Eat Smart! Ontario’s Healthy Restaurant Program: A Survey of Participating Restaurant Operators

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Abstract

Eat Smart! Ontario’s Healthy Restaurant Program is a standard provincial health promotion program. Public health units grant an award of excellence to restaurants that meet designated standards in nutrition, food safety, and non-smoking seating. The purpose of this study was to assess whether program objectives for participating restaurant operators were achieved during the first year of program implementation, and to obtain operators’ recommendations for improving the program. Dillman’s tailored design method was used to design a mail survey and implement it among participating operators (n = 434). The design method, which consisted of four mail-outs, yielded a 74% response rate. Fifty percent of respondents operated family-style or quick-service restaurants, and 82% of respondents learned about the program from public health inspectors. Almost all respondents (98%) participated in the program mainly to have their establishments known as clean and healthy restaurants, 65% received and used either point-of-purchase table stands or postcards to promote the program, and 98% planned to continue participating. The respondents’ suggestions for improving the program were related to the award ceremony and program materials, media promotion, communication, education, and program standards. Program staff can use the findings to enhance the program.

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INTRODUCTION

Eat Smart! Ontario’s Healthy Restaurant Program is a standard provincial health promotion program that public health units can adopt. Through this program, public health units grant an award of excellence to restaurants that meet designated standards in nutrition, food safety, and non-smoking seating. The Eat Smart! program is described elsewhere (1). Considerable resources were devoted to consultation and testing of program elements before the program was implemented in 1999. For this reason, the program gained wide acceptance and uptake in various health units across the province. After one year of operation, 434 restaurants were participating in 16 health unit regions throughout Ontario. Consumers are made aware of the program through local dining guides, the Eat Smart! Web site, door decals, and point-of-purchase materials in the restaurants. The program was in an early stage of development during 2000, and a formative evaluation to guide program
improvement was therefore warranted (2). Monitoring certain aspects of the program was deemed important, as that would determine whether the program was on track in achieving its objectives, and permit subsequent program improvements.

METHOD
Participants
The target population was the 434 Eat Smart! restaurant operators in Ontario. The study involved the entire population, as opposed to a sample, because 1. it was important to get as much information as possible from all participating operators at such an early stage of the program, 2. each participating regional public health unit wanted access to local results, and 3. the additional cost of obtaining information from all restaurant operators via a mail survey was not substantial.

Survey
A mail survey comprising closed- and open-ended questions was developed. The Eat Smart! logic model, which diagrammatically shows the relationship between program activities and outcome objectives, guided the development of the questions. The questions addressed how Eat Smart! restaurant operators became aware of the program, why they chose to participate, whether they made any menu changes to qualify for the Eat Smart! award, their use of program materials, their suggestions for improving the program, and whether they intended to continue participating.

The survey was pilot tested with restaurateur members of both the Eat Smart! provincial steering committee and the Toronto Eat Smart! committee. These members were asked to review and provide feedback on the face validity and clarity of questions.

Procedure
Toronto Public Health’s research review committee approved the study. Dillman’s tailored design method (TDM) (3) was used to obtain quality survey responses and maximize the response rate. The survey was printed in a professionally designed booklet with the Eat Smart! logo on the front cover, and was implemented in May 2000.

The first mail-out was a personalized letter. It was sent to all restaurant operators to inform them that the survey was forthcoming.

Figure 1
How respondents (n = 315) heard about Eat Smart!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mailed inspector</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other health unit staff</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant operator</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Restaurant News</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Restaurant Association</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade show</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio commercial</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billboard/bus shelter ad</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV commercial</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents could specify more than one channel.
The second mail-out, sent one week after the advance-notice letter, included a personalized letter, a short survey, and a stamped, addressed return envelope. The letter mentioned that the identification number stamped on the survey was only for keeping track of who returned the survey and who needed a follow-up mailing. A monetary incentive was offered to increase the response rate; the letter indicated that five respondents would be randomly selected to receive $200 each.

