



Sign of the times: Testing consumer response to local food signage within a casual dining restaurant

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the impact of variations in locally produced food signage on consumer attributes within a casual buffet-style restaurant. A baseline period followed by three treatments were conducted to test signage effects on the constructs of product involvement, servicescape perception, pleasure, perceived product quality and revisit intention. Moderation effects from product involvement were also investigated on the proposed structural paths. Results suggested that the largest effects occurred on the constructs when local identification, farm name, and pictures of the farm were included. Product involvement showed no moderation effects on the proposed relationships. Implications for academics and practitioners were provided as were future research directions.

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1. Introduction

As locally produced foods continue to become more mainstream within U.S. culture, it is no surprise that retailers have become creative in communicating this message to their customers. A trip to several grocers or restaurants will confirm that signage communicating the locally produced food movement has not only undertaken an informational approach, indicating the farm or point-of-origin of the products and the method of production such as organic, sustainable, or even responsibly sourced, but also more visual and emotional approaches such as pictures of farms, farmers, tractors, and health-related aspects to connect with consumers. As consumers continue to demand such products, and both grocers and restaurants attempt to capture part of this market share, it becomes vital for companies to understand what information is a necessary part of the marketing and advertising and what may be less salient to consumers.

While the effects of signage on consumer behavior is not a new concept, academics have long considered signage as part of a broader set of store atmospherics, introduced by Kotler (1973) as “the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance purchase behavior” (p. 50). Subsequent research by Bitner (1992) on atmospherics included the idea of a servicescape that can affect consumer perceptions, emotions, and subsequent behavior. Signage within

the servicescape environment is a vital part of the consumer experience, helping to communicate attributes such as store image, labels, rules of conduct, and even quality of the products offered (Bitner, 1992) as well as a potential level of authenticity of the experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009).

Although country-of-origin identification has been enacted into law within the U.S. for retailers (e.g., grocers, warehouse stores) to provide product source information to their customers by the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service, little regulation has been developed regarding signage specific for locally produced foods to address its perceived lack of consistency in use by marketers (Martinez et al., 2010). Even less academic study has considered the effect of locally produced food signage and how consumers respond to such information, either as an effective response to pleasure or as an influencer to decisions made about product quality, purchase intent, or potential revisit intentions. Unlike product labels that convey written and textual specifics about the brand, nutritional and caloric information, or product origin, typically on the package itself (Hu et al., 2012), signs are considered “graphic designs, as symbols, emblems, or words, used especially for identification or as a means of giving directions or warning” (Crandall, n.d.), thus implying a more visual depiction to the consumer. They also allow for mobility of placement, and often are placed in strategic locations to entice consumers to notice the products. To this end, our exploratory research helps to fill a gap by addressing current local food signage within a casual dining restaurant setting to determine if an impact on consumer behavior exists, and to what extent it may do so. Will consumers have a different evaluation of product quality given a more detailed description of where the product originated? Does adding pictures

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of the farms or farmers create a higher level of involvement with local products and/or create a greater perceived pleasure by the consumer? How would these contribute to consumption changes or future revisit intentions? Given the above issues, the study seeks to answer the following primary research question:

RQ: Do consumer groups vary in terms of perceptions about servicescape, product quality, pleasure, product involvement, and future revisit intentions when exposed to different levels of information on locally produced food signage?

Our exploratory study, completed in a real-world setting, will help academics to better understand the relationship of signage to product choice decisions while also providing practitioners a guide to determining which type of signage is most effective when creating an appealing atmosphere to either shop or dine in. The study is also unique in that it addresses consumption changes of locally produced items or items containing locally produced products based upon signage manipulations and considers if a threshold exists as to the amount of information provided and deemed salient by consumers. Third, the study explores the importance of product involvement and if it reflects a direct effect or moderating effect on revisit intention. Finally, the study is a first step to better navigating the various designations of locally produced food signage and whether restaurants or other retail operations (such as grocers) may be better served by only indicating place of origin on their products versus a more elaborate marketing effort that includes pictures and descriptions of the farm or farmers from where the product originated.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer response to the local food movement

