

Synopsis of Findings from Consumer Research Development of MyPyramid Food Guidance System

Consumer Research Overview:

Six rounds of consumer research were conducted to obtain consumer feedback to help guide the development of the new MyPyramid Food Guidance System that replaced the original Food Guide Pyramid. Below is a summary from each round of consumer research.

1) May-June 2002 Food Guide Pyramid Concepts and Messages

The objectives of this research were to assess consumer understanding of the concepts and messages of the original Food Guide Pyramid and to obtain feedback on how consumers use the Pyramid to make food choices, identifying any barriers they face. Eighteen focus groups were conducted in May and June of 2002 with a total of 178 participants. Six groups were conducted with general consumers. Twelve groups were conducted with a set of 3 special audiences (four groups each): elderly consumers (over 60 years of age), food stamp recipients, and overweight consumers (BMI over 30). The sessions were held in Baltimore, Houston, and Chicago.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Consumers can identify key Pyramid messages, but not the specifics.

- Most were familiar with the original Food Guide Pyramid.
- Many mentioned one or more of the key messages that the Food Guide Pyramid is intended to convey—variety, moderation, or balance. Others referred to the concept of proportionality, stating that you should eat more from the base and less as you move toward the top.
- Few (<20%) could place all of the food groups into correct tiers on a blank Pyramid.

Consumers are confused about servings and serving sizes.

- Most did not distinguish between the words “portion” and “serving,” which they considered to be the amount they ate on a single occasion.
- Responses to questions about servings and serving sizes suggested that these issues are confusing for consumers.
- Most believed that household measures, such as ounces or cups, would be a more effective way than “servings” to express a standard amount of food, because they are commonly understood.

Most consumers do not use the Pyramid in making food choices.

- Most said they had not used the Food Guide Pyramid. Some believed they had used the Pyramid subconsciously, especially while shopping.
- The most commonly cited barrier to using the Food Guide Pyramid was the recommended number of servings.

- Some said that the Pyramid was hard to follow; it was difficult to count servings, or it required too much work, time, or self-discipline.

Consumers recommended ways to increase the usefulness of the Pyramid.

- Many recommended providing more detailed information on serving sizes, such as using visual images. Some stated that using household measures (e.g., ounces, cups) would help them understand “servings.”
- Some felt it would help if the Pyramid were individualized by age or gender.

2) February 2004 Potential New Food Guidance System Messages

The objectives of this research were to assess how consumers understand potential new Food Guidance System messages and the potential appeal and perceived usefulness of these messages to consumers. Eight focus groups were conducted in February 2004 with a total of 75 participants. Groups were stratified by age (older and younger adults) and gender. The sessions were held in Baltimore and Chicago.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Recommended amounts of food are easier for consumers to understand when expressed in household measures rather than in servings.

- Amounts expressed in volume (e.g., cups) initially were easier to understand than those expressed in weight (e.g., ounces).
- Examples and visual representations of the recommended amounts may help consumers follow this advice.
- Some consumers would appreciate information that would help them determine appropriate amounts of food based on their age, body size, or activity level.

Practical information and examples are needed to help consumers understand detailed food group recommendations.

- While consumers have a limited understanding of whole grains, they are open to incorporating more whole grains in their diet.
- Consumers understood the concept of vegetable subgroups, but they had some difficulty identifying vegetables in each subgroup and were confused about how to translate the advice into action.
- Although many were unfamiliar with the term “legumes,” most were very familiar with foods in this group and indicated that these foods were part of their diet.

- Consumers were concerned about and confused by the types of fats. Advice stated in terms of solid fats and oils may be easier for consumers to understand and follow than advice that is stated in terms of saturated and unsaturated fats.
- Consumers showed a limited awareness of the differences between sugars and added sugars and cited many obstacles to reducing the amount of added sugars in their diet.

Consumers often misinterpret their own level of physical activity.

- Consumers consistently associated the terms used to describe physical activity (“sedentary,” “low active,” and “active”) with less physical activity than they were intended to designate and were reluctant to use the term “sedentary” to describe their own level of physical activity.
- Consumers often made a distinction between “exercise” and “physical activity.”

3) October 2004 Potential Graphic Concepts and Slogans

The objective of this research was to explore consumers’ response to prototype concepts for a new graphic symbol and slogan for the Food Guidance System. A range of potential images and slogans was presented to consumers. Ten focus groups (a total of 77 participants) were conducted in two geographic areas (Baltimore and Chicago) with an audience of adults who have some interest in healthy eating (defined by positive responses to the question on the participant screener about the importance of healthy eating). The audience was stratified by gender, age, use of the Internet for finding health information, and, for women who use the Internet, weight status. Women who use the Internet were stratified by weight status to gather more information with one group of how weight may affect women’s reactions to nutrition images and messages.

The images fell into one of 3 categories: Pyramid based, Pyramid influenced, and non-Pyramidal. Findings from the first few focus groups were used to alter graphic designs for testing in subsequent groups. At the end of this phase of research, the data provided guidance to narrow the scope of graphic concepts that had the potential to replace or update the original Food Guide Pyramid. A total of 10 potential images were tested in each focus group.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this environment of conflicting health messages, it is both a challenge and an opportunity for the Food Guidance System.

- The low-carb craze continues to garner news, as participants overwhelmingly referred to it and its associated diets as what they have seen and heard lately about healthy eating.
- Participants also expressed confusion about knowing what foods are actually good for them. They noted conflicting nutritional reports that complicate their healthy eating decisions. Some suggested a yearning for a centralized source for consistent, reliable, and “correct” health information.

