All Indulgent Products Are Not Created Equal
Towards an Informed Retail Checkout Strategy
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Hank’s perspectives have been shared in numerous publications, including the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and the Washington Post as well as the major television networks and CNN, NPR and the BBC. He is the author of the book Stuffed: An Insider’s Look at Who’s (Really) Making America Fat and several landmark reports including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported Better-for-you Foods: It’s Just Good Business, and New Realities at Retail Checkout: Challenges and Opportunities for Instant Consumable Candy and Snacks (supported by the National Confectioners Association). He has moderated expert panels at the White House, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Partnership for a Healthier America among others and served as advisor to the NCA in developing the Always a Treat Initiative in conjunction with the Partnership for a Healthier America.

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Richard has been invited to present his views by such organizations as the Lancet Commission on Obesity, the National Academies of Science, George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health and the International Sweetener Colloquium on topics ranging from structuring the dietary guidelines, the food industry and obesity, and the impact of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes on health and business. He has also published a number of papers exploring the role of sweet foods in the diet, low-calorie sweeteners and weight management, new approaches to the dietary guidelines, and facts and myths surrounding artificial sweeteners.

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Executive Summary

Stratospheric obesity rates in the United States are driving policies that target high-calorie, high sugar foods and beverages. Measures such as taxation, bans at retail checkout lanes and warning labels on package fronts have been advanced by regulatory bodies and public health advocates treating all such products as equals. This paper will demonstrate that all indulgent and “junk foods” are not created equal and, therefore, should not be lumped together for policy-decision purposes. One-size-does-not-fit-all. Candy is the exception within the indulgent food category in that there is not a higher purchase by those with obesity. And the importance of portions in delivering the benefits of “permissible indulgence” will be highlighted. The hoped for impact of this paper is to help guide policymakers and public health officials to make more informed and effective decisions on how obesity can be addressed by the food industry.

Introduction

Concerns about the health of Americans are driving the public health community and regulators to look for ways to dampen the impact of certain foods and beverages on consumer diets. Globally, regulators have been actively advancing dictates to limit the consumption of products deemed to be “junk foods,” including taxing sugar-sweetened beverages; flagging labels of products high in calories, sugar, saturated fats and sodium; and restricting the display of such items at food retailer checkout counters.

While such measures have been met with varying degrees of success, the assumption that all indulgent foods and beverages – soft drinks, sweet baked goods, packaged pastries, cookies, chips and pretzels, packaged ice cream, and chocolate and non-chocolate candy - are lumped together as “junk foods” is a one-size-fits-all approach that neglects consideration of individual product category purchase and consumption patterns and their linkage to obesity.

The recent “Healthy Checkout Ordinance” passed in Berkeley, California banning “junk foods” at retail checkout utilizes the definition that food with more than 5 grams added sugar or 200 mg sodium will be banished from the checkout aisle. While useful, this “ingredient” criteria does not consider the impact that individual product categories violating these criteria may have on calorie or sugar consumption and their true link to obesity.¹,²

This paper examines the purchase, consumption and usage patterns for key indulgent product categories to gain a better understanding of the role these individual food sectors have on diet and to assess the connection each has to obesity and the intake of less desired food ingredients. As a result, the intent is to yield more effective policy decisions, better dietary guidance and enlightened industry actions to enhance consumer health.
Americans’ Unhealthy Waistlines

The health of Americans is on the decline with obesity rates soaring and longevity declining. As shown in Figure 1, the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) illustrates that obesity rates in the United States have hit 42.4%, with 16 states having a prevalence of obesity of 35% or greater. The trend is alarming given that only four states exhibited obesity rates of 35% or greater in 2015. 3

Reports that consumers have eaten more calories and “comfort” foods and have put on additional weight (the “Quarantine 15”) since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic have been confirmed by a Harris Poll which cited that 61% of adults reported undesired weight changes, with more than 2 in 5 (42%) saying they gained more weight than they intended. Of this group, adults reported gaining an average of 29 pounds (with a median gain of 15 pounds). 4

