
Communicating about healthy & sustainable eating to consumers with low socioeconomic status: **Evidence-based recommendations**



Background

Consumers with low socioeconomic status (SES) face unique challenges that limit their uptake of healthy & sustainable eating (e.g., reduced affordability, accessibility, and availability of healthy & sustainable foods). The reduced exposure to, seeking of, and trust in health information that have been observed in consumers with low SES further reinforce these challenges. This toolkit presents evidence-based recommendations on how to tailor your communication to consumers with low SES to empower them to shift towards healthier & more sustainable diets. The recommendations were developed based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research findings.

The research

Focus groups with social supermarket beneficiaries and professionals of the Caritas Trieste charitable foundation in Italy provided insights into the barriers and communication preferences of consumers with low SES with regards to healthy & sustainable eating. Based on these insights, tailored communication material (i.e., infographics) were developed and tested in a larger pool of consumers with low SES via an online survey.

Who is it for?

This toolkit of recommendations is particularly relevant for science communicators, researchers, health professionals, journalists, NGOs, and policy makers who work with communities with low SES.

Recommendations

1



Know your target audience

Not all consumers with low SES respond in the same way to information about healthy & sustainable eating. Native Italian consumers found messages about food-related risks of climate change more motivating than general recommendations on healthy & sustainable eating and more useful than recommendations on how to eat healthily and sustainably on a budget. They also thought that information about the benefits of canned/frozen fruits, vegetables & pulses creates more opportunities for eating healthily & sustainably compared to information about similarities between products irrespective of brand. In contrast, the differences between the various messages were not significant for migrant consumers.

2



Understand the key barriers for your target audience

Consumers with low SES face problems with both limited motivation (e.g., migrants are less willing than native Italians to shift towards healthy & sustainable eating behaviours), **skills** (e.g., in cooking), **and opportunities for healthy & sustainable eating** (e.g., limited availability of healthy & sustainable foods in food banks). Try to understand these barriers and their underlying reasons (e.g., limited motivation caused by cultural norms, facing more obstacles in everyday life, limited access to information) to better address them in your messages. Deliver information that is tailored to the specific needs of your target audience.

3



Understand the food environment of your target audience

The limited availability of healthy & sustainable foods is a key barrier that consumers with low SES often encounter. 46% of food bank customers said that they find fresh products (e.g., fruits and vegetables) in food banks only sometimes, rarely, or never. In turn, there is a dominance of pre-packed and canned products in food banks. Identifying and promoting healthy & sustainable foods that are available in the current food environment of consumers with low SES (e.g., canned fruits, vegetables, pulses, fish) may help them overcome the limited availability barrier and create more opportunities for healthy & sustainable eating.

4



Choose your message carefully

Certain messages (or message framings) may be more likely to impact consumer behaviour than others. Consumers with low SES thought that information on food-related risks of climate change are more likely to change what they choose to eat or buy compared with general recommendations on healthy & sustainable eating or recommendations on how to eat healthily & sustainably on a budget. This could be due to the increased focus of consumers with low SES on socio-economic factors or the negative framing of the message (focus on risks instead of benefits) that has been found in previous research to elicit stronger responses in consumers with low SES.

5



Provide the necessary context and deliver information in a non-patronising way

Consumers who have financial insecurity are burdened with many concerns around their everyday survival. Promoting healthy & sustainable eating among people who experience food insecurity and have an urgent need to eat may even seem contradicting. The delivery of information about healthy & sustainable eating to this target group can thus be difficult, especially if this is not initiated by the consumer. To help consumers with low SES receive the information well and understand it, deliver messages within an appropriate context and in a non-patronising way (e.g., use non-directive language, focus on personal gains/risks, deliver the information through people who share the same struggles as the target audience).

6



Explore ways to increase the trustworthiness of information

The limited trust in information and sources of information about food and nutrition is a real barrier for consumers with low SES, and specific segments like migrants or consumers with low education have lower levels of trust overall. Increasing the trustworthiness of information is therefore important. Peer endorsement (e.g., use of a quote from a consumer with low SES to validate the information) was not successful in increasing the trustworthiness of information. Other ways to achieve this might be to use resources that have widespread use (popularity), are precise and specific (specificity), or are developed by reputable and competent sources that consumers already trust (authority). Specifically, males were found to trust health authorities and health professionals more than NGOs and food labels, while females reported equal trust in the various sources.

