



# Changes in family dynamics predict purchase and consumption

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the changes that have taken place in the family and relate these changes to where and how people eat.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Female heads of household were surveyed via telephone interviews to identify the characteristics of how the modern family dines. The telephone interview was conducted by a commercial research organization and used random digit dialing methods to identify potential respondents. The personal telephone interview was conducted by trained interviewers provided by the research supplier. The respondents were screened to insure that the respondent was a head of household.

**Findings** – Data revealed that families are reacting to time pressures in a way that changes the way they prepare foods while not affecting the end result. Overall, 75 percent of families eat as a family in the home five or more nights per week. In addition, 85 percent of those who eat together four nights a week or fewer, claim they would like to eat at home more often with their families. Today, families are eating together, even if it means making mealtime part of the daily multi-tasking ritual. The extent to which families actually make a point to eat meals together could be an invaluable and irreplaceable component of healthy family relations. Culture, economy, and society have changed and people have again started ensuring that eating together occurs on a daily basis.

**Originality/value** – The paper highlights how the changing role of the family can dramatically influence the food industry.

**Keywords** Family, Marketing, Food industry, Consumer psychology

**Paper type** Research paper

The constantly changing world has had an impact on business, family, and government in a variety of ways. Hirschautt (2004) points out that:

[...] if nothing else, the uncertainty in today's world reminds us to enjoy the company of family and friends, not just on special occasions, but on every possible occasion. Over the last several decades, the home has become a quick pit stop in a frantic family schedule. Today, however, more and more families are opting out of that hectic lifestyle, and one of the first things that they are reclaiming is the family meal.

There is no industry more influenced by changes in the family than the food industry (Herbst *et al.*, 2006; Stanton and Herbst, 2005). The food industry has been consistently



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This research was sponsored by the American Furniture Manufacturers Association. The furniture industry is interested in how the family dining occasion has changed in order to better make the types of furniture that best fit the needs of the modern family. This market/consumer focus has led to numerous innovations in how the furniture industry has made not only dining furniture but living rooms and casual room furniture. This responsiveness to consumer changes is an example of how other industries (e.g. the furniture industry) have responded to changes in the family.

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changed and transformed, however reluctantly, by changes in the family. While the purpose of this article is to trace how the food industry has responded to the changes, some of the root causes of the family changes will also be identified. This study will draw upon original research on meal patterns in the modern home as well as significant secondary research.

In the fairly recent past, families gathered on a nightly basis to dine together and chat. Dinner, often prepared by females working inside the home, was a nightly gathering for which time was prioritized by families. As both spouses comprising the household began working outside of the home, the way in which individuals gathered for meals changed dramatically. The last quarter of the twentieth century was characterized by greater numbers of people claiming that it was difficult to find time to prepare meals. According to the 1999 Gallup Study of Changing Food Preparation and Eating Habits (Gallup, 1999), the percentage of persons agreeing with the statement: "It is difficult to find time to prepare meals" increased from 33 percent in 1980 to 45 percent over 20 years later.

Today, an unprecedented number of mothers are returning to work within a year of giving birth, and they are now more likely to be full-time rather than part-time. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1950, about one in three women (ages 16 and older) participated in the labor force. By 1998, nearly three of every five women (ages 16 and older) were in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics Report, 2000),

and this number has remained stable in recent years (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Worldwide, there is an increasing presence of women in the workforce, and women are contributing an increasing amount to the economy (United Nations Statistics Division, 2005). Table I reveals the percentage of total income generated by women throughout various European countries.

In addition, over half of new mothers return to work at some point versus less than one-third in the 1970s. With women working outside of the home to a greater extent beginning in the mid 1970s, the percent of disposable income spent on food at home has decreased while money spent on food away from home has increased significantly (Stewart *et al.*, 2004). Inevitably, finding time to prepare meals has waned.

In this paper, the authors examine the changes that have taken place in the family and relate these changes to where and how people eat. Implications of these changes in terms of how food should be manufactured, distributed, and merchandised are then discussed.