Such weight gain during the pandemic further exacerbates America’s obesity crisis and suggests that projections that almost half (48.9%) of the U.S. population will have obesity by 2030 will prove accurate. 5 Compounding the health impact of this is that obesity – which is tied to diet - has been linked to a higher risk for COVID-19 complications, with research illustrating that those with obesity had a 48% greater rate of death due to Covid-19. 6

Just as disturbing is that child obesity rates have risen during the pandemic. A study released in September 2021 by the CDC found that the percentage of obese children and teens increased to 22.4%, compared with 19.3% before the pandemic. 7

Naturally, these alarming health trends have generated a host of well-intended strategies, but which may have been overly broad in their implementation. We will now examine the types of initiatives that have been implemented to slow down the consumption of so-called “junk foods.”
Regulatory and Environmental Overview

In the United States, efforts to address the dietary impact on obesity rates have been fragmented at best. While some regulatory efforts have ultimately been national in scope (e.g., placing calories on restaurant menu boards), other approaches to tax sugar-sweetened beverages and restrict consumer exposure to certain high-calorie, less healthy items have been limited to certain geographies. This has led the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to recommend a focused government strategy to address problems such as obesity. 8

Given that void, two major organizations have led the charge and taken stances to limit the intake of select nutrients, especially added sugars:

* The World Health Organization in 2015 issued guidelines recommending that adults and children reduce their daily intake of free sugars to less than 10% of their total energy intake. The global health body went further and cited that “capping your sugar intake at just 5 percent of your daily calories would provide additional health benefits.” 9

* The USDA Dietary Guidelines for 2015 – 2020 also recommended the 10% intake limit for added sugars. This limit was upheld for the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines despite the recommendations of the USDG scientific advisory committee to reduce that level to 6%. 10 (Figure 2 shows food and beverage category contributions to added sugars per data from The Sugar Association.)

Over the past decade, a number of regulatory actions have been taken to address rising obesity rates and arrest the consumption of foods and beverages deemed to contribute to that condition. Several approaches have been undertaken to ameliorate the consumption of “junk foods,” including taxes imposed on products high in sugar and saturated fats; package warning labels; and proposed bans at retail checkout counters.
Some specific examples include:

• **The Denmark “Fat Tax.”** In 2011, Denmark became the first country to institute a “fat tax” imposed on saturated fats. The tax impacted all food items with a saturated fat content exceeding 2.3% by weight, including meat, cheese, butter and margarine, along with oils and delicatessen products. In addition, products made from these foods, such as chips and other snack items, even if saturated fat accounted for less than 2.3% of the finished product, were subjected to the tax. It was calculated that consumption declined marginally (-0.4%) over the period from October 2011 to July 2012. A Danish Agriculture and Food Council survey also noted that 80% of those surveyed said they had not altered their consumption after the fat tax was imposed. Evidence showed that many Danish consumers changed their shopping habits by purchasing the taxed items (at lower cost) in neighboring countries such as northern Germany. For these reasons, the tax was repealed one year later. 

• **The Mexico Soda Tax.** In 2014, Mexico imposed a Mex$1 (U.S. $.05) per liter tax on all non-alcoholic beverages with added sugar. A study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that purchases of taxed beverages decreased by 5.5 percent in 2014 and 9.7 percent in 2015. Nevertheless, obesity rates have continued to rise. ConMexico, an industry trade association, conducted an analysis after one year which concluded that the impact on obesity rates was negligible. In the six years up to 2018, the percentage of Mexicans aged 20 or older who were either obese or overweight increased by almost four percentage points to 75.2%. 

