

A STUDY OF RESTAURATEURS' ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES IN RELATION TO OBESITY

Keywords: *Obesity, Restaurants, Fast Food, Health, Economics*

Gary "Lee" Frantz, Ph.D., FMP
Business, Food and Hospitality Programs
Southeast Community College, Lincoln, NE

Chanda Walter, M.S., RPhT
Health and Nutritional Sciences
South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD

Kendra K. Kattlemann, PhD, RD, LN
Health and Nutritional Sciences
South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD

Introduction

The dramatic increase in the rate of obesity in the United States is raising new public health concerns. Each year, obesity-related problems cause at least 300,000 deaths and cost around 100 billion dollars. Take a walk down the street, go to a shopping center or sport event, or pick up a newspaper or magazine and the severity of the obesity problem in the United States is becoming a critical problem to solve. About 65% of the U.S. adult population is overweight (35%) or obese (30%), which has doubled in only two decades. Obesity-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke, arthritis, respiratory problems, cancer, and sleep apnea have become a major concern in our health care crisis. Poor diet and physical inactivity leading to excess body weight was identified as the second leading cause of death in the United States.

While Americans are consuming more food outside the home, it may seem easy to assume a relationship between the increases in the success of the restaurant industry and national obesity rates. The growth in food away from home has created concern about its possible effect on dietary quality. Because so much food is eaten outside the home, restaurants do have a significant impact on the food consumption of the United States and play a considerable role in the shaping of American diets.

Problem

Obesity prevention methods are being researched and implemented in U.S. schools, and the populace as a whole, however, little research has been done to assess restaurateur's attitudes and practices in regard to healthful food offerings, cooking processes, and the effect these offerings have on their bottom-lines. Additionally, few educational and outreach products are available for educating future restaurant chefs, owners, and operating managers. This study developed a content valid survey instrument that will be useable to assess restaurateurs' attitudes,

practices and responsibilities toward helping consumers make healthful food choices when eating away from home; and the perceived economic impact on the restaurant business.

Methodology

This research used stakeholder focus group methodology followed by subject matter expert (SME) Delphi process to develop the survey instrument; and determine evidence of face and content validity.

Focus Group Methodology

Focus groups combine interviewing, participant observation, and group interaction in order to investigate people's thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the research topic. Focus groups used in this research consisted of six to eight restaurant industry stakeholders—educators, owners, operators, and chefs. Content analysis was used as a technique to examine the social communication among restaurateurs. This method allowed for making inferences by objectively identifying special characteristics of messages. Categories such as themes provided a means for assessing the qualitative data gathered.

Delphi Methodology: SMEs

The Delphi Method is a type of survey process that can be used to collect knowledge and opinions from a group of experts by a series of questionnaires. The benefits of this method were to provide a rapid consensus and to cover a wide range of expertise and avoid group thinking. SMEs were purposely selected based on having a body of scientific work that combined at least two of the following three criteria: 1.) expertise in restaurant management education and research; 2.) expertise in nutrition education and research; and 3.) expertise in restaurant business economics and research. Specific themes were identified for further evaluation. After review of these recommendations, the final survey instrument was developed.

Results

The survey created was designed to: 1) assist in evaluating restaurant owners' and managers' attitudes and practices in relation to obesity, 2) allow restaurant managers and owners to reflect on how they perceive consumers feel about restaurant food offerings, 3) show the value restaurateurs' can offer on their menus by determining whether or not they provide food dollars that can stretch further and 4) examining where the underlying issue of obesity falls in regards to the restaurant industry. Key findings from this survey, if conducted, will allow for future awareness of the obesity concern in the dining away from home atmosphere.

The current study developed an instrument to use in support a collaborative USDA Agricultural and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) grant proposal in Human Nutrition and Obesity. It is recommended that this future study involve cooperation between dietetic and restaurant researchers, nutrition outreach specialists, dietetic and restaurant management educators, and industry stakeholders. Parties interested in pursuing the AFRI grant should contact the author for rights to proceed with the research.