Over the past two decades in the United States, a rise in both the number of channels through which local products are available and the demand by consumers for local foods has created a substantial market opportunity for businesses who seek to achieve a competitive advantage. Suggested as a potential \$7 billion dollar market or greater (DeWeerd, 2009), locally produced foods can be found in approximately 8144 recognized farmers' markets in the U.S. (USDA-AMS, 2013) as well as national grocery and specialty grocery formats (Ruehle and Goldblatt, 2013). Researchers cite a number of reasons for this continued movement by consumers toward local products. These include perceptions of higher quality, the support for local economies and farms as small farms continue to dwindle, perceived health and safety benefits from local foods, belief that their personal efforts can make a difference to solving social or environmental problems, and a push toward greater environmental stewardship (Thilmany McFadden, 2012; Marketzki and Tuckermanty, 2007). Along with purchasing through grocery and farmers' markets channels, consumers are seeking locally grown products in restaurants, and restaurants are seeking to balance this demand versus perceived cost and delivery restrictions that local items may yield (Sharma et al., 2009). Making locally produced food items available in restaurants has also been cited as a means to competitive differentiation (Martinez et al., 2010). As the trend of consumers demanding locally produced items continues into 2014 (National Restaurant Association, 2013), it becomes even more important to understand those factors which can influence consumer point-of-purchase decisions, and how changes to those factors can help drive product demand and ultimately business success through differentiation.

2.2. The impact of store signage on consumer evaluations and choice behaviors

While previous research has considered the impact of restaurant menu labels and item descriptions and their effect on consumer attributes such as attitudes, perceptions, and purchase intentions (Albright et al., 1990; McCall and Lynn, 2008), no research has considered the differences in local food signage and how this may positively or negatively impact both consumer affective dimensions (e.g., pleasure) and behavioral outcomes (revisit intention). Albright et al. (1990) in their study noted that "A sign stating those entrees with a heart next to them were low in fat and cholesterol was placed directly below the menu board" (p. 160) when testing different manipulation interventions, but did not suggest any reference to place of origin. U.S. legislation on menu labeling in 2009 only addressed calorie content and required restaurants with over 20 locations to supply basic nutritional information (Banker, 2010). However, the legislation noted that in cases of self-service food operations such as salad bars or buffet lines, signage shall be placed next to the product to indicate caloric content (Higgins, 2012), thus implying the use of signs in buffets to provide consumer information. The legislation did not, however, address issues relating to product sourcing such as 'local', though Inwood et al. (2009) suggested that restaurant owners often use temporary sign boards to call out local products and get the attention of the customer. With this information in mind, our exploratory study mirrors the study of Inwood et al. (2009) that reviewed the role of point-of-purchase signage for local foods on affecting consumer behavior. Specifically, the researchers suggested that "While signage is an overt strategy to promote local foods and influence public opinion, the degree to which blackboard items transfer into sustained interest among patrons is not answerable, so further exploration of this matter is warranted" (p. 186). Though the current exploratory study does not include printed menus at each table or use of a menu-type blackboard to highlight products, the buffet context suggests that signs can include not only descriptions of the product offerings (similar to product labels), but also images and graphic designs to tell the consumer more information about a product on the buffet line.

2.3. Hypotheses development

2.3.1. Influence of local food signage

The positive effect of restaurant signage on product involvement is suggested as informational cues are provided to consumers about the locally produced food offerings. Kim et al. (2010) tested the relationship of food involvement and loyalty and found it to be positively significant. McKinnon et al. (1981) considered the stimulus effects of 'benefit' signage and determined that the inclusion of additional information about product benefits on store signage is significantly better for consumers. Local food consumers are often referenced as more involved consumers who seek to understand food systems issues relating to geographic origin of the products, the support of social and environmental welfare, and seek to be involved with the growers of a product and the place of production (Martinez et al., 2010). We suggest that as consumers receive more information about the place of production on the restaurant signage, they will become more involved with the local product offering. Therefore

H1: *Consumer product involvement will be positively affected by the level of information provided in the locally produced food signage.*

Cues from the shopping environment such as signage can positively affect product evaluations (Bitner, 1986), overall perception

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