The third mail-out, sent one week after the initial survey, was a personalized postcard follow-up to all restaurant operators. The postcard thanked those who had responded and encouraged all others to reply.

The fourth mail-out, sent three weeks after the second, contained a new personalized letter, a survey, and a stamped, preaddressed return envelope. It was sent to those who had not yet responded.

SPSS for Windows (release 6.2; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, 1993) was used for a descriptive analysis of the responses to the closed-ended questions. The Ethnograph (version 5.0, Qualis Research Associates, Salt Lake City, UT, 1998), a computer application to facilitate the management of qualitative data, was used to code and synthesize the responses to the open-ended questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The TDM yielded a response rate of 74% (n = 319). Fifty percent of the respondents operated family-style (34%) or quick-service (16%) restaurants, which represent the segment that the program is trying to attract with its messages and materials. The other respondents operated the following types of restaurants: fine dining (16%), café (10%), food court (6%), cafeteria-style (5%), bistro (4%), pub (1%), roadhouse (1%) and other (7%). Forty percent of the respondents operated restaurants with over 90 customer seats. The remainder equally represented restaurants that had 61 to 90 (20%), 31 to 60 (21%), or 30 or fewer customer seats (19%).

Awareness of the program

Most restaurant operators (82%) learned about the Eat Smart! program from public health inspectors (Figure 1).

Twenty-two percent of the operators learned about the program from information mailed by public health units. The variety of responses demonstrates that the program message is reaching restaurant operators through many different communication channels.

Respondents who learned about the Eat Smart! program from a source other than those listed reported employees, head office staff, family members, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation as their sources. Some operators also bought a restaurant with an Eat Smart! designation, and other operators were participants in similar health promotion programs that converted to the Eat Smart! program.

Reasons for participating in the program

Respondents chose to participate in the Eat Smart! program mainly to have their restaurants known as clean and healthy places to eat (Table 1). They were interested in providing a clean environment for their customers and staff, providing healthy choices for their customers, winning an award of excellence, and attracting new or more customers to their establishment.

Ninety-eight percent of respondents planned to continue participating. The remaining 2% were unsure about continued participation. No respondents planned to withdraw from the program. When asked why they planned to continue to participate in the Eat Smart! program, many restaurant operators cited the same reasons that had attracted them to the program (Table 1). Others identified a personal commitment to nutrition: “I believe in eating healthy and promote it to my customers.” Some mentioned a sense of accomplishment: “We are proud of our achievements and pleased to promote ourselves as an Eat Smart! establishment.” Some operators perceived the program as a staff motivator that helped to change attitudes: “So that clean is not a must, but a natural and automatic thing to do.”

Changes made to foods offered to qualify for the program

Twenty-two percent of respondents reported that, in order to qualify for the Eat Smart! program, they made changes to the food offered. Among these respondents (n = 69), the most common change in foods was the addition of a lower-fat dessert (Figure 2).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free promotion (n = 304)</td>
<td>18 49 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award of excellence (n = 313)</td>
<td>5   15 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association with Canadian Cancer Society/Heart and Stroke Foundation (n = 309)</td>
<td>11 38 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be known as clean and healthy (n = 314)</td>
<td>1* 2* 98*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide a healthy environment for my staff (n = 308)</td>
<td>3   15 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide a healthy environment and healthy choices for my customers (n = 313)</td>
<td>1   4 95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To attract new or more customers (n = 310)</td>
<td>3   21 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have a good reputation with the health unit (n = 308)</td>
<td>6   17 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain an edge on the competition (n = 308)</td>
<td>14  32 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining is quick and easy with no added cost (n = 307)</td>
<td>22  34 44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Because of rounding, the total percentage for this entry does not add up to 100.
Use of program materials

Sixty-five percent of respondents received the point-of-purchase table stands and postcards to promote the program in their restaurants. Of those who received the materials, 33% used the table stand exclusively, 40% used the table stand with the postcard insert, and 27% used the small postcard as a menu insert. The variety of materials that respondents used suggests that restaurant operators use different items to suit their needs.

