



## Behavioral economics? Another way to promote healthier foods and beverages

Efforts to promote healthier food and beverage choices have tried to change people's behavior in a variety of ways.

Traditionally, most efforts to promote healthier choices relied on **educating the consumer**. This could be education on the benefits of eating healthy or the potential consequences of making an unhealthy choice. Recent research shows this may not be the most effective way to influence people's choices.

Another common strategy to improve food and beverage choices is to **restrict or eliminate** less healthy options. This approach can backfire. People have a natural reaction to rebel when they feel coerced into making a choice. Eliminating less healthy food options or offering excessive incentives prompts individuals to rebel and over-compensate when the restrictions are not in place. These strategies are unlikely to lead to consistent, long-term behavior change. People tend to value the outcome of a decision more when they feel like they have had the freedom to make their own choice.

With both education and restriction falling short of achieving the outcome we're looking for (healthier individuals), behavioral economics has looked into why we sometimes make irrational decisions. Researchers have created strategies based on behavioral economics that influence our choices by understanding our decision-making process.

We have two decision-making systems: Automatic and reflective. The automatic system is unconscious and often irrational. The reflective system is rational and deliberate. We tend to default to the automatic system when we are under stress, have many decisions to make, or have low resources to make a decision. This is why we are more likely to "pre-order" a healthy meal a day ahead of time rather than order it when we're hungry. Quite often, we are under the influence of the automatic system when making food choices.

Behavioral economics strategies are evidence-based and are used to "nudge" people to make healthier food choices. They make the healthy choice the easy choice, which is especially helpful when we are under the influence of the automatic system. Some example strategies include:

- Provide an attractive fresh fruit presentation, such as baskets at the checkout with prompts asking "Would you like a piece of fresh fruit today?"
  - The research says to increase the visibility and improve the placement of healthier items. People are more likely to buy what they see first.
- Make the healthier items the first thing customers see when they enter the cafeteria
  - One study found that white milk sales increased up to 46% when placed first in school lunchroom coolers.

Not only are behavioral economics strategies low-cost, applying these strategies won't negatively affect the food business's profit margin. In many studies, implementing these strategies actually increased sales.

## How to promote healthy choices for meetings and events

- Allow meeting and events participants to pre-order their meals. People tend to choose healthier meals when they pre-order.
- Use attractive, descriptive names for healthier foods items and regular titles for less healthy options.
- Use tall, skinny glasses or other containers to give illusion of more drink or food.
- Use smaller plates and bowls.
- Add any kind of non-fried, low-fat vegetable to meals.
- Offer more than one choice of healthier foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy) and decrease the number of less healthy options. For example, provide one choice of dessert but several choices for fruits and vegetables.
- For potlucks, encourage attendees to bring food and beverage items that meet the *Healthy Nutrition Guidelines*. There are examples in the *Recommended Foods and Beverages* section (see pages R-7 and R-8). Examples include:
  - **For desserts** – small portion sizes
  - **For condiments** – low-sodium and low-fat options
  - **For breads** – whole grain breads
- If you're having a buffet, put the healthier options at the beginning of the line and label food and beverage options that meet the guidelines.
- Display a poster on the food table to let your attendees know the nutritional importance of what is in their meal.



**Healthy veggie snack**



**Chicken wrap**



**Desserts in smaller portions**



## How to promote healthy choices in cafeterias

1. **Use strategies other cafeterias have found successful** to encourage customers to make the healthy choice.
  - Make the healthier items the first thing customers see when they enter the cafeteria. Place healthier items first in cooler or on food line.
    - ✓ **It works!** White milk sales increased up to 46% when placed first in school lunchroom coolers.
  - Make healthier choices more visible by placing at eye-level and in good lighting.
    - ✓ **It works!** Moving and highlighting fruit in a school cafeteria increased sales by up to 102%.
  - Make the healthier choice the default option. You can still have the less healthy side available for customers who ask for it.
    - ✓ **It works!** People are more likely to choose default options.
  - Consider an "express line" with healthy grab-and-go items such as boxed lunches with sandwiches made on whole grain bread, a side of fruit and vegetable, and water.
    - ✓ **It works!** 35% more students in one cafeteria chose healthier items when the cafeteria offered a "healthy choice only" convenience line.
  - Try accepting pre-orders of healthier items in the morning, and then have them ready for pick up.
    - ✓ **It works!** People tend to order healthier choices more often when they pre-order.
  - Make smaller portions the "regular" and the larger portions "double."
    - ✓ **It works!** Customers respond more to portion size labeling than actual container size. We eat less when items have a larger sounding name.
  - Use attractive, descriptive names for healthier meal options.
    - ✓ **It works!** Naming vegetables in an attractive way increased the selection of vegetables in school cafeterias.
      - One cafeteria incorporates "exotic new veggies" in their menu like creamed cauliflower and mixed roots.
      - One cafeteria serves "breakfast salads" made with eggs, chicken or tofu, and vegetables.
  - Use tall, skinny glasses for beverages. Tall and skinny glasses make it look like there's more drink. This also works for food containers.
    - ✓ **It works!** People pour more into a short, wide glass than a tall, narrow glass.
  - Use smaller plates and bowls.
    - ✓ **It works!** People over-serve themselves when using larger plates and bowls, and they underserve themselves when using smaller plates and bowls.
  - Make sure meals come with a vegetable. You can add any kind of non-fried, low-fat vegetable to meals.
    - ✓ **It works!** People think meals with vegetables are more appealing.



- Offer more than one choice of healthier foods and decrease the number of less healthy options.
  - ✓ **It works!** We eat more when we have more options to choose from
    - Students in one cafeteria chose more vegetables when they had two choices instead of one choice.
    - One cafeteria has an oatmeal bar with fun, healthy toppings that customers can choose from like blueberries, cranberries, apples, dried currants, dried apricots, walnuts, toasted almonds, flax seed and honey.
    - One cafeteria allows customers to “create their own bowl” by choosing a whole grain, a protein, and then a seasonal vegetable.
- Encourage people to make the healthy choice by asking, “Would you like a piece of fresh fruit today?” or “Would you like water with that?”
  - ✓ **It works!** Students at one school were four times more likely to take fruits when the servers asked them if they wanted fruit or juice.
    - One cafeteria found that giving options helps control costs and reduce calorie consumption. They’d ask customers “would you like cheese or sour cream?” on taco bar days.
- Make the daily special a healthier choice.
  - ✓ **It works!** Customers are more likely to choose a meal featured on the front of a menu as the special.
    - One cafeteria had “Wellness Wednesdays.” The Wednesday special featured a new, healthy food like sweet potato casserole.
    - One cafeteria had “Fresh Start Mondays.” The menu included new vegetable-loaded recipes and exotic flavors.

## 2. Market healthier choices by using the Choose Well–Live Well materials

- Use the Choose Well–Live Well campaign materials to promote the healthy choice. Label vegetarian, gluten-free and healthy options with food and beverage labels.
- Put up Choose Well–Live Well posters around the cafeteria and worksite.
- Tell your customers about the healthy options available in your cafeteria through emails or newsletter articles.