• **Chile Black Stop Sign Labeling.** Chile’s Law of Food Labeling and Advertising, implemented in 2016, was the first national regulation to jointly mandate front-of-package warning labels (Figure 3), restrict child-directed marketing, and ban sales in schools of all foods and beverages containing added sugars, sodium, or saturated fats that exceeded the set nutrient or calorie thresholds. A study released in February 2020 showed that Chile’s efforts have led to a nearly 24% drop in consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks over two years and encouraged purchasing of healthier alternatives. However, according to a report issued by Chile’s Health Ministry, since the law went into effect obesity rates in school children have continued to rise from 51.2% in 2016 to 52.0% in 2019 and 54% in 2020. (Figure 4)

• **Berkeley “Junk Food” Ban.** Berkeley, California was the first city in the U.S. to implement a soda tax in 2015. At U.S. $.01 per fluid ounce the excise tax resulted in soda sales dropping by 9.6 percent in the year following tax implementation according to a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study. The city subsequently passed the nation’s first healthy checkout policy to commence in March 2021 with enforcement commencing on Jan. 1, 2022. The edict prohibits candy, chips, soda and other ‘junk food’ items from being available for purchase at store checkouts. As mentioned in the Introduction, this Healthy Checkout Ordinance eliminates items with more than 5 grams of added sugars per serving and 200 mg of sodium per serving. Notwithstanding the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study findings and subsequent Berkeley School of Public Health research which concluded that soda consumption was cut in half, annual County Health Rankings published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation show that adult obesity rates in Alameda County (where Berkeley and two other taxing cities reside) actually inched up 1 point since 2015, the same increase as the state of California. While taxes and draconian labels will clearly reduce purchases of the affected items, there is a dearth of research on the impact these actions have on the intended health benefits. There is scant evidence that total calorie consumption has declined due to these efforts, raising the issue that more “substitution effect” analyses should be performed to assess the net impact of regulatory actions. Additionally, ascertaining the impact on obesity and diabetes rates is crucial. Do these initiatives reverse the upward trends on population Body Mass Index (BMI) or measures of blood glucose levels?

Net: the jury is still out whether taxes, labels and/or bans can lower consumption of the targeted food and beverage items on a sustained basis and deliver improved health outcomes, such as reduced obesity rates.
The Food & Beverage Industry Response to Obesity and Overconsumption

Compared to the other sectors, packaged food and beverage companies have made the largest strides in helping to reduce calories, sugar and portion sizes. In the past dozen years, three major initiatives (Figure 5) stand out for their comprehensiveness:

- **Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation Calorie Reduction Commitment.** The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (HWCF), whose members include 16 of the nation’s leading consumer packaged goods (CPG) food and beverage manufacturers, voluntarily pledged to collectively sell 1 trillion fewer calories in the U.S. marketplace by 2012 (against a 2007 baseline) and sell 1.5 trillion fewer calories by 2015. In advance of the 2015 target date, it was determined that the committing companies had removed 6.4 trillion calories from the food supply, exceeding the original pledge by more than 400%. The reduction translated to the consumption of 78 fewer calories per person per day.19

- **Balance Calories Initiative.** In 2014 The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the American Beverage Association (ABA), The Coca-Cola Company, Dr. Pepper Snapple Group (now Keurig Dr. Pepper), and PepsiCo announced an initiative to reduce the number of calories that Americans consume from beverages by 20 percent by 2025. The 2019 update report cites that from 2014 to 2019, calories per person per day fell 5.6% from 203.0 to 191.8. In order to achieve the 2025 goal, an additional decline of 29.4 calories per person per day is required. The program has been supported by a major television campaign highlighting the industry’s actions to offer “More Choices. Smaller Portions. Less Sugar.” Over $100 million was earmarked in support of this campaign over three years.20