7



Always factor in the limited budget

Budget is the most important determinant of food choice for consumers with low SES. Consumers believe their limited budget prevents them from eating healthily and sometimes they cannot purchase certain foods (e.g., fish, meat, fruits) because they are expensive. In fact, 90% of the survey participants reported cutting down on food expenses when their budget is limited. To achieve this, the main food groups that they buy less frequently or in smaller quantities are sugar-sweetened beverages (65%), fish and seafood (63%), sweets (61%), red meat (60%) and nuts/seeds (40%). Providing examples of healthy & sustainable foods that are affordable (e.g., canned/frozen versions of fruits, vegetables, pulses, fish) or recipes that can be prepared with affordable ingredients (perhaps mentioning also the cost of the recipe per person) can tackle the affordability barrier.

8



Raise awareness about the importance and benefits of sustainable eating

Consumers with low SES are less knowledgeable about sustainable eating and focus more on issues related to food's quality and health impacts rather than on environmental impacts. Also, specific segments of consumers with low SES such as those with low education were less likely to be familiar with information about healthy & sustainable eating. Providing information about the importance and benefits of healthy & sustainable eating, particularly in consumers with low education, may help raise awareness on the issue.

9



Focus on flexibility

Consumers with low SES experience financial insecurity, which is associated with heightened psychological burden and uncertainty. As a result, **they need to be able to adapt to changing circumstances and limited choice.** Flexibility is also important for migrant consumers who may be attached to their traditional eating practices or try to integrate traditional eating practices with local ones. Providing ideas on food/ingredient swaps or alternative cooking methods in the form of flexible recipes allows consumers to easily adapt the information to their eating preferences and changing circumstances.

10



Tackle product misperceptions

Consumers often form misperceptions about products from unknown brands that are donated to food banks and see them as inferior because **they often carry poverty labels and have unattractive packaging.** Highlighting the similarities between products irrespective of brand or package design cues improved product perceptions in the majority of consumers (61%) and was moderately effective in creating more opportunities for healthy & sustainable eating. Informing consumers about the benefits of canned/frozen fruits, vegetables & pulses, which are generally thought to be less healthy than fresh ones, had similar positive effects.

11



Tackle the language barrier

For migrant consumers, **not speaking the local language is an extra barrier to getting information.** Indeed, 63% of migrants felt that their access to information about food and nutrition was reduced at least moderately because of the language barrier when they arrived in the new country. Making the information available in various languages, increasing access to information from various language sources, or using mainly visuals to deliver the information are potential solutions to tackle the language barrier.

12



Increase the availability of information

Twelve percent of consumers with low SES reported not accessing information about food and nutrition at all, while 25% only do it in an opportunistic manner (i.e., when they come across it). Increasing the availability of information would allow more consumers to get exposed to it. This could be done by collaborating with social workers or organisations that work with vulnerable consumers or by delivering information through various channels, both online and offline, to achieve higher outreach. For example, people living alone said they prefer the internet more than social media or tv/radio but not more than magazines/newspapers, books, or word of mouth, while those living with others showed highest preference for the internet compared to all other channels of communication.



Structural changes to reduce barriers to effective communication

Communicating about healthy & sustainable eating to consumers with low SES via tailor-made messages is promising.

However, structural changes are also needed to tackle inequalities around the limited affordability/ availability of healthy & sustainable food and limited access to information that are evident in communities with low SES.

Evidence-based recommendations on structural changes are presented below.

- Regulate prices of healthy & sustainable foods such as fish, fruits, nuts/seeds.
Stakeholders: Policy makers
- Give incentives to retailers/producers who donate healthy & sustainable products (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables) to food banks.
Stakeholders: Policy makers, Food banks
- Improve product and package design of products from less known/cheaper brands.
Stakeholders: Industry
- Facilitate the logistics of donating fresh products to food banks (e.g., food banks picking up products instead of having them delivered, investing in food storage equipment and qualified personnel for sorting, handling, and storing food properly) and the development of large and solid networks to support with massive donations from producers.
Stakeholders: Food banks, Retailers, Producers
- Incorporate the provision of information about healthy & sustainable eating in the process of admitting beneficiaries in food banks. Make sure there is personnel with expertise and enough time for the provision of information, as well as reliable information from trusted sources to share with consumers.
Stakeholders: Food banks, Social workers
- Improve internet access of migrants in places they frequent (e.g., food banks, social welfare and cultural organisations) to allow them to access information in different languages or to translate the information.
Stakeholders: Food banks, Social welfare and cultural organisations
- Enrich children's education at school with information about healthy & sustainable eating.
Stakeholders: Schools, Teachers

Want to know more about
the research behind these
recommendations?

Watch the recorded [webinar!](#)

Do you have questions?

Contact us!

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