

Title: The Re-Installation of Fast Food

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Case Presentation

Despite being one of the largest global brands, McDonald's fast food chain is currently in a state of crisis (Fottrell, 2015). McDonald's has been in the press a lot in 2014, struggling to maintain their image in the face of consumer scrutiny. In response to a rapidly changing market, McDonald's is struggling to keep up with consumer demands for more healthful, ethical, and sustainable foods (Lutz, 2013). In 2014, sales declined to the lowest point in fourteen years (Ro, 2014). In particular, Millennials are moving away from hamburgers and quick service restaurants at a rapid rate, indicating a desire for more sustainable meat (Morrison, 2013). The vegetarian meat market doubled in the last two years and is expected to see similar growth by 2019 (Market Insights, 2015). This is something that McDonald's is aware of, recently unveiling a number of strategies to offer consumers more transparency and a plan to increase the quality of their products. These strategies include: committing to stop using chickens fed with anti-biotics, using hormone-free milk, and sourcing sustainable beef by 2016 (Starkman, 2014). This memorandum will argue that McDonald's isn't doing enough to keep up with the demand for 'real food,' and will lose a significant share of the market if they don't act soon.

Memorandum

To: McDonald's CEO Steve Easterbrook

Subject: Keeping Up with the Future

From: McDonald's Consumer Insights Team

Dear President Easterbrook,

We'd like to congratulate you on your recent promotion to CEO and hope that you're settling in well. You're taking the helm at a turbulent and exciting time for our brand and will undoubtedly have an impact on the future of the company. The actions you took in your first month as CEO are commendable. While these are positive steps in a new direction for our brand, we feel that more

drastic actions are necessary to keep up with the market. We're writing today to give you a glimpse of the future, as we've invested a significant amount of time into forecasting consumer demand. We believe that our company is uniquely positioned to be a leader in sustainability, serving the needs of our customers and the planet.

Insights from the Environment and our Customers

The Future of Protein

Climate change has arrived. Though the effects of global climate change are just beginning to reveal themselves, scientists are able to make a harrowing prediction: the planet won't be able to support the production of animal protein. Inclement weather, drought, land availability, and global demand for food, will make industrial meat-production incredibly difficult and costly. Due to drought in America, beef prices rose 5% in 2014. According to climatologists, this will become the new norm, making beef and other industrially produced protein sources a luxury good.

Simultaneously, the vegetable-based protein market is rapidly expanding, as technological innovation allows for a cheaper more delicious source of protein. This market has doubled since 2010, with both vegetarians and meat-eaters opting to purchase these products. Furthermore, the market is forecasted to grow by 8% by 2019. Companies like Beyond Meat and Hampton Creek are now carried in most major retailers, indicating growing public demand for such products.

Are customers still 'Loving It'?

Beyond the looming environmental costs and limitations of beef production, there is also a social cost of industrial beef consumption. Consumers are increasingly interested in knowing where their food comes from and if it is produced ethically. With a growing number of chains offering sustainable products, touting it as central to their brands' value proposition, it is clear that consumers are desirous of eco-friendly, higher-quality food (e.g. the rise of Chipotle). Our research shows that 51% of our customers want us to focus on

health and nutrition. This represents a larger movement towards healthful consumption and a move away from industrial-produced meat. Evidenced by a rise in vegetarianism, consumers are moving away from hamburgers and quick-service restaurants.

Furthermore, consumer perception of our brand is increasingly low. According to Consumer Reports' annual 'Taste Survey,' *our own* customers rank our burgers as the least delicious burgers in fast food. As you know, sales are down and our campaign to increase transparency into our food production backfired. We believe that increased awareness of health and ethical concerns are creating a stigma around our products. This stigma creates a 'social cost' to engage with our brand and products, insofar as our negative reputation is extended to the identity of our consumers. If our products make consumers feel bad about themselves, they will be less inclined to purchase our products. For these reasons, we recommend an overhaul of our brand and product line to fit our customers' needs.

Better Products, Better Representations, Better Bottom Line

As stated, our current product line is failing to meet the changing demands of our consumers, and will become costly to produce due to climate change. A strategy for success must be one that focuses on our core issue, the taste and sustainability of our products. We believe that any chance of redeeming our brand's reputation will follow from a change in the experience that customers have with our products.