### Literature review

Most of the academic and trade literature has focused on convenience and demonstrating that consumers are trying to simplify their lives by either making simpler meals via fewer ingredients or eating away from home. However, an emerging trend seems to be eating more at home. The literature review documents the aforementioned changes, and the authors discuss how the changing family will move away from the kitchen table to areas throughout the house.

### What are we eating? Convenient goodies!

The time crunch has left families with more to accomplish in a day than time permits. One area in which families are multi-tasking in an effort to get all finished in a day's time is eating. The unfortunate result has been that family members eat together less often now than they do individually. A total of 50 percent of people eat while working,

BFJ 109,8	Country	Year	%
	Albania	2002	49
	Austria	2003	51
	Belarus	1999	53
	Belgium	2003	40
650	Bulgaria	2003	44
	Croatia	2001	45
	Czech Republic	2002	51
	Denmark	2003	73
	Estonia	2003	58
	Finland	2003	64
	France	2003	49
	Germany	2003	49
	Greece	2002	38
	Hungary	2003	47
	Iceland	2002	79
	Ireland	2002	49
	Italy	2003	37
	Latvia	2001	50
	Lithuania	2002	52
	Luxembourg	2003	43
	Malta	2003	31
	Netherlands	2003	56
	Norway	2003	69
	Poland	2003	48
	Portugal	2003	55
	Republic of Moldova	2002	54
	Romania	2001	56
	Russian Federation	2003	59
	San Marino	1999	57
	Slovakia	2002	53
	Slovenia	2003	50
	Spain	2003	43
	Sweden	2003	76
	Switzerland	2003	59
	The FYR of Macedonia	2003	43
	Ukraine	2003	58
	United Kingdom	2003	55

**Table I.**  
Percentage of total income generated by women throughout various European countries

**Source:** International Labor Office (2003)

42 percent eat while watching TV, and 19 percent eat in the car (10 percent - 15 percent of all meals are consumed in the car).

Data indicate that the average family dinner has decreased from seven components to one to two components over the last 50 years. In fact, according to an unpublished National Panel Diary (NPD, 2003) report in 2003, an average lasagna recipe has reduced from 26 ingredients to nine ingredients while the average salad has shriveled from seven ingredients to bagged pre-washed salad containing one ingredient called lettuce. Now, 23 percent of consumers consider the best recipe to contain no more than three ingredients while 58 percent of consumers claim to only have a repertoire of eight recipes. Individuals do not purchase foods because these foods are the ones that they

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may ideally want for a meal. Instead, they purchase them for their convenience characteristic (AC Nielsen, 2000). If it is easy to throw together/heat, it is dinner, and desire for the product seems secondary.

In addition, the percentage of new pacesetter brands offering convenience as a major benefit has increased by 25 percent in the last ten years. Nearly half of all leading brands now have products that offer convenience as a main benefit (IRI Times and Trends, 2000). As a result, food marketers who have responded to a desperate call for time-saving food products from consumers are making money. Pre-cut salads, refrigerated entrees, and breakfast bars are among the top selling and growth areas in the food industry (AC Nielsen, 2002).

### **Where we shop and eat: The rise of food service**

In addition to the change in what we eat (i.e. more convenience), the evolution of where we eat and shop has changed. There are two key consequences associated with this issue: the shift away from eating at home and thus eating and spending more time and money at food service establishments, and the location at which a meal is consumed when eaten at home.

As the time famine intensified, consumers relied more on prepared foods and the food service channel even though it often increased food costs. [Note: In an unpublished report for the Campbell Soup Company, Stanton and Kirschling (1985) predicted that the food service channel would overtake supermarket sales in the mid-1990s.] This trend was not just in traditional restaurants but especially in fast-food restaurants as more working females ate meals at work and did not have time to prepare meals for other family members (Stanton and Kirschling, 1985).

Not only has the changing family affected the mix of eating at home versus eating away from home, but it has also had an influence on the amount of time and money consumers spend at the traditional supermarket. The old paradigm was based on keeping consumers in the store and getting them to “shop the entire store” by placing common purchased items such as milk and eggs in the back of the store. Long lines at check-out were tolerated by store management because the waiting period often led to unplanned sales near or around the checkout lines. Little to no industry-wide effort was made to speed time-starved consumers in and out of the store.

