

# Consumer attitudes to snacking versus meals



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For many consumers, increasingly demanding lives are leading to fragmented mealtimes and unremitting snacking. Despite its traditionally bad reputation and negative health associations, snacking remains a key aspect of consumers' daily eating and drinking behaviour, and with a significant 61% of European and US consumers having sought to improve the healthiness of their snacking, according to a report on BNET, it is therefore vital to understand what consumers believe with regard to this growing trend.

## Key trends

- Busy lifestyles and time famine;
- Snacking: A student's solution?
- A growing concern.

## Commercial opportunities

- Marketing needs to be directed towards making food and drink products more convenient as well as appealing in order to meet high consumer demand, as many turn away from traditional meals;
- The increasing improvement of health needs to be addressed by either placing an emphasis on organic or more nutritional snacks;
- With snacks being increasingly consumed by people all ages and ethnic backgrounds, other potential areas to be targeted include 'ethnic' snacks, vegetarians, and novelty angles.

## Background

The pressures of working life along with time constraints have resulted in an increasing number of consumers opting for convenience over price, taste and on some occasions, health. This is the main conclusion of a survey carried out in the USA by the market research and analysis group Packaged Facts. The study revealed that around one-third of consumers felt they lacked the time to prepare healthy meals, resulting in food being consumed quickly at work or in the car. For this reason these same people have actually replaced many of their meals with snacks. A more extreme illustration of this trend is apparent in new products from Japanese confectionery maker Morinaga & Co. Ltd. Two of its popular snacks have been released as emergency foods amidst growing safety concerns. The two new canned items inspired by Morinaga's "Marie" cookies and "Milk Caramel," have been produced to meet the needs of those who want to prepare emergency food in advance, for possible disasters.

Tatjana Meerman from Packaged Facts comments that "foodservice sectors are seeking to increase their share of this growing market by adapting to changing consumer attitudes towards meal times, meal sizes and health issues in order to make their products more convenient, healthier and otherwise appealing."

## Busy lifestyles and time famine

Busy lifestyles plagued as they are by time famine mean that consumers are undoubtedly demanding convenience and the increasing availability of convenient meal and snack solutions. A study by The National Food Centre: "Meals for Cash Rich, Time Poor Consumers" discusses the ready meals sector in the Irish market. It defines 'ready meals' as products that have a high degree of readiness, completion and convenience. The research revealed that due to an increase in women working and a consequent loss of cooking skills, as well as a breakdown of traditional family meals due to greater individualistic lifestyles, there was a greater tendency towards these ready meals in Ireland.

The American lifestyle's shortage of spare time in which to prepare healthy, nutritious meals is increasingly leading people towards convenience foods says a new report that highlights the potential for healthy snacking. "On-The-Go Eating in the US: Consumer, Foodservice, Retailing & Marketing Trends" from Packaged Facts, reveals that although 65% of consumers are trying to eat more healthily, 33% said they didn't have time to prepare or eat healthy meals. The report showed that "time; was the biggest factor driving 49 million Americans to fast-food solutions and 41 million to store-made, pre-cooked meals. Further, it was also indicated that a third of Americans frequently skip meals and graze on snack foods, partly as a result of media reports hyping up the health and weight-loss advantages of eating regular small meals, and smaller portioned on-the-go choices from the foodservice industry.

In agreement is The NPD Group, a leading market research company. Their "Snacking in America 2008" report detailed that snack consumption has grown steadily and will continue to do so in future, as a result of an escalation in the health and wellness trend. Harry Balzer, vice president of The NPD Group maintains that "a generation ago, most Americans believed they should 'avoid snacking entirely,' but today snacking is more acceptable and is clearly the fourth meal of the day," further adding that "21% of all meals are snacks."

This report indicated that morning snacking showed the highest growth (28.5%) among consumers, with snacks replacing more breakfasts than other meal due to a demand for a quick energy boost before the morning rush to work or school; with fruit as the food most commonly eaten between meals. Meanwhile, a pan-European online consumer survey reports that in Europe, missed breakfast occasions account for 69% of the total number of missed meals and this is expected to escalate over the next five years.