- **Always a Treat Initiative.** In 2017, the National Confectioners Association (NCA) brought together the leading chocolate and candy companies, including Mars Wrigley, Ferrara Candy Company, Ferrero, Lindt, Ghirardelli Chocolate, and Russell Stover Chocolates, to commit to the Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) that calorie information would be printed on 90% of package fronts and that at least half of their single-serving products would be 200 calories or less after five years. At the completion of the 5-year pledge period ending December 31, 2021, both commitments were achieved: over 90% (94.8%) of SKUs were identified with calories labeled on front-of-pack (FOP) and half (49.8%) of Instant Consumable SKUs were at 200 calories or less.21

Initiatives also have been undertaken by other food industry sectors. For example, the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS) and a number of convenience store chains have made commitments through the PHA to increase sales of healthier items. Overall, serious, public food industry commitments are helping to reduce calories, added sugars and portion sizes. To make more meaningful impact on consumer health and obesity, other food sectors such as restaurants, food service and sweet baked goods are presented with the opportunity to step up their efforts to improve their product nutritional profiles and reduce portions.
Consumers and Indulgent Products

Coming through the coronavirus pandemic, consumers are finding themselves in a conundrum. Many are more concerned about their health as fifty-nine percent of consumers said they are shopping more health-consciously and will likely continue to do so post-outbreak. Research supports this trend as the International Food Information Council (IFIC) May 2021 Food & Health Survey reconfirmed that 72% of consumers are trying to limit or avoid sugar. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, consumers were clamoring for comfort foods as evidenced by increased grocery sales of indulgent items, which have higher added sugar, saturated fat and/or sodium levels.

Because hospitalizations and death rates due to Covid-19 were significantly higher for those with obesity, the public health community is doubling down on curtailing consumption of what they deem as the biggest offender products, including sugar-sweetened beverages and “junk foods.” This results in the pursuit of brash measures such as front-of-package warning symbols, taxes and checkout bans.

Attempts to change consumer purchases and consumption of certain “offender” products through such policy measures is a “one-size-fits-all” approach and does not consider behavioral patterns exhibited by various consumer cohorts. Research over twenty-two years performed by Natural Marketing Institute (NMI) on consumer health and wellness segmentation has demonstrated wide disparities in the attitudes and behaviors consumers exhibit when considering healthier eating. Figure 6 illustrates these differences ranging from the Well Beings who are the most health attuned to the Fence Sitters who aspire to eat healthier to the Eat, Drink & Be Merrys who are the least concerned about health.

It should be noted that the highest obesity rates reside in the least health-involved consumer segments, the Magic Bullets and Eat, Drink & Be Merrys.

For instance, each consumer segment reads nutrition information on package labels at varying rates. According to NMI’s 2021 Health & Wellness Trends & Insights Report, the Well Beings, as expected, pay close attention to nutrition information on pack, with 84% selecting foods based on the nutritional facts panel. Conversely, less than one quarter (24%) of Eat, Drink & Be Merrys are utilizing that information to select foods, suggesting that one-size-fits-all policy tactics will not have their desired effect.

Similar to nutrition label reading, consumers do not purchase indulgent products equally. There are major differences across food product categories in the frequency of purchase and the quantity consumed. This topic will be addressed in a later section of this paper.
The Retail Checkout Environment

While the Berkeley “junk food” checkout ban signaled the public health community’s desire to drive healthier food sales at checkout, it was structured on a sugar, calories and sodium basis rather than targeting and tracking improvements in health outcomes.

Similarly, following the hospitalization of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson for Covid-19, Johnson in July 2020 pushed through new restrictions to curb obesity in the UK. This caught people by surprise considering that Johnson was once the proud libertarian who in 2018 denounced the UK’s new tax on sugary beverages as a “continuing creep of the nanny state.” As a result, “junk foods’ such as chocolates, “crisps” (chips) and sweets have been banished from grocery checkout lines to curb impulse buys.

While there have been no additional municipalities that have passed ordinances like Berkeley or the UK, it is important for food and beverage marketers to recognize that, due to consumers clamoring for healthier snacks, food retailers are also beginning to take notice.