Two ramifications resulted from this neglect of the time-starved consumer. The number of convenient stores and more convenient channels of distribution increased, and they expanded the number of product offerings. Convenience stores that once focused on tobacco, newspapers, and coffee, now sold both more grocery items (e.g., milk and eggs) and more prepared foods (e.g., sandwiches and frozen meals). At the same time, other outlets were capitalizing as they simplified the shopping effort by becoming one-stop shops (e.g., combining food and other goods into super-store formats – this is epitomized by the Wal-Mart SuperStore). This trend was equally prevalent in Europe as in the United States (AC Nielsen, 2004).

Thus, the landscape of where consumers shop for foods that provide convenience as a main benefit has changed. From 2000 to 2003, including K-Mart, Wal-Mart, and Target stores, family trips to dollar stores and superstores have increased markedly while voyages to the mass merchants and supermarkets have decreased significantly (AC Nielsen, 2003). So, people are shopping the more convenient food formats and the growth of the superstore has been quite dramatic.

### **Method**

Female heads of household were surveyed via telephone interviews to identify the characteristics of how the modern family dines. The telephone interview was conducted by a commercial research organization and used random digit dialing methods to identify potential respondents. The personal telephone interview was conducted by trained interviewers provided by the research supplier. The respondents were screened to insure that the respondent was a head of household.

### **Discussion**

Data revealed that families are reacting to time pressures in a way that changes the way they prepare foods while not affecting the end result. That is, in the end, we may not have an hour to prepare meals today, but families do prioritize eating together. Seventy-five percent of families eat as a family in the home five or more nights per week. In addition, 85 percent of those who eat together four nights a week or fewer claim that they would like to eat at home more often with their families:

Dashboard dining – eating on the go or in a hurry – is on the decline because parents and children alike recognize the opportunity to spend time with the people who matter most in their lives. Plus, families are rediscovering all the benefits of dining at home (Hirschaut, 2004).

From the most endorsed benefit to the least, spending quality time with family, spending less money, enjoying eating at home, eating healthier, greater control over family life quality, and feeling like a parent that is appropriately responsible were listed as benefits of eating at home (AFMA Press Release, 2004).

#### *Eating with an ear on the family chat, an eye on the TV, and a tooth on the meal*

Families may not gather formally around the same dinner table each and every night, but they are eating together as a family while multi-tasking. Hirschaut (2004) claims that “while most families often or always eat at the same table (82 percent), today’s reality is that often, we eat where we can enjoy other activities.” Sofas and coffee tables provide a place to have a comfortable meal watching the evening news.” In sum, we accomplish other chores and satisfy multiple needs while eating together. According to AFMA, though people multi-task at family dinner gatherings, they still manage to spend most of their time talking with other family members while eating together. People also watch TV, listen to the radio, talk on the phone, read, use the computer, do homework, work, and play games while eating meals together (AFMA Press Release, 2004). These data are validated by studies conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (1999) which found that 65 percent of families with children ages 8–18 eat dinner while watching television.

### **Implications**

#### *Psychological benefits of preparing a family meal*

Research on the malleability of the self-concept, or beliefs about what comprises the self, reveals that children learn the environment and setting in which they live, and this forms their expectations for how the world and family operate. One’s self-concept is malleable and our thoughts can change dramatically dependent upon who and what is in our proximal environment and with whom we compare our own experiences (Herbst *et al.*, 2003; Sedikides and Herbst, 2002; Sedikides *et al.*, 2002). If children are raised in

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an environment in which family discussions and gatherings for dinner are the exception rather than the rule, this could be detrimental to future family relations. Meals, specifically dinners, are a great time to touch base and relay life experiences, concerns, and occurrences in an effort to build the self-concept and self-confidence.

