

SEPT 2024

Promoting Healthy Food Choices in the Office with Behavioral Design

As part of a corporate initiative to explore the use of behavioral science across the Organization, the Office of Innovation (OIN) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) engaged ideas42 in a number of pilots to enable staff to apply ideas42's behavioral design methodology to solve problems in new ways. In this pilot, FAO sought help to promote healthier food choices among their staff. Adapting the layout, presentation, and communication of food options increased the proportion of healthy foods sold in the office cafeteria by 17% after six weeks.

Barriers to healthy food choices at a nutrition-focused organization

FAO is focused on defeating hunger and improving nutrition around the globe and prioritizes creating a healthy food environment for all, including its own staff. FAO's Food and Nutrition Division (ESN) regularly implemented various initiatives and communications campaigns to promote healthy food choices in the office cafeterias. Nonetheless, during our field research, staff mentioned gaps between their intentions to eat healthy and their actual choices in the cafeteria. Partnering with OIN, we gathered FAO staff from ESN and the Logistics Services Division (CSL) to apply a behavioral lens to understand and improve FAO staff food choices in Café Eden, one of the cafeterias at the headquarters in Rome. Our colleagues from the ESN division identified which items at Café Eden would qualify as "healthy" or "unhealthy".¹

To better understand the drivers of food choices and barriers to selecting the healthier items offered at Café Eden, we examined the layout, presentation and communication of food options, conducted in-depth interviews with staff, and analyzed sales data at the cafeteria.

We found that food choices were negatively impacted by the relative salience and visual appeal of healthy and less healthy foods in the cafeteria. Less healthy items such as pastries and chocolates were abundant and placed in high-traffic areas, making them a go-to option for an afternoon snack or on-the-go breakfast. On the other hand, healthier items were harder to find and less visually appealing.

Highlights

- *Despite their best intentions, people don't always make healthy food choices.*
- *Collaborating with the United Nations, we designed solutions that leverage choice architecture to encourage healthier eating.*
- *Our intervention showed potential for improving healthy food choices. For instance, the proportion of healthy foods sold increased by four percentage points, or ~17%, from baseline.*

¹ The ideas42 team is of the belief that all foods in moderation can be part of a balanced diet. However, for the purposes of this intervention, it was necessary to label foods "healthy" or "unhealthy", even though these are not necessarily the team's preferred terms for any type of food.

We also learned that the lack of convenient healthy foods drove staff towards less healthy choices. FAO staff reported going to Café Eden when looking for a quick lunch option, and purchasing food outside the FAO compound when there is more time for lunch. However, buying the healthier lunch options took a long time due to long lines at peak times.

Finally, we found that staff perceived the price of some healthy foods, such as fruit, as too high. They tended to compare it with the price at the supermarket, overlooking the convenience factor. Pastries and chocolate, on the other hand, were relatively inexpensive and their price was in line with the expectations.

A behavioral solution package

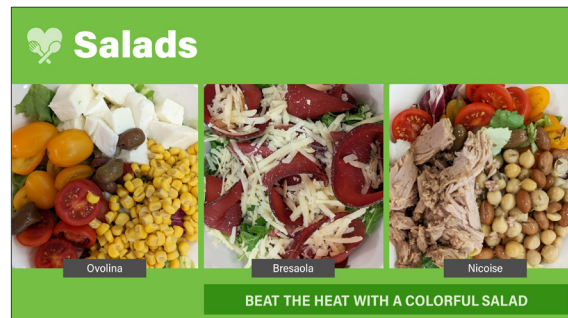
We collaborated with the FAO and Café Eden to make recommendations regarding effective and feasible behavioral interventions to address the barriers identified, focusing on choice architecture.

