Sizing Up Package Size Effects

Natalina Zlatevska, Bond University, Australia
Marilyn Jones, Bond University, Australia

Repackaging food into smaller servings has become a popular strategy among food marketers but recent research surprisingly suggests that smaller packs may lead to more food consumed. The aim of the present research is to explore the usefulness of using smaller package sizes as a tool for monitoring consumption. In particular, we explore this in situations where distractions are present. We find that smaller package sizes are beneficial for dieters, though usage needs to be in circumstances where no distractions are present. In situations where distractions may exist, dieters are better off consuming from traditional larger sized packs.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15061/volumes/v37/NA-37

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Repackaging food into smaller servings has become a popular strategy among food marketers but recent research surprisingly suggests that smaller packs may lead to more food consumed (Coelho do vale et al. 2008). Studies have found that, when comparing dieters with non-dieters, dieters were more likely to over-consume from smaller packs (Scott et al. 2008). These results are unexpected as smaller sized potions are typically used as a dietary aid (Wansink et al. 2005). The aim of the present research is to explore the usefulness of using smaller package sizes as a tool for monitoring consumption. In particular, we explore this in situations where distractions are present.

The main prediction of the present study is that small package sizes are beneficial for dieters, though usage needs to be in circumstances where no distractions are present. It is expected that restrained eaters (dieters) will consume more from smaller package sizes when distracted than when not distracted. This is because dieting individuals will be unable to monitor the visual consumption cues or benchmarks offered by a smaller package and will therefore believe that they have consumed less, because the portions are smaller, than what they actually have. Moreover, because consumption volume is proportionate to package and serving size, the more that is placed in front of a distracted dieter, the more they will eat, it is expected that dieters will consume more from larger packages when distracted than when not distracted.

The design of the study was a 2x2x2 mixed design with one measured variable, dietary restraint (restrained, unrestrained) and two manipulated variables, serving size (small, large), and distraction (TV on, TV off). The main dependent variable of the study was the amount of candy consumed during the experiment. Depending on the condition, participants were either given a number of small packs (5 x 20g) or one large pack (1 x 100g) of chocolate rocks confectionary. Participants in the distraction condition were shown an episode of a popular television show during the study. The amount of candy consumed during the experiment was weighed once participants completed a final, short questionnaire.

The results reveal that as expected, restrained eaters consume more from smaller packages when distracted than when not distracted. This is because for restrained eaters, the visual cues of package size are used as a consumption monitoring device. Disturbing environments distort a dieter’s ability to accurately monitor consumption. The findings illustrate this point further, with respondents stating that when distracted they found it much more difficult to regulate consumption behaviour than when not distracted.

Somewhat surprisingly, although distraction has a negative effect on consumption for restrained eaters consuming from smaller packages, distraction has an overall positive effect on consumption from larger packages and on the consumption patterns of unrestrained eaters. The results reveal that, restrained eaters consume more from large packets when not distracted than when distracted. They also consume more from large packets when not distracted than they do from small packets when distracted. A possible explanation for the unexpected results is that, although visual contact with food and close attention to consumption cues is extremely important in providing dietary benchmarks when monitoring intake of smaller sized portions, visual contact and attention also creates increased tension and exposes dieters to greater temptation when faced with larger sized servings. Because restrained eaters rely heavily on consumption cues and norms, when not distracted and focused solely on the large serving of food placed in front of them, they are more likely to consume more.

In summation, repackaging bulk snack food into smaller sized servings is beneficial for individuals, though only when the repackaged food is consumed in environments where distractions are not present. Distractions distort an individual’s impression of dietary intake. Conversely, larger serving sizes under conditions of no distraction may create increased cognitive tension and temptation. When distracted some of the internal conflict and stress, of being faced with a large serving size is removed. This finding is consistent with popular dieting wisdom suggesting that those who absorb themselves in activities that do not relate to food are more successful at keeping temptations at bay.

Although smaller package sizes are beneficial for dieters, consumption needs to be in situations where distractions are not present, a scenario that is quite difficult to replicate in everyday circumstances. Rarely does an individual consume food in situations where no children, television, radio, co-workers or friends are present. Consistent with the conclusions drawn by Scott et al (2008) and Coelho do vale et al. (2008), dieters should opt for traditional larger package sizes over smaller package sizes in circumstances where they might lose track of the number of smaller packets consumed.

REFERENCES


