The psychology of food choice: Intention to action

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The global context

- **World Health Organization (WHO)**
  - Society gripped by obesity epidemic *(WHO, 2007)*
  - CHD via obesity will be THE of major cause of death and disability worldwide by 2020 *(WHO, 1996)*

- **European Food Council (EFC)**
  - Relationship between food choice health key public concern *(EFC, 2004)*
  - Poor food choice linked to disease states (CHD, neoplasms etc.)
Policy, strategy & progress (?)

• UK Department of Health
  – “Health of the nation”, 8 areas of food choice (DoH, 1997)
  – 5-a-day fruit and vegetables (DoH, 2003 re-launch)
  – Dietary salt (DoH, 2007)
  – Energy derived from fat (DoH, 2004)
  – Eating range of dairy (Food Standards Agency-FSA-2006)

• UK based information
  – Augmented anti-obesity campaign (DoH, 2008) £372M
  – Change4life “eat well, move more, live longer” (DoH, 2009)
  – Food labelling work with food sector (FSA, 2007)
  – “Sales of ‘super foods’ soaring...” (Telegraph, 2007)
  – High profile media e.g. Jamie Oliver (2007; 2008)
The state of play

- **Sobering reality**
  - 17 yrs since The *Health of The Nation* report (DoH, 1992)
  - High rates of mortality/morbidity re: poor health choices remain
  - People are *not changing* their behaviours
Why aren’t things getting better?

• “Up-stream” information giving campaigns
  – The presentation of information on healthy food choice
    • Traffic lights; Change4life; web based information (inc retailers)
  – Overtime it is the case that these *may* work
    • Lots of evidence from Health Psychology that they might not
    • E.g. anti-smoking information on packets

• Does anyone engage with the information?
  – Cf. Smoking campaigns: does anyone think smoking won’t kill?
  – How many people deliberately set out to be unhealthy?
  – Something is going wrong...
We are creatures of habit

• Everyone has their habits
  – “You can live to be a hundred if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be a hundred” (Woody Allen)

• Limited control over choices
  – “Most of a person's everyday life is determined... by features of the environment ...that operate outside of conscious awareness” ... “The unbearable automaticity of being” (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999)
How people are hamstrung re: food choices

• Firstly, through these habitual “choices”
  – Best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour
  – Poor food decisions yesterday = poor decisions today
  – No one can change what happened yesterday...

• Secondly, via our physiology
  – Appetite well adapted to feel full from low energy dense foods before overconsumption occurs
  – Appetite poorly adapted for environment rich in energy dense foods (Blundell et al., 1987)
Timing is everything...

Commercial and social enterprise

• Moment of synergy?
  – Government(s) agenda / growing public and media awareness
  – Food industry promoting “health”
  – Volume of “pure” research outputs from psychology
  – Knowledge Transfer Food Innovations Project SHU

• Sheffield Hallam University’s offer
  – To seek to provide products and services to facilitate healthy food choices for clients via the application of collaborative knowledge, developed with commercial partners. How?
  – 1. Psychology/CFI track record of working with food sector
  2. Expertise in science of behaviour change
  3. Expertise in science of hunger and satiety
Understanding food choice

First step towards altering client behaviour

Food choice

- Psycho-physiological model
- Developmental model
- Social/cognitive model

Psychology: Sheffield Hallam University
Can behaviour be predicted?

(From: *Theory of Planned Behaviour*, e.g. Ajzen, 1988)

- **Attitude**: +/- or neutral
- **What we think other people think...**
- **Do we believe we have any control**

Motivation to do something

Intention

Volition: doing something

Psychology: Sheffield Hallam University
Motivation ≠ action

Good news: **Motivation**

Bad news: **Action**

Psychology: Sheffield Hallam University
Moving from intention to action

• Goal intention (motivation)
  – *What* you will do
  – New Year’s resolutions...
  – Vague and passive

• Implementation intentions (volition/ACTION)
  – *When*, *where* and *how* you will do it
  – Creating the *illusion* of habit
  – Capture of behaviour by cues in environment
  – Requires “cognitive” effort before you get to the store

  – Specific and active
Some research examples

• Applications of implementation intentions (imps)
  – Different to usual “downstream” interventions aimed at individuals, because requires deliberate planning (Verplanken & Wood, 2006)
  – Significant reduction in dietary fat via imps + 1 month (Armitage, 2004), for motivated and non motivated
  – Evidence that imps comparable to small financial incentive to break habit of not buying organic food (Bamberg, 2002)
How can we achieve this?

Beyond information giving

“At its simplest, knowledge transfer is about starting a conversation” (ESRC, 2009).

For further information, or to start a conversation about how we may add value to your business, please contact:

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