In September 2018, Raley’s unveiled a “better-for-you” checkout format, reducing the number of candy offerings at its check stands by 25%. Shoppers can now find a selection of snacks focused on better nutrition, portion control and reduced sugar content, such as nuts, beef jerky and seaweed snacks.

Other grocery chains such as Ahold Delhaize (owners of Stop and Shop, Food Lion, Giant Foods, Hannaford Brothers and Giant/Martin’s) are exploring modifications to which products are offered at their checkout counters.

One of the primary issues raised for changing products at checkout is the “pester power” argument. This posits that parents are harassed by children demanding sweets and snacks during the checkout process. In August 2015 the Center for Science in the Public Interest published a report titled “Temptation at Checkout: The Food Industry’s Sneaky Strategy for Selling More” which advocated for the adoption of food and nutrition standards for checkout, citing “pester power” as one of the arguments for change. Subsequent research conducted by Hudson Institute examined different consumer health & wellness segments and determined that Fence Sitters, the cohort with the highest concentration of children in their households, exhibited an extremely low purchase index for “instant consumable” chocolates and candies. This quantitative evidence suggested that child pester power at retail checkout did not hold for single-serve candy and snack products.
All Indulgent Products Are Not Created Equal

The blunt instrument approach adopted by public health advocates to reverse high rates of adult and child obesity has not distinguished the effect of individual product categories on consumption. Missing is an examination of numerous consumer and marketing metrics which would uncover distinctions across products which would permit policies to be more targeted and, thus, more effective. Contributions to sugar and calorie consumption, frequency of purchase, quantities purchased, and linkage to obesity are some of the facets that should be evaluated. Following is an assessment of these factors on consumption behavior as it pertains to indulgent products:

I. Link to Obesity. A study conducted by Hudson Institute titled “Why They Buy: Fighting Obesity Through Consumer Marketing Research”29 was the first to examine differences in indulgent product purchases by consumer segments based on Body Mass Index (BMI). Figure 7 highlights the GAP between product purchases by the segment with obesity compared to the healthy weight segment. (i.e., an index of 100 = the purchase rate of the general population; indexes above 100 indicate higher purchase rates than the general population).

Important, there were no statistically significant differences in purchase rates of chocolate and non-chocolate candy between those consumers in the healthy weight segment and those comprising the obesity cohort. However, purchases of all other products in the indulgent category were significantly higher amongst those with obesity compared to healthy weight individuals. These findings signal that efforts to curtail excess consumption should be focused on the product categories with larger discrepancies between the healthy weight cohort and those with obesity. One exception: the high purchase index for diet sodas among those with obesity is hypothesized to help that cohort lower their caloric intake.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchase INDEX</th>
<th>Healthy Weight</th>
<th>Obesity GAP vs. Healthy Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diet soda</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>123.6*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular soda</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>119.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packaged pastries/ Baked goods</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>115.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookies</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>110.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potato &amp; other chips/ pretzels</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>110.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packaged ice cream</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>110.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-chocolate candy</td>
<td>102.3</td>
<td>109.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate candy</td>
<td>99.3</td>
<td>101.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant finding versus Healthy Weight individuals

Figure 7. The indulgent product purchase GAP between the Healthy Weight consumer segment and the cohort with obesity.
I. Link to Obesity (cont.)

Findings surrounding chocolate and non-chocolate candy were consistent with Hudson Institute’s Retail Checkout report cited above which utilized consumer health & wellness segmentation data generated by NMI and showed that the purchase of candy across consumer segments was virtually identical, showing no statistically significant differences in purchasing between the most health-focused segment and the least health-oriented segments exhibiting poorer eating habits and higher rates of obesity (Figure 8).