The desire to prepare home-cooked meals has decreased not because cooking is no longer enjoyable and important for children and the family in general, but perhaps because our time is now demanded more than ever. Households with two working partners are suddenly forced to attempt to pack more in a minute than they have in the past. Meal preparation and time spent around the table may have suffered from the changing demands put forth on our family members. Still, individuals are apt to enjoy preparing foods for their family even if it is a prepared meal purchased at the local supermarket, or a frozen dish onto which a member of the household sprinkles some spice, mixes the ingredients, and arrives at the table proud of the “home-cooked” meal. The psychological benefit of at least mixing and serving may be greater than that of bringing home a bag of goods from the local fast-food establishment. Parents may feel as though they are more responsible to the extent that they provide “home-cooked” meals as opposed to fast food deliveries.

Based on the psychological benefits engendered by preparing a meal for the family in addition to the positive repercussions for nutrition and vital family time that eating together engenders, families have again come home to eat. According to Jackie Hirschautt (2004) of the American Furniture Manufacturing Association, “dinnertime means much, much more . . . than just mealtime; it represents quality time.”

#### *Make convenient food products that help families eat together*

A sagacious move for marketers would be to target families with products or meals that can be consumed easily together. Supermarkets currently thrive in the prepared foods area because these foods tend to be ready-to-serve or ready to quickly heat-and-serve. Families know the importance of eating together and so, in a sense, they are ready to be driven home by a marketer’s base hit. The family segment is a large one and segmenting it even more specifically makes sense. However, what unites families, operating in a time-starved world, is a desire to eat together even if it includes watching the Atlanta Braves simultaneously or dealing with extraneous activities or duties on the side. The more that companies can do to create products that help make eating meals together easier in the event-packed day, the greater they may find that their offerings are in line with today’s family needs and demands.

#### **Limitations**

This research is best described as exploratory in that it has, for the first time, documented the suspected migration from the dinner table to the home. While some evidence has been provided that people are eating more in the car, little has been revealed concerning in-home eating habits. By no means should this small sample of telephone interviews be taken as a final statement. Instead, this research is a clarion call for more intensive investigation into how in-home eating “place” migration should influence how we market food to these households. The authors believe that improvements can be made to the sample size and the depth of questioning as to how food choices are made in the context of food consumption location. Greater emphasis should be placed on a taxonomy of in-home eating locations and their relationship to food choice. Most importantly, the authors recognize the methodological implications

of the study and would encourage further analysis of this emerging and important trend.

### Conclusion

In sum, what has not changed is the realization that eating together is important. We have always known that eating together is an instrumental part of a healthy family. The difference is that, today, we are making it work even if it means making mealtime part of the daily multi-tasking ritual. Eating together while watching TV or completing homework may be better for family life quality than eating in shifts or grazing independently. The extent to which families actually make a point to eat meals together could be an invaluable and irreplaceable component of healthy family relations. Culture, economy, and society have changed and, after time for readjustment, people have again started ensuring that eating together occurs on a daily basis.

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### About the authors

Kenneth C. Herbst is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Babcock Graduate School of Management at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Dr Herbst has a Masters and PhD from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition, Dr Herbst earned a BA from Wake Forest University. Dr Herbst researches the underlying thoughts and emotions that affect customers when they make decisions about what to buy. He also examines ways in which retailers can merchandise items so that they are more likely to be seen and purchased. Dr Herbst has published numerous articles in the field of consumer psychology and he has taught extensively in this area. Dr Herbst has published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Political Marketing*, *Journal of Promotion Management*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Personality and Individual Differences*, *British Food Journal*, *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, *Innovative Marketing*, *Revue Internationale De Psychologie Sociale*, and *Health Psychology*. In addition, Dr Herbst recently has been interviewed about his food research and industry expertise by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *Advertising Age*, and *Woman's Day*. He has also consulted with Ocean Spray, H. P. Hood, Inc. Dairy Company, the United States Mushroom Council, Performance Food Group, the Quality Bakers of America, and two supermarket corporations (Publix and Hy-Vee). Dr Herbst can be contacted at: [Kenneth.Herbst@mba.wfu.edu](mailto:Kenneth.Herbst@mba.wfu.edu)

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