Thirty percent of respondents received the food safety poster. Of those who had received it, 87% already displayed it in the restaurant kitchen.

Ways to improve the program for restaurant operators and customers

The analysis of responses to open-ended questions about how to improve the program yielded five areas needing improvement. These were the award ceremony and program materials, advertising and promotion through the media, communication, training and education, and program standards.

Award ceremony and program materials

Suggestions to improve the award ceremony included scheduling it at a time when restaurant operators could easily attend, and not during restaurant busy times such as lunch hour. Operators preferred a variety of speakers at the ceremony, such as local dignitaries, a cancer survivor, or an athlete. One operator thought that the award ceremony should be for staff, rather than for owners, as staff members are responsible for working every day to uphold the standards.

Operators would like to receive the award certificate in a frame or dry-mounted. Participants suggested a photograph with a local dignitary, especially if that person were well-known in the community.

Participating restaurateurs wanted more Eat Smart! program materials for their establishment and to give away, so that customers would not forget the message once they left the restaurant. To facilitate this, participants recommended that health units improve the distribution system for program materials. For example, an operator suggested having “the total package ready to send out to the restaurants that comply so they can insert/display [the materials] for the customers.” The customer materials should provide enough detail that people clearly know what to expect from an Eat Smart! restaurant.

An operator said, “I find that some customers think that Eat Smart! applies to all items on the menu, and that every food choice should be able to be altered to a healthy choice.” When referring to currently available point-of-purchase materials, an operator commented, “Yes, they read the postcard insert. However, give-aways allow participation, and participation helps people remember, and this will help return customers to our restaurant as well.” Future program materials could include an informative take-home item for customers.

Some operators suggested that customers who frequent Eat Smart! restaurants should be given a discount or redeemable coupon. While this strategy...
could enhance awareness and recognition of Eat Smart! restaurants, it provides no incentive for customers to choose healthier menu items.

Some operators wanted more decals, a bigger decal, or window posters/banners to promote the program. Other operators wanted permission to add the Eat Smart! logo to their restaurant menus. A minority described their establishments as fine-dining restaurants, and felt that a single plaque would be more appropriate than the other program materials offered.

Participants desired more promotion to customers outside of restaurants, such as posters displayed in schools, doctors' offices, and hospital clinics. One operator suggested giving the Eat Smart! restaurant listing to restaurant reviewers so that Eat Smart! status could be highlighted in restaurant reviews.

Several operators were unaware of the Eat Smart! decal or point-of-purchase materials. Other operators ran out of materials partway through the year, and were unsure how to obtain more. All participating restaurant operators must be made aware of available materials and how to obtain them.

**Advertising and promotion through the media:** Many operators commented on the need to inform the public about the Eat Smart! program and to promote participating restaurants through ongoing use of mass media. They felt this would give the program more credibility and "brand awareness." Operators wanted the advertising to provide information about the high standards that restaurants must meet to qualify, so customers would understand and value the program. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, billboards, and tourist guides were commonly suggested as vehicles to promote the program and participating restaurants. For example, an operator said, "Various timely press releases would show the public that the government and operators alike do care and are working together towards a common goal." Respondents felt that more media attention should be given to clean restaurants, considering the recent Ontario media reports on restaurants that failed food safety inspections. They described the benefits not only for their restaurants, but also for the industry as a whole. An operator commented, "By you promoting Eat Smart! restaurants, restaurant operators are encouraged to raise their standards in order to participate and qualify.

Public health officials should view the cost of advertising the program as an investment in assisting the restaurant industry to raise its food safety and sanitation standards voluntarily.

**Communication:** Participants mentioned a need for more information-sharing and dialogue between restaurants and the Eat Smart! program. Operators recommended newsletters on health issues affecting the restaurant industry, recipe suggestions, current trends in healthy eating, and food safety and sanitation. Operators wanted to know of any changes in the program in advance, so that they could be prepared to meet new regulations or standards. The once-a-year assessment of restaurants for the Eat Smart! award could be followed up with regular program updates to help maintain interest and participation. This commitment to continuous quality improvement is aligned with the Eat Smart! program objective of improving restaurant staff's nutrition and food safety knowledge and skills. More resources could be dedicated to the regular communication of relevant health and program information to restaurants.