![Consumption Index](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well Beings®</th>
<th>Food Actives®</th>
<th>Fence Sitters®</th>
<th>Magic Bullets®</th>
<th>Eat, Drink &amp; Be Merrys®</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate Candy</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Chocolate Candy</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. All consumer segments consume chocolate and non-chocolate candy at similar rates.*

II. Contribution to Caloric Intake. According to National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data, beverages and sweet baked goods are the biggest contributors to caloric intake among indulgent products, followed by savory snacks. Candy and ice cream/frozen dairy were found to contribute only 1.9% of calories. (Figure 9)

![Figure 9](image)

**Beverages:** Sugar sweetened beverages (soda; sport/energy drinks; fruit drinks; smoothies/grain/nutritional beverages); tea; coffee

**Sweet Baked Goods:** Cakes; cookies; brownies; donuts; pies; sweet rolls; pastries

**Candy:** Chocolate and non-chocolate confectionery products

*Source: NHANES 2017-2018, ages 2+

*Figure 9. Beverages and sweet baked goods, followed by savory snacks, contribute the most calories among indulgent products.*
III. Contribution to Added Sugars Intake. NHANES data also highlights that the primary source of added sugars comes from beverages, especially sugar-sweetened beverages.\textsuperscript{31} (Figure 10) It should be noted that this sugar-sweetened beverage data is significantly higher than that reported by The Sugar Association in Figure 2.

![Figure 10. Beverages contribute the most added sugars among indulgent products.]

IV. Consumption Amounts. The volume of soft drinks consumed annually per person is unparalleled, with Americans quaffing 38.87 gallons\textsuperscript{32} each for the year ending 2018. As shown in Figure 11, for indulgent foods, the most consumed indulgent product categories were sweet baked goods at 40.0 pounds per person per year, followed by savory snacks at 32.7 pounds per person per year.\textsuperscript{33}

![Figure 11. Among indulgent foods, Americans consumed more pounds per capita of sweet baked goods and savory snacks.]

**Beverages:** Sugar sweetened beverages (soda; sport/energy drinks; fruit drinks; smoothies/grain/nutritional beverages); tea; coffee

**Sweet Baked Goods:** Cakes; cookies; brownies; donuts; pies; sweet rolls; pastries

**Candy:** Chocolate and non-chocolate confectionery products

Source: NHANES 2017-2018, ages 2+

Source: Euromonitor Passport 2020, Retail Volume, United States
V. Purchase Frequency. Soft drinks are the most frequently purchased indulgent product with over one-third (35.9%) of consumers purchasing at least a few times a week and over two-thirds (68.1%) purchase at least a few times per month. IRI reports that 47% of consumers eat 3+ snacks per day. Among indulgent food products, shoppers buy salty snacks on 28% of their retail trips, more than twice as often as candy. (Figure 12)

![Figure 12. Shoppers buy salty snacks at least twice as frequently as candy.](image_url)
The Importance of Portion Sizes

Consumers are finding themselves in a conundrum coming through the Covid-19 crisis as many are more concerned about their health yet during the pandemic were purchasing more comfort and “junk foods” and did not want to forfeit these tasty luxuries.

This quandary was spotlighted in a Natural Marketing Institute survey which showed that while 47% of consumers said they were eating more healthy food options, 40% said they were eating more comfort and “junk foods.”

The consumer trend for healthier eating is real. Consulting firm Accenture reported that 59% of consumers expect to continue shopping more health-consciously coming out of the pandemic. And a FMCG GURUS report noted that 69% of consumers in North America said they would make greater attempts to eat and drink healthier as a result of Covid-19.

Meanwhile, snacking is on the rise. Amid COVID-19 lockdowns, 79% of core snack categories saw a sales increase during 2020. The 2020 Mondelez State of Snacking report states that 88% of adults are snacking more or the same during the crisis vs. before.

This rise in health consciousness accompanied by a craving for indulgent foods suggests that this “permissible indulgence” trend will continue as consumers seek to treat themselves with snacks that are also aligned with their health, dietary and weight management goals.

