

Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think
By Brian Wansink, Ph.D. (New York: Bantam Books, 2006)

Reviewed by
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Each day the human mind cycles through thousands of decisions and scenarios. Many are plagued by habit or inherited preference when it comes to daily food choices. In “Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think,” Brian Wansink says that we make 200 decisions about food each day – and we’re only aware of 20 of them. The author suggests that external influences are responsible for governing how much we eat – not simply what we believe will be enough. His antidote: a simple awareness of what causes us to overeat will curb thoughtless snacking.

Wansink’s investigations are all supported by evidence gathered at Cornell University’s Food and Brand Lab, among several other lab locations. His approach is an easy-to-follow and cleverly written plea for Americans to simply think before they indulge. Influences like soft music playing in the background, food presentation and the impulses of the people surrounding us are hidden to all that participate in his studies – even a few seasoned academics. The experiments also delve into the psychology and leverage behind restaurant-customer relationships.

Each chapter concludes with summarized strategies for eating less – or simply becoming conscious of when to stop. He says that an underlying “mindless margin” of adding or subtracting 100 calories a day in any diet can translate into overall weight-loss and management. This investigation into the hidden patterns behind how and why Americans mindlessly munch is an essential read for anyone that eats.

Wansink pairs hard facts with witty, supportive anecdotes about all of his studies. Many of his subjects are graduate and undergraduate students, always willing to stuff themselves in the name of science. The problem with overeating boils down to the notion that Americans eat with their eyes, absorbing strictly visual cues from plate size to packaging, instead of their stomachs.

One night in 2007 rewarded suburban Chicago moviegoers a treat sponsored by one of Wansink’s experiments. Any ticket holder for Mel Gibson’s action flick, *Payback*, received a soft drink and either a me-

dium or large-size, “bigger-than-your-head” bucket of popcorn. Two disturbing variables accompanied the giveaway. The free popcorn wasn’t fresh; it had been popped five days prior to the viewing, and both massive-sized tubs were distributed to every one so there wouldn’t be any sharing.

Stale popcorn didn’t deter the moviegoers from snacking during the movie – which is surprising considering how tasteless the experience must have been. Each person was handed a questionnaire and weighed their popcorn after the movie. Most large-bucket holders claimed that the tub’s size had no influence on how much they ate, but what they believed and how much they consumed was dramatically different. Weighing the buckets revealed that the big-bucket group ate an average of 53 percent more aged popcorn than their smaller-bucket counterpart. Multiple popcorn studies that followed produced the same results, regardless of location or what kind of movie was played. Not only package size, but hidden factors like a distracting movie and the ambient sounds of munching popcorn also impact how much we eat.

In recent years, fast food companies like Subway have created a marketing strategy designed to wrap customers up in their “fresh” and “6 Grams of Fat or Less” alternatives. Many Americans opt for Subway over other “less healthy” fast food places like Burger King or McDonald’s. A major flaw in this widely advertised, yet selective-nutritional information is that it doesn’t include the extra cheese, bacon, sauce or variety of bread choices. Additional chips, cookies or a fountain drink also offset any notions of being genuinely nutritious. Subway subs don what Wansink coins a “health halo” – implying an all-inclusive radiance of healthy food compared to McDonald’s. His McSubway Study reveals the nutritional information that restaurant chains willingly provide and often gloat over creates presumptions about all the food sold there.

McDonald’s frequenters are never bombarded with claims that french fries and double cheeseburgers will transform a chubby body to a fit and healthy one in Jared’s likeness. To deliberately plaster nutrition and weight-loss promises on napkins, tray liners and cups is to create a misleading illusion of all-inclusive whole-

some dining. Advertising has become a double-edged dogma of persuasions and customer ignorance. Considering that cookie or Coca-Cola refill would involve a more conscious awareness of what is healthy and what is simply available.

A former World War II Navy cook was able to create the illusion of more than just lemon flavored Jell-O when sailors complained that cherry had jumped the menu. When the chef served them the lemon Jell-O with red food coloring, “seeing red” was enough to transform it into cherry. Americans tend to assume how palatable a dish or dessert is simply from how it is presented.

In another study, Wansink observed how restaurant patrons react to two identical menus, but one with literal food names and the other with more abstract food adjectives. When presented with “Red Beans with Rice” versus “Traditional Cajun Red Beans with Rice,” Americans are willing to shell out more for the latter and believe it’s a better value despite both dishes being the same. Sprinkling a few descriptive words over a dinner menu “changed sales, tastes and attitudes toward the restaurant.”

The author cites World War II again as a time when organ meats: hearts, kidneys, liver, brains, stomachs, intestines, feet, ears and heads of cows, hogs and sheep were in surplus. Other domestic meat products were being shipped overseas to feed soldiers and allies. “Variety meats” emerged as an ambiguous way to convince Depression-era Americans to incorporate a malleable base to their menus. Although it may be unsurprising that food description will have an effect on our taste, words have carried a prominent convincing power in other circumstances. Political semantics can mean the difference between support and rejection – for example, “choice” and “life” trigger two different images in mind on abortion.

This book asserts that Americans are stubborn and clueless when it comes to food consumption. Mindless Eating teeters between diet guide and popular social science-style genres – offering readers impromptu lifestyle changes while still maintaining a creative portrayal of informative non-fiction. Wansink has packaged his investigations of the snacking psyche into an honest and persuasive look at the general public’s eating habits. He suggests “the best diet is the one you don’t know you’re on,” and that making small, simple changes in what influences food choices will cause us to mindlessly lose weight.

This format benefits an audience interested in losing weight through logic and awareness, and does so by combining real-world applications with quirky, interesting facts. Wansink’s approach is informative on several psychological roles that play into eating habits, but he falls short on the broader implications. Suggesting

that people can be effortlessly manipulated by outside influence is likely to have an effect on the companies looking to capitalize on such information. The author never leads on that he intends to share greater ideas and problems associated with his research, but by the end most readers might wish he had at least mentioned the possibility.