a day and counting. That's a lot of burgers and fries. But this rapacious business model is not stopping McDonald's from trying to claim that it has the answer to America's health problems.

Years ago, the environmental movement coined the term "greenwashing" to describe how corporations use public relations [PR] to make themselves appear environmentally friendly. Today, nutrition advocates need their own moniker for a similar trend among major food companies—I like to call it "nutriwashing." As the food industry finds itself increasingly under attack for promoting unhealthy foods, one of its major defense strategies is to improve, or promise to improve, the nutritional content of its food.

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Among the major peddlers of fast food, McDonald's has borne the brunt of the criticism from nutrition advocates, many of whom are especially troubled by the company's shameless marketing to children. In response, the corporation has developed a massive PR campaign aimed at convincing us that it really does care. But before believing the spin, we should ask whether these moves have any positive impact on the nation's health, or if, worse, the campaign could actually encourage people to eat more of the wrong foods....

## Ulterior Motives

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By the time the obesity debate started heating up, McDonald's was already a company in need of serious spin control. So, in April 2004, with then U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Tommy Thompson at its side, McDonald's announced "an unprecedented, comprehensive balanced lifestyles

platform to help address obesity in America and improve the nation's overall physical well-being." Sounds very impressive, until you bother to scratch the surface. The major news outlets focused largely on the initiative's "Go Active! Adult Happy Meal" component, which included a "premium salad," bottled water, and a pedometer. Other "highlights" of the plan included how McDonald's promised to take an "industry-leading role" in working with HHS to determine the best way to "communicate" nutrition information to consumers. (Are the folks who invented the Big Mac really the best candidates for this job?)

An important concept in brand marketing is the "halo effect," which is the generalization of a positive feeling about a brand from one good trait. In other words, if you think that a food company is selling healthy products, this can generate an overall good feeling about the company's brand. Whether or not the items are actually any healthier is beside the point.

Mary Dillon is responsible for McDonald's global marketing strategy and brand development, as well as the company's Balanced, Active Lifestyles initiative. Here is how Dillon describes the effort: "McDonald's cares about the well-being of each of its guests throughout the world, and by making balanced, active lifestyles an integral part of the brand we aim to make a difference in this area of their lives." In other words, McDonald's wants its customers to associate the *idea* of healthy lifestyles with its brand—a classic halo effect maneuver.

## An Unhealthy Salad

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In 2003, the nonprofit Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) conducted a nutritional analysis of thirty-four salads served at fast-food chains, and the results, to put it mildly, were dismal. The group awarded only two menu items (from Au Bon Pain and Subway) an "outstanding" rating for being high in fiber and low in saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and calories. McDonald's salads were among the worst offenders. PCRM noted that all of the corporation's salad entrees contain chicken (which has virtually as much cholesterol as beef) and concluded that the salads "may very well clog up your arteries." The group also awarded the Bacon Ranch Salad with Crispy Chicken and Newman's Own Ranch Dressing "the dubious distinction of having the most fat of any salad rated. At 661 calories and 51 grams of fat, this salad is a diet disaster," with "more fat and calories and just as much cholesterol as a Big Mac."

McDonald's number-one motivation is to keep its customers addicted to its products, and lettuce covered with fried chicken furthers that goal.

Curiously, when I checked the current data on the Bacon Ranch Salad with Crispy Chicken at the company's Web site, the numbers were different. (The salad is listed at 510 calories and 31 grams of fat.) When I asked dietitian Brie Turner-McGrievy (who conducted the PCRM study) to explain the discrepancy, she said that the site numbers must have changed, since she used data that was posted in 2003. She also noted that right after her group's study was released, McDonald's changed their nutrition facts to list all of the salads without chicken as an option. (This was not available prior to the survey.) "So we know they went back to look at their nutrition facts after our review. I wouldn't be surprised if they reanalyzed their salads—maybe using less dressing or less chicken—to come up with more favorable ratings," she said.

Whatever the number of calories, merely calling something a salad doesn't make it healthy. Also, calling chicken "crispy" instead of fried is misleading. Essentially what McDonald's has done is taken the contents

of its chicken sandwiches, dumped them on top of some lettuce, and served it up with a creamy dressing. As Bob Sandelman—whose market research firm specializes in the restaurant industry—told the press, food chains "have doctored those products up. If people really knew, they would find out that the salads pack more fat and calories. That's why the key word in all this is 'perceived' to be healthy." The Fruit & Walnut Salad is better at 310 calories, but it's unlikely to hold you for a meal since it's just apples, grapes, and a few "candied walnuts," even with the "creamy low-fat yogurt."

McDonald's number-one motivation is to keep its customers addicted to its products, and lettuce covered with fried chicken furthers that goal. But touting its "premium salads" gives the false impression that the company sells healthy items.

