

MENU MINDSET MAKEOVER

Menu Labeling Provisions will Spark a new Era in Exploration of Culture through Food

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The meaning of food is an exploration of culture through food. Looking through the window into our most basic beliefs about our world and ourselves we discover attitudes, practices and rituals surrounding food. *Food culture* defined is the shared attitudes, practices, goals and meanings related to food. *Section 4205 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 on State and Local Menu and Vending Machine Labeling Laws* will have profound effects on the food produced for and consumed in the commercial restaurant world and have a spill over to what we do in healthcare foodservice.

Sweeping legislation was signed into law at the beginning of 2011 with the *FDA Food Safety and Modernization Act*. This is supported by many influential organizations, including the National Restaurant Association and the American Dietetic Association. Many states and municipalities have put menu labeling laws in place and the new national law will supersede and replace them with a uniform standard. Commercial establishments such as restaurants and food vendors with 20 or more units will be required to post calories on menus, menu boards, drive-through menus and food display tags, with additional nutrient information (fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, sodium, protein and fiber) available in writing upon request. Calorie posting requirements will also apply to vending machines managed by companies that operate at least twenty machines meaning even a single location healthcare facility using a large enough vending company will see this happen. In states that have already adopted menu labeling, RDs and DTRs have already incorporated key messages into delivering nutrition education (according to a press release on September 8, 2010 in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*). Consumers see the Federal Government as having the clout to push the issue to the forefront.

Managers are the world's most voracious consumers of theory. Every plan a manager makes, every action a manager takes, is based on some implicit understanding of "what and why." People and patients bring expectations to healthcare facilities that have been influenced by the commercial food world and the media, among other things, so leaders need to react. According to a study released in 2009 by Technomic Inc. on affects of the NYC (New York City) labeling laws, 82 percent of NYC residents surveyed January 30 to February 3 say the posted calorie information is affecting what they order, and 60 percent say it is affecting what restaurants they visit. Ninety percent of the respondents said the calorie counts were higher than they expected them to be. The theory is gaining support that people will be as accustomed to having nutrition information readily available in eateries as they have on packaging of grocery store food and will use it to make better decisions. In a national sense, this is changing the American eating experience and evolving our food culture.

There are new circumstances in play that will affect and spark overall change in menu concept creation and implementation. Managers have looked into evolving to healthy menu concepts for years with spotty as opposed to blanket results. We need to understand what it is about the present situation that will at last enable these strategies and tactics to succeed. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) publishes (www.cspinet.org) a website with research and information showing how menu labeling would allow Americans to exercise personal responsibility and make informed choices for a growing part of their diets. They show that 78% of Americans support menu labeling, half of large chain restaurants do not provide any nutrition information to their customers and that without nutrition information, it is difficult to compare options

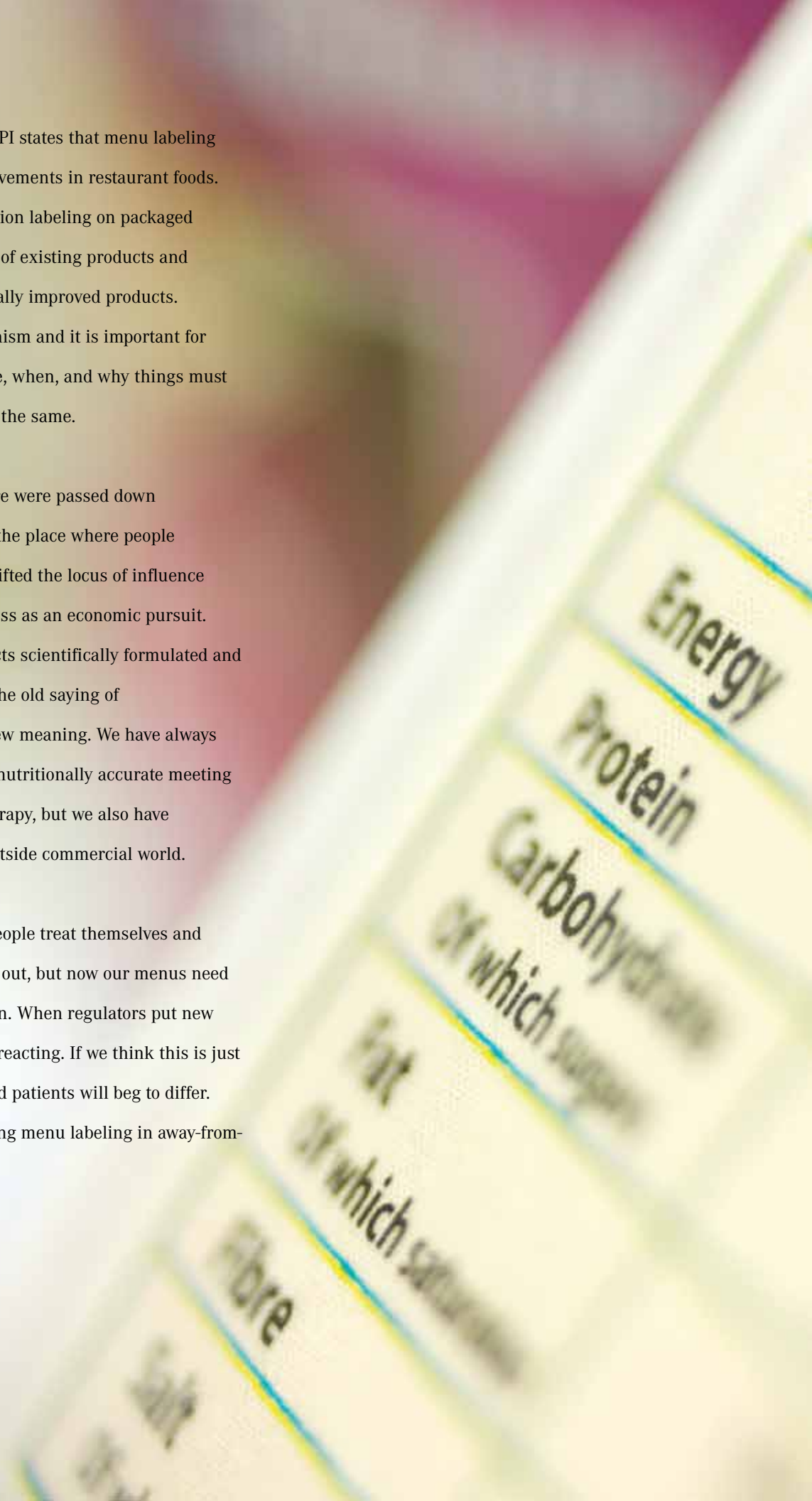
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and make informed decisions. CSPI states that menu labeling is likely to spur nutritional improvements in restaurant foods. A key benefit of mandatory nutrition labeling on packaged foods has been the reformulation of existing products and the introduction of new nutritionally improved products. Government is the causal mechanism and it is important for managers to know not only where, when, and why things must change but also what should stay the same.

