

Consumer insights

READING THE MINDS OF YOUR GUESTS

THE FAT FAULT LINE

Feel like everybody blames you for the obesity epidemic? Funny thing is, everybody doesn't.

By ROBERT KLARA

IT WAS FOUR YEARS OF TERROR for anyone who ever served a hamburger.

First, investigative (some said muckraking) journalist Eric Schlosser burst onto the scene in 2001 with *Fast Food Nation*, a book that placed responsibility for America's obesity problem squarely on the shoulders of quickservice restaurants. A year later, a 272-pound maintenance man from the Bronx was in a New York City courtroom, suing four fast-food chains for making him 272 pounds. In 2003, a group of obese teenagers hauled the Golden Arches before the judge with a similar argument. Then in 2004, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock did on film what Schlosser had done in print with the release of "Super Size Me"—a movie that left no doubt that the maniacal forces of burger chains like McDonald's were behind a scheme to enlarge every waistline in the United States.

It's no surprise that many restaurants—despite the court cases being dismissed and the book and movie having passed from the headlines—have felt scapegoated. Somewhere in the process of exploring the question of whether fast food made America fat, the conclusion

was somehow drawn that it had—of course it had! Yet amid these colorful public shenanigans, an equally enticing and far more relevant question still lurks: Does the average American consumer really think that restaurants are responsible for making him or his peers fat?

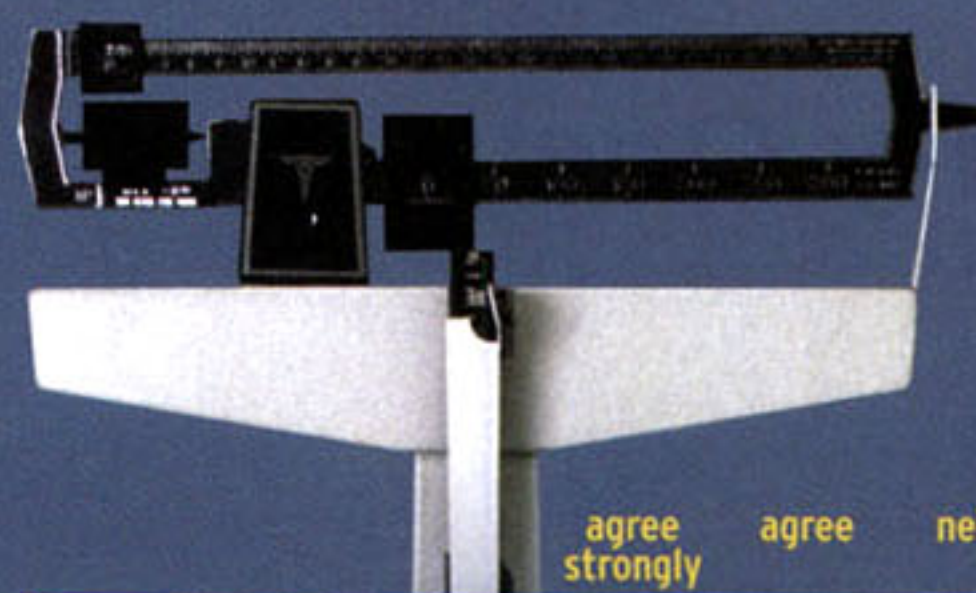
Consider that specifically. Never mind the liability issues or whether chicken nuggets are purportedly the edible equivalent of cigarettes; never mind what some advocacy groups and activist lawyers have said. Do Americans truly think that obesity is the fault of their local diner?

Surprisingly or not, no, they don't.

Indeed, one story behind the story of the obesity crisis is the fact that consumers—many of whom

Whodunit?