## Not Happier Meals

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In response to charges that it's turning a new generation of young people into loyal Big Mac and McFlurry fans, McDonald's now offers "Happy Meal Choices." The new and improved Happy Meal gives parents the option of replacing high-fat french fries with "Apple Dippers" (sliced apples and caramel dipping sauce). Instead of a Coke, kids can now have apple juice or milk. There is, however, no substitute for the hamburger, cheeseburger, or Chicken McNuggets.

But is this any real improvement? Probably not. For a toddler who needs about 1,000 calories per day, a Happy Meal consisting of four Chicken McNuggets, small french fries, and low-fat chocolate milk totals 580 calories, or more than half of a child's daily recommended calorie intake. This of course says nothing about the dismal nutritional quality of these foods, which are devoid of fiber as well as vitamins and minerals that are especially important for growing children. And while it's true that the "Apple Dippers" in the Happy Meal contain fewer calories than french fries, this "improvement" hardly compensates for the heavy dose of sugar delivered by the dipping sauce that kids are sure to love....

## A Small Fraction Are Healthier

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In 2005, McDonald's conceded that despite all the hoopla around its new salad offerings, only a tiny fraction of its customers actually orders them. While the company loudly trumpets the sale of 400 million premium salads since their introduction in 2003, that number is dwarfed by the total body count. McDonald's serves 23 million people a day in the United States alone, or roughly 16.8 billion people in the two-year period since the salads' introduction. As the *Washington Post* calculated, this means that in mid-2005 just 2.4 percent of McDonald's customers had ordered salads since they were added to the menu.

[Healthy menu options] make for effective window dressing, helping to keep critics and regulators quiet.

We need look no further than the fast-food king itself to confirm these stats: McDonald's spokesperson Bill Whitman explained, "The most popular item on our menu continues to be the double cheeseburger, hands down." McDonald's isn't alone in this regard. Data from NPD Foodworld indicate that the number-one entree ordered by men in America is a hamburger and the number-one selection among women is french

fries, followed by hamburgers. Also, a typical Burger King outlet sells only 4 or 5 of its allegedly healthier Veggie Burgers in a day compared to 300 to 500 of any other sandwich or burger on the menu.

## Burgers More Profitable

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Fast-food-chains are faced with unavoidable food-related obstacles when it comes to serving truly healthy alternatives. For example, produce is much harder to store than, say, frozen hamburger patties. Other challenges include standardization and mass production of messy, perishable fruits and vegetables. Such annoyances of nature add up to more complexity and higher costs. As Matthew Paull, McDonald's chief financial officer candidly explained to the *Economist* magazine, "There is no question that we make more money from selling hamburgers and cheeseburgers."

As a result, one of the basic tenets of fast-food economics is the so-called 80-20 rule, which holds that 80 percent of a fast-food company's revenue derives from 20 percent of its products, usually its flagship line of burgers and fries. As *Forbes* magazine writer Tom Van Riper explains, so-called healthier fare at fast-food chains serves only a narrow fraction of the population while conveniently deflecting attention away from the remainder of the unwholesome menu:

Certainly, soups and salads have added incremental revenue, since they serve that segment that has made a commitment to healthier eating. They also make for effective window dressing, helping to keep critics and regulators quiet. But a fast-food fixture that has measured its success in terms of "billions served" can't live on lightweight salads that people can get anywhere. It must beef up sales of Big Macs and Quarter Pounders. Given the 80-20 rule, a 5% drop in burger and fries sales, coupled with a 10% gain in "new menu" items, would net out to a 2% drop in revenue. For a \$20 billion company like McDonald's, that's a \$400 million hit....

## Game Over

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Getting products (any products) into the mouths of cash-carrying customers is of course the top priority for food marketers. So when one of their creations fails to "show them the money," it gets swept into the dustbin of failed ideas. Such was the fate of the apparently less than popular Go Active! Adult Happy Meal, which was jettisoned by McDonald's after it had dutifully delivered the desired halo effect following the 2004 press conference. A nice McDonald's "customer satisfaction representative" apologized when I asked if it was still available, explaining that it was a "limited-time promotion." Other "well-intentioned" menu innovations have also met their untimely demises at the hands of major restaurant chains. For example, in 2004 Ruby Tuesday reduced some portion sizes and added healthier items. However, when slumping sales threatened quarterly returns, the company soon returned to its roots, aggressively promoting its biggest burgers and restoring its larger portions of french fries and pasta. Similarly, while Wendy's garnered great press in February 2005 for its "bold" decision to add fresh fruit to its menu, that resolution was rescinded as soon as corporate headquarters reviewed the disappointing sales figures a few months later. As the *Washington Post* explained in 2005, "Fast-food and casual dining chains are slowly going back to what they do best: indulging Americans' taste for high-calorie, high-fat fare."

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## Further Readings

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