In the past our food and its culture were passed down through the family and reflected the place where people lived. The information age has shifted the locus of influence in food and food culture to business as an economic pursuit. Researchers generate new products scientifically formulated and tested for customer acceptance. The old saying of *“like Mother used to make”* has new meaning. We have always assured our patient food is 100% nutritionally accurate meeting the goals of medical nutrition therapy, but we also have cafeterias that operate like the outside commercial world.

What will stay the same is that people treat themselves and focus on taste/flavor when eating out, but now our menus need to reflect an overall healthy design. When regulators put new rules on the table we are used to reacting. If we think this is just for restaurants, our customers and patients will beg to differ. Potential obstacles to implementing menu labeling in away-from-



home food establishments (as detailed in *Menu Labeling: Does Providing Nutrition Information at the Point of Purchase Affect Consumer Behavior?* June 2009, Healthy Eating Research, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) include the following:

1. Chefs are taught to cook by proportion, touch, taste and feel rather than by following standardized recipes. Restaurants and cafeterias that do not use standardized recipes or allow for the customization of orders may unintentionally provide inaccurate information to consumers.
2. Providing nutrition information would limit flexibility in changing the menu.
3. Providing nutrition information would be too difficult when there are many menu variations and little space on the menu.
4. Providing nutrition information might be costly.
5. Providing nutrition information might lead to reduced demand for profitable menu items or encourage consumers to switch the source of their meals from one food-service outlet to another.
6. Training employees to respond to questions about menu labeling may be difficult.

In playing to the healthcare facilities strengths, we are used to using the dietitians on staff to do the research on patient menus. Moving them to the cafeteria menu is a small step.

The menu is the primary marketing tool of a food service where the four “P’s” (product, place, price and promotion) are applied. Identify and offer **products** that are appealing that meet customer/patient needs. Use product **placement**

to make healthy products easy to choose. Set **prices** at levels that encourage people to purchase healthy options. Lastly use **promotional** strategies so that people know about these products and are motivated to try them. Image marketing is focusing more these days on health and sustainability and companies know this is good for business and the consumer alike (image marketing refers to the perception people have of your business when they hear your company name). A business’s image is composed of an infinite variety of facts, events, personal histories, advertising and goals that work together to make an impression on the public. Many businesses add health and sustainability into their efforts to build their company image. We find it on their cups, menus, storefront windows and where ever the message placement makes sense. Obviously this is a good fit for healthcare consumers who increasingly want to associate themselves with this thinking. Getting people to eat healthier requires more than just posting calories or adding healthy options to the menu ... the food also has to taste good. The availability of nutrition information on menus through national legislation is now to be taken as a change in society. Businesses will help the consumer eat in a better way and assist them in feeling better about doing so. Most restaurants go out of business in the first five years and the ones that survive stand as a lesson in customer satisfaction. Smart, noncommercial managers take heed of their commercial counterparts by building some of their ways into what we do in healthcare. The world of food and food culture is changing at the fastest pace in history and the timeless dictum of “giving the customer what they want” has accelerated meaning. It is time to adopt the *menu mindset makeover!* ■