**Education:** On-site training in food safety and healthy eating was a key request from several operators. One operator suggested the provision of "more information and courses to enhance the knowledge of [the] hospitality industry." Several operators wanted staff food safety training in languages other than English, or more pictures in the current materials. They felt that some staff members were excluded from program information. For example, an operator said, "Provide more information for all my staff to feel that they are all important to the success of the program." The participants sought information for all restaurant employees, not only the food handling staff. Although copies of a restaurant staff information booklet are distributed to winning restaurants, public health employees could consider alternative methods for educating restaurant staff about the Eat Smart! Program; this would ensure increased access to information. Workshops, presentations, or site visits to restaurants may be options. In addition, materials in languages other than English and French could be provided.

**Program standards:** Most respondents were satisfied with the program and did not recommend any changes to improve the standards. Some noted the importance of continuing to update and upgrade the program. For example, one operator said, "If the criteria of the Eat Smart! program is [sic] the same every year, restaurants may lose interest in participating." Maintaining a program that is a challenge for operators seems to be attractive to some current participants. One Eat Smart! program objective is to continue increasing the standards for participation. It seems that restaurant operators will not oppose increased standards.

Respondents provided specific recommendations to improve the nutrition, food safety, and non-smoking seating program standards. Several operators wanted more detailed information about the nutritional content of foods, so they could pass this information on to their customers. They also wanted access to nutritional menu analysis, seminars by a registered dietician, and research on and tips and ideas for healthier food choices. They also wanted suggestions for lower-fat dessert items to meet the nutrition standard, and a mechanism for operators to share "low fat or healthy" entree ideas with each other.

Some respondents felt that customers associate Eat Smart! with healthy eating, rather than with food safety, and that the program should focus more on promoting the message that "clean restaurants have the Eat Smart! Award of Excellence certificate." Some felt that public health inspections should occur more often, and that public health inspectors should take more time to explain the program during their visits. Public health inspections are an opportunity to educate and motivate operators, and time could be made available for this purpose during inspections.

A few operators advocated province-wide regulations to prohibit smoking in all restaurants. Others would have preferred more stringent enforcement of the local non-smoking bylaw.

**CONCLUSION**

The findings suggest that the Eat Smart! program is on track in achieving its program objectives. Almost all respondents intended to continue participating in the program.
Various sources of communication, especially public health inspectors, made respondents aware of the program. Most respondents used program materials to promote the program in their restaurants. However, the results suggest that more restaurant operators need to receive the program materials.

The respondents did suggest some ways to improve the program. A well-coordinated system of program material distribution and ongoing communication with operators are important. Suggestions included giving program materials to customers, providing tangible incentives for people to eat at an Eat Smart! restaurant, and using various media promotion strategies. Nutrition and food safety education for restaurant staff could be offered, both formally through workshops or newsletters and informally during public health inspections or site visits. In the future, standards for restaurant participation could be raised to ensure that the Eat Smart! program maintains a standard of excellence in promoting and protecting health, and is respected by both health professionals and the restaurant industry.

RELEVANCE TO PRACTICE

Seventy-four percent of restaurant operators participating in the Eat Smart! program provided information that public health unit staff can use to determine whether the provincial program objectives were achieved during the first year of implementation. Dietitians in public health play a key role in promoting the program, training restaurant staff, and providing nutrition education to operators. This study provides practical information about the promotional strategies, training, and food safety and nutrition topics that current participants prefer. Dietitians can use the results and operators’ recommendations to develop similar health promotion programs with the food service industry. When outpatient and private-practice dietitians counsel patients about eating in restaurants, they can enhance the program’s profile and help the public by communicating the program elements and promoting the healthier choices available.

Acknowledgements

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References