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Receipt System Offers More Nutritional Info

BY JULIE VALLONE
FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Posted 8/23/2007

Imagine ordering lunch and getting a receipt that not only shows your meal's impact on your wallet, but also on your waistline.

For diners at several Southern California fast-food restaurants, it's a reality. After buying their meals, they get receipts that also include a custom nutritional breakdown of what they ordered. The receipts display the calories, fat, carbohydrates, protein and nutritional daily value for everything they ordered.

Moreover, the receipt shows the impact of customized orders. If you say "Hold the mayo," your receipt will indicate how many calories and fat grams you saved by that decision and how it affected other nutritional categories. If you ask for extra cheese, you'll see how many calories and fat grams were added to your meal, as well as changes in protein and other nutrients.



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The nutritional receipt system is the product of Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Nutricate, a privately held firm that patented the technology and licenses it to restaurants.

"Consumers eat out over 250 times per year. They tend to eat at their same favorite restaurants and order the same items," said Nutricate founder Jay Ferro. "If you create this platform to show them how they can make their preferred meals healthier, or choose other options, they're going to make better choices."

Ferro says education is part of his company's mission. The company name combines the words "nutrition" and "educate" to make Nutricate.

In addition to showing the nutritional breakdown of orders, the receipt also includes a "Did You Know" section with more generalized educational data. For example, it might tell you that ordering the grilled chicken sandwich, rather than the crispy chicken sandwich, will save you at least 100 calories. It also features multiple-choice questions to test diners' nutritional IQ.

The Nutricate technology works with virtually any cash register or point-of-sale system. The cashier enters the customer order into the system, which sends the order to the Nutricate server within the restaurant. The server, programmed with nutritional info provided by the restaurant, then sends the relevant info to a small computer and printer near the register that creates the receipt.

The Nutricate receipt is another tool for a nation where obesity rates doubled between the late 1970s and early 2000s. Many blame fast food.

In 2004, the number of meals eaten away from home was 34% higher than it was in 1974, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service. ERS statistics show that away meals account for about half of U.S. food spending. The National Restaurant Association says the average American consumes about 4.2 meals per week that are prepared away from home. That would be about a quarter of weekly meals.

Many restaurants include general, non-customized, nutritional information on menus, food packaging and Web sites. But consumers aren't changing poor eating habits as fast as some experts would like.

Ferro says 70% of consumers customize their order, making the general information irrelevant. He says customers just won't take the time to add everything up. "Basically, people are in a hurry and they don't want to do the math," he said.

He says creating a receipt that calculates everything for customers and puts the data right in front of their faces can have a positive impact on consumer health.

Offering such data also might make a difference in an establishment's bottom line, says Brett Weiss, president of Extreme Pita of San Diego, a privately held franchise of a Canada-based company. Weiss is using the Nutricate system in two of his area restaurants, and plans to implement it in two more within the next six weeks.

Weiss says that since Extreme Pita started using the Nutricate receipts in March, he has seen a 5% to 10% increase in customers and a 10% to 15% increase in sales.

"The customer response has been phenomenal," Weiss said. "We hear comments like 'I wish every restaurant would do this,' and 'Thank you for making it easier for me to eat healthy.'"

Weiss is working with Nutricate to get it implemented by his parent company. Extreme Pita has 200 restaurants in the U.S. and Canada.

"It's something I feel will probably be used widely throughout the U.S. in the coming years," Weiss said.

Sheila Weiss (no relation to Brett), director of nutrition policy of the nonprofit National Restaurant Association in Washington, DC., says using these receipts is a great idea.

"It's really important to look at how far restaurants have come in offering more variety to their patrons, and more nutrition information," she said.

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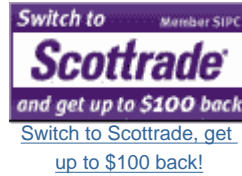
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