Don’T Count Calorie Labeling Out: Calorie Counts on the Left Side of Menu Items Lead to Lower Calorie Food Choices

Steven Dallas, New York University, USA
Peggy Liu, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Peter Ubel, Duke University, USA

Drawing on information processing theory, we propose a new explanation for why calorie information has been minimally effective in many existing studies: it is typically displayed to the right of menu items. Three studies show that positioning calorie information the left (vs. right) of menu items greatly increases its effectiveness.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Government-mandated calorie information on menus and menu boards has been one of the United States government’s favorite tools for combatting the obesity epidemic in the United States (FDA 2016). Indeed, as part of the Affordable Care Act, all chain restaurants nationwide will have to provide calorie information on their menus by May 2018 (FDA 2017). However, the key question remains of whether providing calorie information actually reduces the number of calories that people order, and, if they do, by how much. This question has been the subject of extensive research across multiple disciplines, including marketing, economics, psychology, and public health, and, in general, this abundance of studies has found either a small effect or no effect of calorie counts (see Kiszko et al. 2014 for a review). Accordingly, these findings have led some to call calorie labeling a policy “failure” (Carroll 2015; Singal 2015).

In the present research, we suggest a new account for why calorie information may often have little effect in terms of leading consumers to make lower calorie food choices and, based on this account, propose a trivially simple intervention to increase the effectiveness of calorie information. Specifically, we suggest that one reason calorie information is typically ineffective is because it is currently typically displayed to the right of food items on menus. Although traditional economic thought would suggest that the order in which information is processed should have no impact on decision making (Frank and Bernanke 2008), we suggest that the positioning of calorie information on menus and menu boards (and, as a result, the order in which information is processed) has a significant effect on consumers’ food choices. Thus, our key hypothesis in this research is that displaying calorie information to the left of food items will lead to significantly lower calorie orders than displaying calorie information to the right of food items.

According to information processing theory, information encountered earlier is given greater weight than information encountered later (Anderson and Jacobson 1965; Asch 1946; Hammond et al. 1998; Lee et al. 2006; Nisbett and Ross 1980). Given that Americans read from left-to-right, when calorie information is to the right of menu items, as is typically the case, it is only processed after consumers have already processed the food item’s name. As a result, the food item’s name is likely given substantially greater weight than the calorie information when making the food choice. This is especially troubling in light of recent research which has found that a food item’s name cues consideration of the food’s taste before its health (Sullivan et al. 2015). Accordingly, even if the calorie information is considered later in the decision process, initial taste information has already been given considerable weight. Thus, the calorie information has a limited effect on consumers’ food orders, which is what has been found in the numerous studies that have examined the effect of calorie information on consumers’ food choices (see Kiszko et al. 2014 for a review). Thus, we propose that simply moving calorie information to the left of menu items will greatly increase its effect on consumers’ food orders. In particular, calorie information to the left (vs. right) of menu items may lead to lower calorie food orders because consumers will view the calorie information earlier, which will lead them to place greater weight on the calorie information.

We tested our main hypothesis—that positioning calorie information to the left (vs. right) of menu items leads to significantly lower calorie food choices in three studies. In Study 1, which was conducted at a casual chain restaurant, customers ordered from a menu with either no calorie information, calorie information to the left of the menu items, or calorie information to the right of the menu items. As predicted, consumers who ordered from a menu with calorie information to the left of the menu items ordered significantly fewer calories than consumers who ordered from a menu with either calorie information to the right of the menu items or no calorie information at all. There was no significant difference in terms of calories ordered between the no calories and right calories conditions.

In Study 2, the goal was to try to determine why calorie information to the left (vs. right) leads to lower calorie food orders. Repeating Study 1, we found that consumers ordered significantly fewer calories when the calorie information was to the left of the menu items (vs. to the right or not present at all). More importantly, though, we found support for a serial mediation model. Specifically, when calorie information is to the left (vs. right) of menu items, consumers view it earlier, and the earlier they view the calorie information, the more weight they place on the calorie information when deciding what to order, which leads them to order lower calorie meals.

In Study 3, we tested for a boundary condition of our effect. Specifically, calorie information to the left (vs. right) is only processed earlier because Americans read from left-to-right. Thus, if the effect is truly driven by the order in which information is processed (rather than, say, the physical position of the calorie information on the menu), we should find that the effect is reversed for consumers who read from right-to-left. Accordingly, Study 3 was conducted with Hebrew-speaking Israelis, who read from right-to-left. As predicted, the effect completely reversed for this sample, with consumers ordering significantly fewer calories when the calorie information was to the right of the menu items (vs. to the left or not present at all).

Thus, it may be premature to call calorie labeling a “failed” policy. Instead, it appears that one reason calorie information has been ineffective is because it is typically displayed to the right of menu items. Accordingly, going forward, it should be required for calorie information to be positioned to the left of menu items, as this appears to greatly increase its positive effect on consumers’ food orders.

REFERENCES


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