How Americans apportion blame for the obesity epidemic.



	agree strongly	agree	neither	disagree	disagree strongly
Genetic					
Inherit from parents	4	36	12	40	6
Born that way	1	17	9	62	9
Environment					
Poor food in restaurants	20	42	5	28	5
Diet ineffective	14	43	6	31	4
Personal Attribute					
Lack willpower	17	48	8	23	3
Obese don't care	8	37	8	39	5

SOURCE: PRINCETON SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER

are overweight or obese themselves—do not hold restaurants responsible for the condition, even though politicians and pundits might. And not only do the majority of Americans think that obesity is not the fault of restaurants, that majority has held even as awareness of obesity has increased.

Back in 2001, just as the whole controversy was reaching a boiling point, researchers at Princeton University conducted a unique telephone poll which yielded startling findings about how Americans attribute the causes of obesity. While restaurants did not escape blame in the eyes of the public, personal responsibility was a far greater theme.

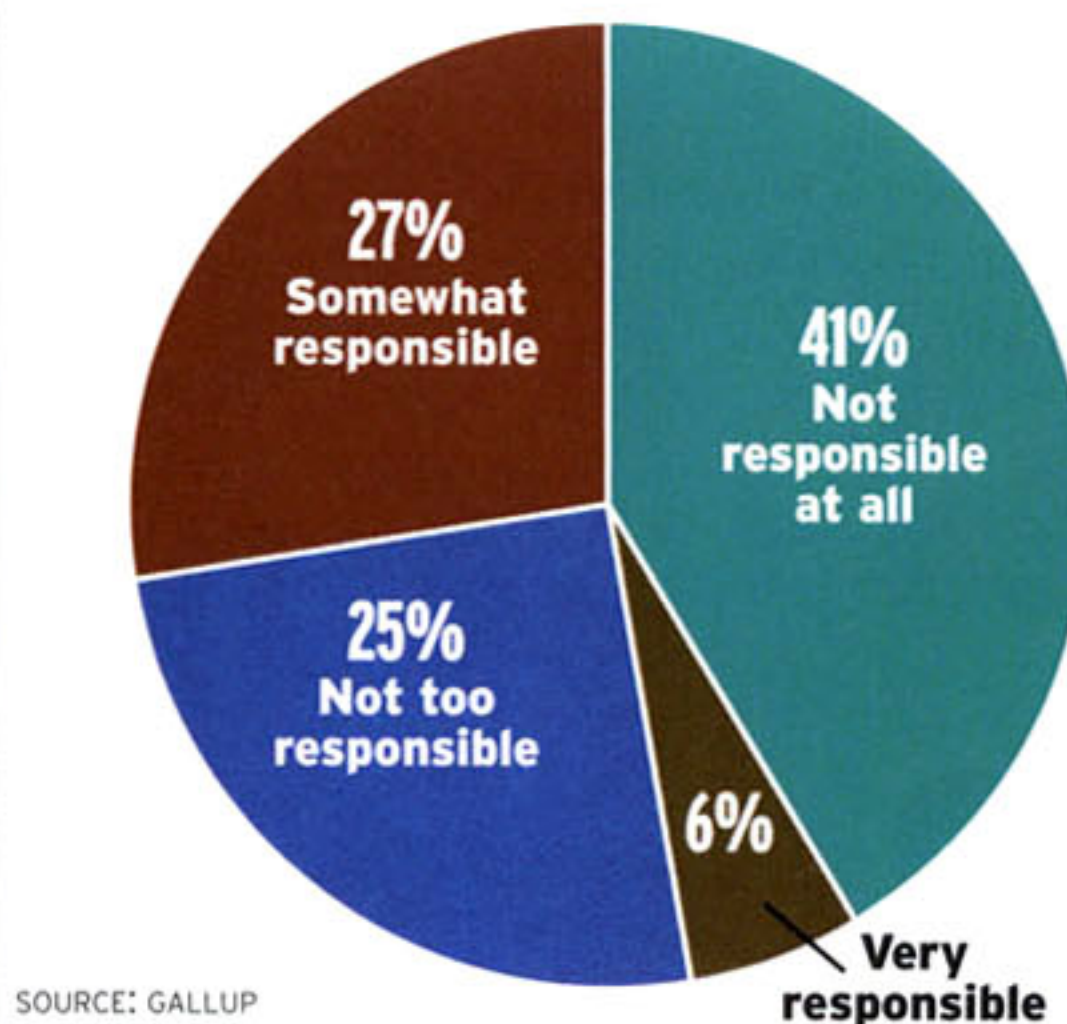
Respondents were given six ostensible culprits they could blame, then asked to rate the degree to which they placed responsibility on those culprits. Some 48% agreed with “lack of willpower” being the cause (with 17% strongly agreeing). While 42% agreed that restaurant food could be responsible, a slightly higher amount (43%) agreed that it was an “ineffective diet,” irrespective of the food source. Over a third (36%) of respondents agreed that obese people were born that way, and 37% agreed that obesity was caused by obese people failing to care about their own health. In fact, crunching the numbers, the researchers uncovered “lack of willpower to diet or exercise” as a cause that 65% of the respondents sided with—well above poor restaurant food and genetic factors.

