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Does the geographic proximity of products influence a consumer's decision? An evaluation in a restaurant



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A long time ago Schooler (1965) reported that identical products were evaluated differently according to the information given concerning their country-of-origin. This effect has been reported in several studies (Chao, 1998; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Previous studies have also found that food names or labels are associated with variations in expectation, food judgment and consumption. Wansink, van Ittersum, and Painter (2005) found that with customers in a cafeteria, descriptive menu labels (e.g. "succulent Italian seafood filet") increased post-consumption sensory ratings and calorie estimations compared to the regularly labelled menu items (e.g., "seafood filet"). Several studies also found that descriptive labels of a product (e.g., 'tender grilled chicken') compared with a standard menu label (e.g., 'grilled chicken') influence the consumer's evaluation (Wansink, Painter, & van Ittersum, 2001) and also influenced sales (Guéguen & Jacob, 2012).

The objective of the present study was to evaluate the effect of further information concerning food products on consumers exposed to this information. In this study the effect of geographic proximity of

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food products was evaluated in a real setting and measured using real consumer behaviour as the dependent variable. In a restaurant, a waitress was instructed to suggest a dish by indicating or not, that the ingredients used came from local products. We hypothesized that customers in a restaurant would agree more favourably to a dish suggested by the employee who added that it was made using local products.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and thirty-two restaurant customers (97 males and 135 females ranging in age from 22 to 70) who acted as participants were randomly assigned to two groups. All of them were seated at tables in a crepe restaurant in the medium-sized city of Vannes (more than 70,000 inhabitants) in a very attractive spot, located in the west of France on the Breton Atlantic Coast. In this restaurant, when the study was conducted most of the patrons came from the geographic area of the restaurant.

Procedure

This experiment was approved by the ethical committee of the laboratory (CRPCC-LESTIC EA 1285). One waitress, a regular employee of the restaurant, acted as the confederate in this experiment, and selected the customer to participate in the experiment when he/she entered the restaurant. After he/she was seated, the employee said: *“I’ll bring the menu right away. Would you like a cocktail first?”* The waitress waited until the customer gave his/her response and then the employee left the table. About one to three minutes later, the waitress came back to the table with the menu, and the cocktail if the customer had ordered one. Then the employee said: *“Here is the menu Sir/Madam”*. According to a random distribution, the waitress suggested a dish in two ways. In the products proximity condition, the employee said to the customer with a smile: *“Today, I recommend our crepe of the day, the “crêpe forestière” (crepe filled with ham, cheese, egg and mushrooms) which is particularly delicious. This crepe is made using local products”*. In the control condition, the last sentence (*“This crepe is made using local products”*.) was not included in the verbal suggestion made by the waitress. In both conditions, the employee said: *“I’ll let you look at the menu”* and then left the customer’s table. After five to seven minutes, she returned to the customer’s table and asked him/her if he/she had made his/her choice. If the response was positive, the employee noted the customer’s choice. If not, the employee left the table for five minutes and returned to take the customer’s order.

Results

One dependant variable was measured in this experiment: the customer’s compliance with the waitress’s suggestion. Data are presented in Table 1 according to customer gender.

To evaluate the outcome of the main effect of the experimental condition and the customer gender, a Chi-square independent test was used. A significant main effect of the experimental condition was reported ($\chi^2 (1) = 12.30, p < .001, OR = 3.06$) suggesting that significantly more customers took the dish suggested by the waitress in the products proximity condition than in the control condition. The main effect of gender ($\chi^2 (1) = 3.64, p = .057, OR = 1.79$) approached significance showing that, overall, male customers more favourably accepted the waitress’s suggestion than female customers.

Table 1
Frequency of customers who complied with the waitress’s suggestion.

	Local products condition	Control condition	Total (%)
Male customers	42.0% (21/50)	19.1% (9/47)	30.9
Female customers	28.8% (19/66)	11.6% (8/69)	20.0
Total	34.5%	14.7%	

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