1: Become a leader in sustainability

For years, our brand has struggled to deal with negative publicity, and spent millions of dollars in advertising, attempting to shake the stigma. Recent efforts from our old CEO to provide transparency and attempt to appear more eco-friendly have backfired, pointing to the problem of strategies that rely on communications. We are advocating that by fundamentally changing the nature of our business, and altering our product offering, we can evade the need to

account for negative publicity. Through this strategy, we have the opportunity to become a leader in sustainability as opposed to a follower of trends.

2: Sell sustainable meat at a premium

While we think that the future of the industry will have less animal meat, we shouldn't abandon the current demand for high quality meat. Our recommendation is in line with your plan to focus our meat around sustainability. Our research indicates that consumers will pay a premium price for higher quality, so we advise an increase in price for sustainable burgers.

3: Use vegetarian proteins

If industrially produced animal protein is to become expensive and socially stigmatised, don't use it. Instead of combating dominant representations of industrial meat, we think it would be easier and more cost-effective to stop using it. Research indicates that the reason that customers choose McDonald's is because of pragmatism and convenience. Taste and the visceral eating experience aren't among the reasons that customers choose our brand. Therefore, if taste isn't the primary value that we're offering customers, nor deliciousness an expected outcome, we should consider the utility of industrially produced animal proteins. Vegetarian proteins have a flavour and texture that mimic meat, yet don't carry the same stigma that our current products do. By switching to vegetable protein, we'd decrease the risk attached to meat production and climate change, avoid the stigma against fast food, and change the representation of our brand. We imagine this transition to away from beef as a gradual one, but suggest an immediate introduction of vegetarian products to shift consumer representations. This could easily be done through the introduction of a vegetarian nugget, as the consistency and flavour are similar to vegetarian meat alternatives. As you know, our stores in Asia currently use vegetarian protein sources, meaning that we've already developed the supply chain and recipes to roll this out globally.

We sincerely hope that you consider our recommendations, as we want to help you give the market what it wants. The majority of CEOs in your position are adopting sustainable practices as demand for these products increases. We

believe that the business case for sustainability is strong, and that it will become a core part of our strategy in the decades to come.

Best,
The Consumer Insights Team

Theoretical Justification

The following section will support the memorandum's recommendations with empirical evidence. The foundation for the recommendations is located in Social Representations Theory, which will be reviewed first. Subsequently, the psychological theories that are attached to each recommendation will be elaborated on. Finally, there will be a discussion of the potential pitfalls and limitations of the strategy. But first, a brief mention of the rationale behind the memorandum's structure is explored.

Memorandum Structure

The memorandum is structured using a variety of social influence techniques and research from the field of risk communication. The labelling technique (Tybout & Yalch, 1980) suggests that if you assign a label to an individual, followed by a request which is consistent with the label, compliance should increase. Furthermore, the use of descriptive norms is powerful in guiding and altering an individual's behavior (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). By invoking the label of CEO and providing descriptive norms about the behavior of other CEOs, the memorandum intended to invoke a willingness to comply with the recommendations.

The structure of the recommendations utilises the foot-in-the-door technique (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) to increase compliance. The first two recommendations are things that the company is already doing. There has been an increase in sustainable messaging used by McDonald's (CSR, 2014; Fottrell, 2015) and a focus on providing sustainable beef in the future (Sustainability, 2015). The first two recommendations are small additions to current strategies, which are likely to be complied with. The third recommendation is a substantial

request; the chance of approval is intended to increase as a result of compliance with request one and two.

Furthermore, the empirical justification that follows will focus on the third recommendation. This is due to space constraints, the depth of psychological theory underpinning the recommendation, and the perceived impact that the recommendation would have on McDonald's sustainability.

Social Representations

Underpinning the recommendations is Social Representations Theory (SRT). SRT is a way to account for the symbolic nature of reality, with social representations constituting the shared symbols that help people make sense of the world. The function of a social representation is to make the unknown known, by anchoring new phenomenon into a pre-existing representational field (Moscovici, 1981). Through the conceptualisation of SRT, Moscovici (1972) considers the system of values, ideologies, and practices related to an object and the process through which they are formed and transmitted. Representations are embodied in communication and actions, and shared in a way similar to language (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). In this way, mass media representations can be seen as communications that create and reify representations, while reflecting pre-existing ones (Wagner et al., 1999). For the purposes of this memorandum, SRT offers insight into the socially constructed nature of representations of McDonald's products and brand.