The original Pyramid's high recognition provides a strong foundation for the new Food Guidance System, and the new symbol needs to leverage this position.

- Overall, participants were very familiar with the Food Guide Pyramid, offering a number of different locations where they had seen it recently. Some of the older participants even thought the symbol had been with them their whole lives, even though it first appeared in 1992.
- Despite this level of recognition, many participants suggested that the symbol needs to be updated to be more relevant to today's lifestyle and food choices. Some participants suggested a renewed symbol should not be a pyramidal shape, to represent a new beginning. Most participants, though, cautioned against a full departure from a pyramidal shape. They reasoned a new shape would lose the wide recognition of the original Food Guide Pyramid.

Consumers identified with three characteristics that were most appealing and attention-getting and these characteristics should be part of a final graphic to replace the Food Guide Pyramid.

- Success and achievement – Participants lauded graphic concepts that communicated positive reinforcement. Participants noted that it was important to feel like they could reach their nutritional goals. These concepts effectively expressed this end result often by depicting human figures at the top of or moving toward the top of a symbol.
- “Personal” appeal – Participants said that it was important for them to be able to relate to a graphic. Graphic concepts that included human figures enabled many participants to apply the concept's message to their personal experience.
- Motion or activity – Participants noted that concepts portraying movement were not only more likely to connote physical activity, but they were also more likely to generate enthusiasm among the focus groups participants.

Consumers identified four elements in the slogans to be the most motivating to make them think about their food choices and to find more information about nutrition.

- Similar to their preferences for graphics, focus group participants favored slogans that included positive outcomes.
- They also preferred slogans that were simple, direct, and comprehensive. Participants did not want to have to infer or “read into” the message.
- Participants searched for *you*-ness—the ability of a slogan to enable its reader to individualize the message (i.e. make it relevant to you).
- Participants rejected slogans that preach and/or patronize.

4) December 2004 - Potential Graphic Concepts, Slogans, and Messages

The objective of this study was to determine which of the four tested graphic concepts respondents found to be the most suitable to serve as a new national symbol for healthy eating and physical activity. Also tested were seven slogans and messages specific to five food groups. The total sample for the Web test was 200 adults over 18 years of age.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Respondents were able to identify a tested graphic concept as suitable for a new national symbol.

- Forty-one percent (41%) of respondents selected one of the tested concepts as the one that would work best as a national symbol for healthy eating and physical activist. Two other concepts were each selected by 23% and 21% of the respondents, respectively; the fourth concept was selected by 14% of the respondents.
- Initial artistic appeal of the graphic concepts was not high. Two of the concepts were rated as having high initial appeal by 21% of respondents, the other concepts had a high initial appeal for 17% and 12% of respondents, respectively.

Slogan preferences

- Of the 7 tested slogans, “Steps to a Healthier You” was rated as having high initial appeal by 49% of respondents. The next highest ranked slogan “Eat smart. Move more. Feel great,” was ranked as having high initial appeal by 29% of respondents.
- The 2 slogans with highest initial appeal were also considered to be the best reminders to eat healthy and be physically active.
- Many survey participants explained that they preferred “Steps to a Healthier You” because it reinforced the idea that better health is obtained in incremental steps and that it was something for them to work to achieve. They also noted that it complemented the graphic image with the staircase.

Most consumers found the messages easy to understand.

- About 90% or more of the respondents found 4 of the 5 messages easy to understand, and 83% of respondents thought the fifth message was easy to understand.
- About 50% of the respondents thought that the information would help them a lot to make better decisions about eating a healthier diet. Over 80% of the respondents thought that each of the messages would help them somewhat to make better diet decisions.

5) February 2005 – Final graphics

A final round of consumer Web testing was conducted to determine if design modifications to the top scoring graphic from the previous Web test would improve its overall appeal. The total sample for the Web test was 200 respondents. They reviewed 2 similar graphic images and ranked them for initial appeal and their opinion on which design would be the most suitable to serve as a new national symbol for healthy eating and physical activity. Sixty-one percent (61%) of the respondents selected the image that has become the new MyPyramid symbol. They indicated it was clearer and easier to interpret than the alternative.

6) February 2005 –Web site Usability Testing of MyPyramid.gov

The objective of this study was to determine the ability of the new Food Guidance System Website, MyPyramid.gov, to communicate intended information and consumers' ability to utilize the site and its tools effectively. Interviews were conducted in Fairfax, Va., with eighteen (18) adults who indicated they were interested in nutrition. Nine of the participants were a healthy weight and nine were overweight. Gender, level of activity, age, and race were mixed within and across both weight categories. Data were gathered via one-hour, one-on-one interviews, during which the interviewer asked respondents to navigate through a prototype version of MyPyramid.gov. A formative testing design was employed to direct the formation and development of the Web site before launch.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The site received a great deal of positive feedback, most notably in its content, its balance between text and graphics, and its bright, colorful presentation

- Respondents experienced little or no difficulty using the site navigation or the MyPyramid Plan application.
- Several respondents requested increased personalization of the site. These respondents, who were recruited, in part, because of their interest in nutrition, often noted that they require more than general information about nutrition and physical activity. Still others thought their MyPyramid Plan should take into account additional factors, such as their weight, health, or pregnancy/lactation status to better “personalize” the results.
- Findings were incorporated into refinements of the Web site prior to launch.