One of the ways food manufacturers can address these seemingly conflicting needs is to employ portion control sizing. Portion packaging is a means to give consumers enjoyment without the guilt. In fact, IFIC reports that appropriate portion sizes are now consumers’ most common element of a “healthy eating pattern.”

Research conducted by Natural Marketing Institute confirmed that consumers are paying attention to portion sizes relative to their consumption of indulgent products. Thirty-four percent (34%) of consumers stated that they were eating smaller portions of snacks and candy while 38% cited that they were eating smaller portions of such indulgent foods to manage their calorie intake.

A handful of initiatives have been launched to specifically address the need to sell smaller portions. As noted in an earlier section, the soft drink and confectionery industries have made commitments to sell more items in smaller portions. Mondelez has made a pledge that 20% of its revenues will come from portion-controlled sizes by 2025. And on the non-profit front, Georgetown University’s Business for Impact has dedicated a program called the Portion Balance Coalition specifically to tackle the challenges surrounding reducing portions and educating consumers. Several major food companies such as Nestle, PepsiCo, Ferrero and Unilever are members of this organization. More industry effort will be required to leverage this timely strategy.
Conclusions

- Governments and regulatory bodies globally are advancing initiatives designed to restrict purchases and consumption of products containing excess calories and added sugars.

- The regulatory climate is driving specific actions to reduce the presence of “junk foods” at retail checkout lanes.

- Regulators and public health officials have employed a “one-size-fits-all” approach to limiting indulgent foods and beverages which leads to less effective policies.

- All indulgent products except chocolate and non-chocolate candy are purchased at statistically higher rates by those with obesity vs. healthy weight individuals.

- Among indulgent products, candy contributes the least to caloric, added sugar, and food quantity intake.

- Industrywide commitments by packaged foods, soft drink and confectionery companies to reduce sugar, calories and portion sizes have helped to make progress.
Implications for Policy

To be more successful in addressing the nation’s obesity crisis, the public health community and regulators must apply a more targeted approach to policy actions rather than taking the default option by categorizing all indulgent products as “junk foods” to be treated equally. This study demonstrates that programs designed to address obesity would be more effective if emphasis were placed on those foods and beverages linked closest to actual purchases by those with obesity. Nevertheless, all producers of indulgent foods and beverages need to re-examine opportunities to sell a greater portion of their product portfolios containing fewer calories, less sugar and smaller portions.

Food industries and policymakers should take the following into account:

• Public health officials and policymakers should consider the contributions of individual product categories to obesity and excess consumption; treating all indulgent products the same as “junk foods” will lead to ineffective policies

• Between the two indulgent product categories with the highest consumption amounts and that contribute the most calories and added sugars, soft drink companies have made a serious commitment to reduce sugar, calories and portion sizes; the sweet baked goods sector is presented with the opportunity to make a similar such pledge.

• Purchase behavior by consumers with obesity suggests that candy should not be lumped in with other indulgent products

• Companies that marry comfort with health will find a broad base of consumer interest. Snacks, candy and beverages that offer excellent taste with less sugar and calories will increase in importance as consumers want their pleasures but ‘a little less so.’

• Portion balance can be a powerful strategy utilized by food and beverage companies to help consumers enjoy their comfort foods and indulgences while trying to manage their weight and improve their health.

• Industry should expect that pressures to ban and restrict items at checkout will continue. Several retail checkout strategies should be evaluated for implementation:
  • Increase the number of smaller portions and ‘better-for-you’ items, such as sugar-free and organic
  • Manufacturers should work with retailers to make joint commitments to increase the variety of options for consumer choice sold at checkout
Endnotes


Endnotes


30 NHANES 2017-2018, ages 2

31 Ibid.


33 Euromonitor Passport 2020, retail volume, United States


36 Information Resources Inc., 52 weeks ending December 27, 2020


43 Portion Balance Coalition. https://www.portionbalance.org/