

 ADAPTED VERSION

How companies trick us into eating more junk

Should “upselling” be banned? Public health is being put at risk by aggressive sales tactics. A report warns that the practice is fuelling an already disastrous obesity epidemic.



Supersize me: On average, those who accept an upsell pay 17% more for 55% more calories.

“Would you like a side with that?” A seemingly innocent question, but it is part of an alarming trend — with potentially devastating consequences for our health.

Retailers train staff to manipulate customers into buying more junk food; the process is known as “upselling”. The vast majority of upsold food is unhealthy, with retailers supersizing portions, pushing extra sides like fries and onion rings, and offering larger coffees and soft drinks.

A report released yesterday revealed that 78% of customers in the UK experience these tactics every week, leading to 106 upsells per person per year. That is an average of 17,000 extra calories per person, the same as eating 66 big macs. Those extra calories add up to an average weight gain of over two kilos. Young people aged 18-24 are even more vulnerable to upselling, consuming an additional 750 calories per week.

Retailers use many tactics. A waiter told researchers that he has “hourly goals” of large

meals to sell, and a barista claimed she must always offer a customer a large coffee, “insinuating that ‘a large’ is in fact what a typical customer orders”. Another worker described how restaurant management have turned upselling into a “team competition”, with prizes for the team upselling the most.

UK MP Sharon Hodgson has claimed that upselling has “infiltrated our society, and is contributing significantly to the burgeoning obesity crisis that we see today.”

In the UK 25% of adults are obese. This rises to a staggering 36.5% in the USA. Obesity can lead to a range of deadly conditions including heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Chief executive of the RSPH, Shirley Cramer, calls obesity “the public health challenge of our generation”.

The British government has attempted to tackle the problem by taxing sugary drinks. However, some campaigners think it is time to crack down on upselling. Cramer suggests giving tax breaks to businesses which pledge

not to train staff to upsell. But some think laws to tackle obesity just will not work; journalist Christopher Snowdon described the UK government’s recent efforts as “doomed”.

You are what you eat

“Upselling should be banned” declare some. Consumers are sick of being bombarded with junk food, and this study proves that it is making a catastrophic obesity epidemic even worse. Retailers should respect the health of their customers, rather than squeezing as many pennies out of them as possible.

“Let consumers choose!” say others. Customers are not mindless drones and nobody forces them to buy more food. Also, a law against upselling would be impossible to enforce, and would severely hamper businesses in an extremely competitive industry. Upselling is here to stay.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: That more people are overweight or obese in the UK than at any other time in the last three decades. Authorities in the USA are no less concerned about the obesity epidemic than in

the UK. As well as causing obvious physical problems, obesity can also affect quality of life and lead to psychological problems, including low self-esteem. We also know that obesity is associated with a range of deadly medical conditions, including diabetes, heart disease and stroke, as well as some types of cancer.

Q: What do we not know?

A: To what extent upselling is contributing to the obesity crisis. There are many factors that help cause obesity including genetics, medical problems, and lifestyle. We do not know if a ban on upselling would affect the rate of obesity in the USA and the UK.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should upselling be made illegal?
2. Should all junk food be banned?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write a list of all the items of fast food you have eaten over the past week.
2. Research the food groups needed for a balanced diet. Keep a food diary for one day and see how your daily diet compares.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Let them eat cake."
Marie Antoinette (supposedly)

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Report – Data was drawn from a survey of over 2,000 people, conducted by the RSPH (Royal Society for Public Health).

Big macs – Or 73 Whoppers, depending on your preference of fast food establishments.

750 calories – This could lead people in the

18-24 age group to put on an extra 5kg per year.

Obese – People are defined as obese if they have a BMI (Body Mass Index) of 30 points or more. This index is calculated by dividing weight by height.

36.5% – According to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). About 17% of US children and adolescents (aged

2–19) are obese. The percentage of obese American children has tripled since 1970.

RSPH – Royal Society for Public Health.

Taxing – Due to come into force in April 2018. The cost of a standard can of coke in the UK will rise by 8p.

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Notes

