

Snacks, Time, and Sex

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We have to eat; we like to eat; eating makes us feel good; eating nourishes our bodies and souls; it is more important than sex. It is also a profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers. But a great deal of the social elements are being lost as we become ever more chained to the clock. Hence, the continued rise of snacking.

According to a study by the Hartman Group, 91% of consumers snack multiple times throughout the day. Not too surprising, but perhaps more importantly, snacking now accounts for 50% of all eating occasions. In fact, 37% of the time, a snack provides one of the three key meals of the day. Note that – it isn't a supplement, it's a replacement. But I don't believe this signals the decline of the meal in terms of social importance. In fact, I think it signals quite the opposite. While we may see more replacement over time (assuming we keep to our busy, calendared lives), it doesn't mean the importance of mealtime is on its way out; it means that the meals that are left to us take on a sacred importance. So what does that mean for the future of snacking?

Isolation and individualism are defining hallmarks of snacking. As eating experiences that tend to be individualized and not shared, snacks can address consumer needs in ways that traditional meals often cannot. The boundary between meals and snacks is blurring, but most people understand a meal to be shaped by cultural traditions around timing, ritual, setting, and food groups (the piece of meat as the centerpiece of the plate still defines the meal for most Americans). Snacks, on the other hand, are highly personalized and variable. Of course, the connection between personalized eating and snacks breaks down in certain situation like watching movies or sporting events, but those are special events and food plays a different role. So yes, snacking and snack foods are part of a shared experience in given situations, but generally speaking snacks are defined by individual tastes and circumstances.

Driving all of this is the increased time pressures under which we work and live. Nearly half of Americans say they feel lonely. Approximately 40% say they “lack companionship,” their “relationships aren’t meaningful,” and that they feel “isolated from others.” The frenetic pace of modern life has created what journalist and author Brigid Schulte calls “the overwhelm.” Humans have always needed to tell time, but the clock, as we know it, wasn’t always the measure. For 10,000 years, humans lived in an agrarian culture and understood time through nature: the seasons, the rise and fall of the sun, and the sow-and-reap rhythm of crops. When time became money, our relationship to relaxation also changed. It used to be that the mark of accumulated wealth was leisure—restorative moments away from the toils of labor to enjoy other pursuits. Today, productivity is our top priority. And this relationship with time has a huge impact on how we eat and with whom we eat – or don’t.

On the positive side,

the future of snacking looks bright precisely because people aren’t slowing down any time soon. It provides flexibility. Looking ahead, there are multiple opportunities for companies to relate with consumers around new, flexible eating styles. With fewer cultural constraints than meals, the future of snacking will give consumers opportunities to explore new kinds of food and beverage, new brands, and bend traditional eating patterns to their personal needs and wants. Smart manufacturers and marketers will speak to the role snacking can play in our dietary regimen.

On the negative side, we run the risk of drifting deeper into a state of semi-permanent liminality. The blurring boundary between meal and snack will accelerate, leading to the emergence of more undefined eating occasions. Within its prominent position, snacking will continue to involve an interplay with meals, particularly breakfast and lunch. That has ramifications for everything from imparting cultural norms, to modes of courtship, to how restaurants develop their menus. We can be sure that eating as display – as a code of messages about selves and status, role and religion, race and nation, etc. – will persist in our species, this animal that lives by symbolic communication. But how eating manifests and how snacking shapes it will have to be handled delicately by manufacturers and marketers alike.