Through SRT, negative representations of McDonald's brand, unhealthy products, and use of industrial meat, can be seen in a larger social context, reified by many actors. The consensual nature of these reputations is apparent in a number of ways, through: the occurrence of negative representations in the media, the lack of contestation about the representations of McDonald's as 'unhealthy,' and the inability for McDonald's to alter these representations through media campaigns (Fottrell, 2015; Morrison, 2012; Ro, 2014; Starkman, 2014). In this way, the memorandum argues that the representations about McDonald's products, as they relate to negative health outcomes, are entrenched, or consensual, in western culture (Howarth, 2006, 2011). For this reason, the memorandum offers recommendations that don't attempt to change the

representations of existing McDonald's products, but rather introduce new products (vegetarian protein products) to be represented. The impact of representations on identity and consumption are explored in the next section.

Social Identity and the Extended Self

Negative representations of McDonald's are likely have a direct impact on consumer identity and behaviour. Just as objects are represented through social interaction, so is the self. Tajfel's (1972) social identity theory poses identity as a social construction that comes from an individual's knowledge of group membership and the significance associated with that membership. At the heart of the theory is a tendency to accept or reject certain aspects of identity to achieve a favorable position in their groups, the values and norms of which provide a framework for action (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Belk's (1988) notion of the extended self suggests that identity is expressed through what we possess and consume. If representations of McDonald's products are negative, then there may be a negative impact on the consumers' identity. According to many scholars, the presentation and preservation of the self is key to signalling one's position in the group and sense of belonging (Bourdieu, 1986; Goffman, 1959). Objects are the means for an individual to signal their position in a group and are instrumental to social interaction. Therefore, if an object lacks value in a system, it becomes worthless (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). These theories indicate that if the value of a good is of low cultural value, it becomes an object that is unable to help the individual achieve or maintain a positive position in their social group. The memorandum's recommendations build off this notion, in that the utility of the product isn't a result of its design, but of its use in the social world.

Furthermore, the representation of the brand is tied to any product it offers, and could hold just as much impact on the willingness to consume. This is in light of self-expansion theory, which suggests that humans desire to expand their identity through relationships with others (Aron & Aron, 1997). Reimann (2012) found a positive correlation between brand closeness and less-inhibited consumption, indicating the tangible effect that brand affiliation can have on the willingness to consume.

The theories above attempt to relay how negative representations of a brand and product could have a negative impact on an individual's identity and willingness to engage with that brand. This line of thinking is outlined in the first portion of the memorandum in order to relay the risk that McDonald's bad publicity could produce a social cost to consumers, who affiliate with the brand through their purchases. The justification for the recommendation to abandon industrially produced meat and offer a new product line is presented in the next section.

Designing for Emotion

This section will present evidence that supports memorandum's recommendation to introduce a new food line using vegetarian protein. Research indicates that the pragmatic and convenient aspects of the McDonald's dining experience are the most important to consumers (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). This would indicate that the primary experience that McDonald's offers their customer's isn't related to taste. If taste and pleasure aren't central to the consumer's experience, then change needs to happen on the social level. A more specific elaboration is found in Norman's (2004a, 2004b) dimensions of product design: visceral, behavioral, and reflective.

The visceral dimension:

The visceral level is concerned with the physical characteristics of the product. In the case of vegetarian protein, the visceral dimensions of the product wouldn't be altered, as these new proteins mimic the smell and taste of animal-based proteins.

The behavioral dimension:

The behavioral considerations for products are about usability and performance, neither of which would be altered in the creation of new food products. In fact, it could be said that performance would increase, insofar as the nutritional value of the new product line would be better than the current offering.