## Snacking: A student's solution?

Despite the missed breakfasts and hectic lifestyles, consumers are more health conscious than ever. A Datamonitor report shows that 72% of Europeans claim to be more concerned about their health and general wellbeing than in the previous year while 80% of US and European consumers believed it is important to improve their health through their diet.

An article entitled “Healthy Snacking” from the UK’s “The Independent” online has highlighted how difficult organising a healthy eating routine when a student can be. With students having to attend lectures from early on in the day through to late afternoons, followed by activities and events in the evening, the temptation of easy snacking can be very high, often at the expense of balanced healthy meals.

The Independent mentioned a study by Fly Research, commissioned by Kellogg's, that shows students are the most confused about snacking in comparison with other age groups, with a significant 44% uncertain about whether snacks are good or bad for them. 92% of students snack solely because of the guilty pleasure it provides, with nearly half (47%) snacking on chocolate on a regular basis!

21 year-old Jude Flynn, studying Russian at University College London, comments: “I do feel guilty when I snack, but not when I snack on healthy things.” Just under half of the students questioned said they feel snacking in-between meals will make them put on weight, however 71% of students still fill up on snacks between meals largely as a result of boredom, therefore missing their main meal.

## A growing concern

The food choices of children (aged 10-19 years) have become increasingly unhealthy, putting them at increased risk of malnutrition, as they grow older, a study carried out in Nigeria highlighted. The study from the African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development was carried out on 401 adolescents in six of the thirty local government areas of Osun State (a south-western state of Nigeria). It investigated the determinants of their food choices in order to assess their nutritional knowledge and the implications of their eating behaviour. It was revealed that there was a strong preference for snacks such as cakes, biscuits, crisps and fizzy drinks. Furthermore, the wholesomeness of the meals was not an important factor in these Nigerian adolescents' food choices.

The authors of the study, Olumakaiye M. Funke and O.A Ajayi, comment that the consumption of snacks although a worldwide issue among the young regardless of where they live, and whether in urban or rural areas, developed or developing countries, is usually the result of being exposed to very similar lifestyles. However, they add that snacking is a key characteristic of an adolescent's diet and is not in itself a bad practice, but that the quality of the snacks should be a matter of concern. The study revealed that just over half (51%) preferred to eat snacks, which, according to Funke and Ajayi, could be because snacks are usually more easily available than wholesome meals as well as encouraged by parents due to time constraints. The study concluded that these children require instruction on the importance of consuming snacks that are rich in nutrients as they cannot be discouraged from taking snacks.

Similarly, according to online paper “The Statesman”, parents and dieticians in India are also seeking snacks with nutrients and vitamins. Mrs Vasantha Selvaraj complained that her sons insisted on munching on snacks immediately after returning home from school, adding that they eat very little during mealtimes. Another parent, Mrs Gomathy said: “We are aware that snacks have no fibre content and mostly contain fats and carbohydrates. We are looking for snacks which offer good nutrients and vitamins but we do not know whether such items are available in the market or not.” However, Dr Gomathy Sivaji, coordinator of the Centre for Nutrition and an adviser to the Tamil Nadu Planning Commission on children's nutrition commented that although the term 'snacking' provides a good opportunity to offer energy and nutrients to children, parents should take care not to use snacks as a substitute for main meals like breakfast or lunch.

## Outlook

Significant opportunities within the industry will result in the formulation of snacks offering convenience by saving time as well as better health and more nutrition.

"Foodservice sectors are seeking to increase their shares of this growing market by adapting to changing consumer attitudes toward meal times, meal sizes, and health issues in order to make their products more convenient, healthier, and otherwise appealing," said Tatjana Meerman, Packaged Facts' Publisher.

Competition will intensify as brands outside the snacking arena will come forth and claim a share of this marketplace, such as cereals, which are increasingly being positioned as an evening snack, and which have already morphed into cereal bars for those who do not have the time to sit at the breakfast table with a bowl of cereal each morning.