1. Increased **visual appeal** and **desirability** of healthy foods.

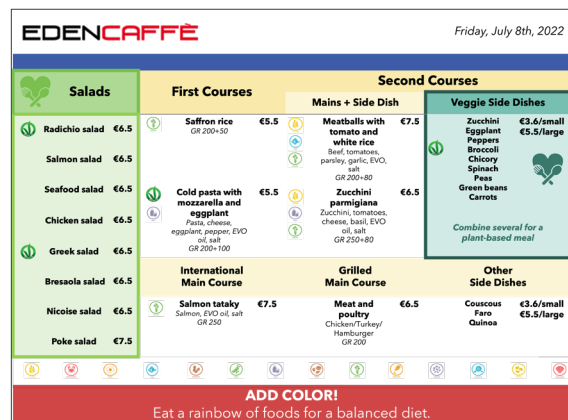
▶ We designed posters and signs meant to **make the health benefits of healthy food more salient**, or top-of-mind, and provide simple, memorable heuristics for making healthier food choices (such as “eat the rainbow”). These were displayed in prominent places in the cafeteria, as well as on a large screen.



▶ Colorful signs were used to **highlight the location of healthy options** throughout the cafeteria and to make it easier to identify them.



▶ A redesigned menu was employed to **draw attention to the healthy hot meal options** available daily. The menu was placed at the entrance of the cafeteria and in several other highly visible places where employees could see it while waiting in line to order.



2. Changes to the **physical environment** of the café.

- ▶ We **increased the salience of healthy foods by altering their placement around the café**. For example, we placed fresh fruit and healthy snacks on top of cashier counters and placed water at eye level in refrigerated cases, while moving candy and chocolates away from high-visibility locations.



We also recommended increasing the convenience and accessibility of healthy foods, for instance by creating a designated “grab-and-go” lane that would channel customers past takeaway salads, yogurt, and other healthy pre-packaged items on the way to a special cashier station.

Third, to address perceptions about the price of certain healthy items, we recommended introducing a **“healthy choices loyalty program”** where customers would get rewards for purchasing a certain quantity of healthy items (for example, for every 10 salads purchased, one is free).

Café Eden’s management was excited about and supportive of the behavioral interventions we recommended. However, at the time, financial costs and logistical challenges did not allow the café to allocate a designated cashier for grab-and-go items or introduce a rewards program. The café implemented the rest of the recommended designs starting July 5, 2022.

Results

We evaluated the effectiveness of the behavioral intervention by comparing sales data (aggregated by day and by item) from Café Eden before (May 31–July 4) and after (July 5–August 12) the intervention was implemented. Since we did not have information on the number of customers served or individual choices they made, we focused on the ratio of various healthy to unhealthy items purchased rather than on absolute sales.

We found indications of the intervention’s potential to improve healthy food choices. For instance, the proportion of healthy foods targeted by the intervention (fruit, yogurt, vegetables, and nuts) increased from 23% to 27% in total sales. Moreover, the sales of specific healthy food in proportion to unhealthy foods they could substitute also increased:

- ▶ The ratio of fruits to sweets increased from .29 to .36, and the ratio of fruit smoothies to sweets increased from .2 to .24.
- ▶ The ratio of healthy snacks (nuts, dried fruits, etc.) to sweets increased from .07 to .12 and the ratio of healthy snacks to pastries increased from .12 to .17.

- ▶ The proportion of yogurt to sweets and pastries remained largely unchanged, likely because the placement of yogurt could not be altered much due to storage requirements.

Although this type of pre-post evaluation does not control for the impact of extraneous factors (e.g. weather, menu variations, etc.) and is limited in its ability to undoubtedly establish causality, it can still provide valuable indication about an intervention's potential effect.

Takeaway

The results of this pilot suggest that behaviorally informed interventions, and in particular multi-pronged behavioral designs, can positively impact food choices. We found that the largest increases in healthy choices were for food categories that were made more abundant and salient to customers, although our intervention package also employed prominent, easy-to-read posters featuring the benefits of healthier food options.

Nonetheless, in addition to behavioral design, the availability, cost, and convenience of healthy foods are priorities that need to be addressed to significantly impact food choices in any context, including an office cafeteria. The designs created for this pilot are still in use at Café Eden and will be further disseminated at FAO offices. Additionally, these materials are being used to support FAO's campaign to enable a healthy food environment for all personnel and visitors in FAO facilities worldwide.