In December of 2004, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota also set out to discover who the citizenry blamed for, well, fat citizenry. The findings here had some marked differences from the Princeton study, but again the bulk of blame did not fall on restaurants.

In the view of Minnesotans, the biggest culprit in obesity is that “food is used too often as a reward in our society,” with 82% of respondents agreeing with

Name That Goon!

Is the restaurant industry responsible for America's obesity crisis?



that statement. Of course, some might point to restaurants as being behind that thinking (celebratory dinners out at a restaurant are, after all, an American institution)—but the issue of personal choice cannot be stricken from this reasoning, either. The next biggest obesity culprit was stress (78%), and higher caloric intakes common in restaurant settings came in third. Even so, 64% of respondents felt lack of physical activity was a major factor, and 55% cited genetics as well.

Restaurants were all but absolved of American consumers' blame if one credits the results of a 2003 survey by the Grocery Manufacturers Association. In it, over eight in ten (83%) of respondents believed that people's eating habits are the main cause of obesity. Restaurants shoulder only 5% of the blame and, surprisingly or not, food manufacturers come in cleanest of all with only 4%.

But few could take issue with the Gallup Organization, which conducted its own who-do-you-blame-for-obesity study, also in 2003. According to these numbers, most Americans don't even consider obesity to be much of an outgrowth of intake as activity. Whether a consumer overeats in a restaurant or

not, only 35% felt that over-indulgence was obesity's cause. Roughly an equal number (33%) said it was lack of exercise. Only 14% cited poor nutrition.

If those questions beat around the bush, Gallup also asked Americans about restaurants specifically. And when 1,000 American adults were given the question, should fast-food restaurants be held legally responsible for the health of their customers, 41%—the biggest chunk of respondents—felt they were “not responsible at all.” Roughly equal portions felt the industry was “not too” or “somewhat” responsible (25% and 27%, respectively), while only 6% said it was very responsible. This was the breakdown, moreover, as 75% of the same re-

spondents openly admitted that “most fast food” was “not good” for them.

Whether or not one is related to the other, these findings have roughly coincided with the rise of a number of so-called “cheeseburger bills” (laws which prohibit obesity suits brought against food purveyors) in several states. Despite the fact that such a law has not cleared both Houses on Capitol Hill, some 15 states have such laws now, and they're being considered in 18 others.

In May, California assemblyman Guy Houston introduced his “Common Sense Consumption Act” that would have barred obesity lawsuits from being brought against food makers. Even in San Francisco—perhaps the most liberal city in the country—the *San Francisco Examiner* supported the bill, and editorialized: “French fries are not health food, [and] you don't have to eat them.”

As things turned out, Houston's bill died in committee recently. But the public sentiment that holds restaurants blameless for Americans' food choices presumably endures—well summed up by the manager of a Sizzler unit in the Bay Area, who reminded the local paper: “We *do* have a salad bar.”