The reflective dimension:

Reflective design considers the meaning associated with a product. According to Norman (2004a), the reflective level of a product is where the self-identity is

located. As previously discussed, this is where the issue lies for McDonald's current products, as they struggle to deal with the meanings associated with industrially produced meat. The recommendation to target the reflective level is supported by research that shows the power of subjectivity when it comes to product design. Experimental research suggests that the reputational aspects of a product are far more important to decision-making than cost or performance (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). This evidence supports the notion that the impact a product has on identity and the role that it plays in social signalling are better predictors of consumption than function or cost. These notions support the recommendations insofar as the meanings associated with McDonald's products need to change.

Installation Theory

The evidence presented thus far supports the recommendations to change the brand perception and switch to non-stigmatised protein sources. The overarching theory of change behind these recommendations is structured on Installation Theory (Lahlou, 2008, 2015). Installation Theory is a framework that attempts to map out the three levels at which behaviors are scaffolded, shaped, and constrained: the physical space, the inner space, and the social (institutional) space (Lahlou, 2015). The theory suggests that the 'installations' of each layer guide human action. These layers can be used to explain the interactive evolution of the material and symbolic world. The physical layer refers to the material aspects of objects and provides an architecture for afforded (Gibson, 1977) behaviors that allow for possible action (Lahlou, 2015). In the case of McDonald's, the affordances of an industrially produced product made from animal protein only differs slightly from that made from vegetable protein. While both products offer the same affordances in terms of how one might physically interact with the object (e.g. picking it up with your hands and biting it), only the vegetable protein offers affordances of abstaining from meat, or reducing your carbon footprint. The psychological layer consists of the individual representations that allow for interpretation of a situation, deciding between affordances, and using learned skills to act (Lahlou, 2015). In the case of McDonald's, the psychological layer includes individuals' representations of fast food, nutritional health, how to consume sustainable products, and personal

motivations regarding consumption. Lastly, the institutional layer represents the norms and rules that govern social behavior (Lahlou, 2015). In the case of McDonald's, institutions could represent educational programs that teach about sustainable meat, laws that create economic incentives for farmers, or media companies that write articles about climate change and the future of protein. While the recommendations of the memorandum don't rely exclusively on installation theory for justification, the framework offered by the theory provides a conceivable structure for social change.

As previously discussed, the crux of McDonald's problem is that the social representations of their brand and products are very negative. As argued in the memorandum, instead of attempting to change the representations of the brand through communications tactics, it is simpler to re-design the affordances of the products. The recommendation to use vegetable-based protein products is an attempt to change the representations of 'fast food' from unsustainable, bland, and unhealthy, to sustainable, healthy, and delicious. The reason for starting with a physical product, is that the needs of consumers to have a convenient, healthy, and ethical meal is currently not afforded by McDonald's current product line. By creating a new product, a new set of affordances would be offered (consumer needs met), new practices created (going to McDonald's for cheap sustainable food), and ultimately new representations formed (of fast food and the brand). According to Lahlou (2015), when new objects are introduced they are constantly tested for symbolic and material fit. One can imagine the introduction of a sustainable 'Mcnugget' made from vegetarian protein. This product would likely undergo a representational process of: anchoring the new object within an existing representational field (chicken nuggets), further refining the new representation based on social practices (eating and education), and looking to institutions to certify its legitimacy as sustainable and vegetarian. Therefore, the memorandum's recommendations utilise installation theory to support this strategy as the most efficient way to change the representations at the core of the issue.

Limitations

There are many potential outcomes to such a bold strategy. The greatest risk associated with this strategy is the potential to alienate consumers, who don't want vegetarian protein products. The assumption that consumers desire more sustainable protein is based off of McDonald's own research (CSR, 2014), trend reports (Worst Fast-food, 2014), and media coverage (Clarkson, 2014; Morrison, 2013; Strom, 2015). Yet, the assumption made in the recommendations, is that this minority move towards sustainability and vegetarianism will eventually be mainstream.

Conclusion

This proposal has illustrated the state of McDonald's identity crisis and offered a series of recommendations that could address it. The justifications for these recommendations rely on a body of research that includes psychological theory and trends from the market. Through the discussion in this proposal, the elements of the problem were illuminated, theory-driven solutions presented, and potential outcomes explored. If these recommendations are implemented, it is likely that McDonald's will accrue a significant portion of a changing market, while shaping the image of their brand and moving towards a sustainable future.

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