

The role of consumers in challenging the value of the carb-based food market

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the value co-destruction process that is taking place in the mainstream food market, and particularly in the carbohydrate-based food category, on the part of consumers who embrace a low-carb/high-fat (LCHF) lifestyle. Through the content analysis of consumer online contributions, we reveal that consumers play a fundamental role in co-creating the value of the LCHF movement. In doing so, they destroy the value of mainstream business incumbents and spur them to innovate, while providing novel market opportunities for new comers, as well as prompting new product launches in adjacent industries.

Key-words: value co-creation; value co-destruction; carbohydrate-based food; LCHF movement.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Economic Research Service of the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) reported that, because of the growing interest in reducing wheat consumption, in the US, per capita consumption of foods containing carbohydrates fell from 146.3 pounds in 2000 to 132.5 in 2013. A recent Mintel report (2014) states that more than one American out of seven declares that they eat gluten-free products, even though only 16% of those who consume gluten-free foods have been diagnosed as coeliac. The remaining 84% do it out of fear that gluten will make them fat and produce inflammation, depression or other health risks. According to Mintel (Stones, 2013), over the period 2008-2013, European new product launches in the food and beverage category carrying both a low-carb and high-fat claim increased by 57%. In the same years, those carrying only a low-carb claim rocketed by 95%. The global market for gluten-free products, valued at USD 4.63 Billion in 2015, is projected to reach USD 7.59 Billion by 2020, at a CAGR of 10.4% over the period 2015-2020 (Marketsandmarkets, 2015). Recent data from GfK's point-of-sale pet panel (GfK, 2015), which represents over 11,000 pet specialty stores, points out that in 2015 grain-free dog and cat food accounted for one-third (34%) of all pet food sales in the US, showing a 25% growth with respect

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to the previous year, and that over the period 2014-2015, 45% of all new pet food items launched on the market were grain-free.

No-carb or low-carb dieting is a phenomenon of paramount importance challenging carb-based food producers all over the world and losing its prevalently functional meaning, takes more and more on ideological significance used by consumers to create an identity and value system in opposition to the predominant market culture.

2. Literature review

In recent years, within the stream of literature on the Service-Dominant logic some authors have started considering the “dark side” of value co-creation (e.g. Laamanen and Skålén, 2015). Authors embracing such stream of literature define as unrealistic the conception that value formation raising from interaction between providers and customers is always conceived as unproblematic for the parties involved. Value co-destruction may emerge in the course of interactions due to multiple reasons: Opportunistic behaviors (Ertimur and Venkatesh, 2010); lack, loss, misuse and non-integration of resources (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010), exploitation of one or more parties involved in the co-creation process (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). In any case, value co-destruction is claimed to take place when there is a difference in the way interacting parties assess and communicate value, resulting in a challenge of the established “regimen of values” (Corvellec and Hultman, 2014 p. 359), which represent the set of beliefs, evaluative rules and practices shared and institutionalized within groups of actors and communities belonging to a social system (Frow, 1995). Value co-destruction happens when new regimes of values challenge the system status quo, conflictual issues emerge and some agents start to develop evaluative rules and beliefs different from those previously shared and institutionalized. The emergence and affirmation of the new set of evaluative rules and beliefs derive from the ability of challenging actors to reveal and make clear some disconnections between novel and previously established values, and largely depend upon the way these disconnections are communicated to all possible audiences.

3. Research design

In order to shed light on the topic addressed in this paper, we adopt a qualitative type of methodology content analyzing 57 contributions[†] posted by consumers over the period March 2014-March 2016, on a single website, www.awlr.org – Ancestral Weight Loss Registry, which self-proclaims to be one of the largest low-carb dieting sites in the world. The website makes available public space for the personal testimony of individual LCHF dieters and represents an interesting outlet to investigate consumer generated content on the part of people who have embraced the LCHF lifestyle.

4. Findings

On www.awlr.org dieters share their own experience, inform others on their weight and health progress and provide tips, suggest recipes and culinary, as well as behavioral

[†] The comprehensive corpus that was content analyzed consisted of 64 standard 8.5" x 11" pages (Times New Roman, 12-point font size), for a total of 37,343 words.

advice to successfully embark on a LCHF “lifestyle”. Personal story-telling is used, on the one part to demystify sound science proving that LCHF diets work despite the stance of the conventional dietary establishment, on the other part to substantiate the effectiveness of carb-free dieting through authentic, real experiences.

Erica, May 2014 *I continued my research and found Mark’s Daily Apple online and learned there what my doctor didn’t have a clue about; high fat grain-free eating. From here, I became my own doctor.*

Peter, November 2015 *I was astonished, why had I never heard about this before? it all made sense. (...) I was angry, really, really angry. I thought, if this is true why have I been lied to by my health care professionals all these years.*

The benefits derived from high-protein dieting are the extraordinary speed with which it is possible to lose weight, the lowering of bad cholesterol levels, the possibility to properly manage the glycemic index, taking insulin under control, and the recovery from multiple illnesses, also very serious, such as cancer, lupus, asthma, and neurological diseases.

Joe, March 2016 *I was a shocking 360 pounds, I had diverticulitis, knee pains, and was constantly low energy with poor sleeping habits and bad health. I’m now down to 255, I sleep well, I lift weights and exercise, I no longer have knee pain or neurological oddities. I am less anxious, and my diverticulitis is gone.*

Clearly, the aesthetic results reached losing weight also represent an extremely persuasive argument. Low-carb diets make it possible to lose a lot of weight and quickly, making people who have lost their good look attractive once again, and in a very short amount of time. From when they start the diet to attaining their weight goal, dieters narrate their progress and struggles.

Lynn, October 2014 *I started to feel happy when I looked in the mirror, and loved getting a new and smaller wardrobe.*

Rebecca, September 2015

Meet Rebecca



Meet the new Rebecca



Along with weight loss and recovered health and beauty, there goes the reappearance of happiness and good mood. In this respect, before and after picture have a tremendous convincing power, witnessing the veracity of the dieters’ claims and the authenticity of their experience. The comparison of pictures of overweight and sad people at the beginning of the diet, and then thin and contented at the end (or progressively), makes their testimony extremely credible and constitutes the proof of the undisputable transformation they have undergone.

Also thanks to their ability to communicate, LCHF proposers are admired, perceived as trustful and reliable, becoming real “gurus” in the dieters’ perception. Citing books

and the name of their authors provide widespread proof of the efficacy of the diets, with the expertise and authoritativeness of the source becoming, therefore, a means of persuasion.

Johnathan, November 2015 *Being diagnosed as Type 2 diabetic and reading Gary Taubes and Dr. Bernsteins books literally saved my life.*

Edward, June 2014 *Thanks to Mark Sisson for all your help and wise words, and thanks to this wonderful community we've become part of, I know we'll spend our lives "Paleoing it forward" until everyone gets it like we did.*

The creators of LCHF diets are often referred to as rescuers, saviors, redeemers. The sentiments expressed in their sakes are of profound gratitude, devotion, love. Just as in religion there are people to whom we look as sacred, like gods, saints, prophets and ministers of churches, also in the LCHF food world, the creators of most popular diets rise to the rank of sacred persons. They become charismatic leaders able to exert an influence over their followers, made up of those who embrace their beliefs, as well as their diet, often turning them into real "evangelists". Dieters become so involved and devoted to the LCHF lifestyle, that they feel compelled to proselytize and to convince as many people as possible to abandon their traditional habits and convert.

Phillip, December 2015 *If my example can even inspire one person to convert, I'll feel that I have spent my time well writing this.*

Stephanie, January 2016 *I actually have to hold myself back for fear of preaching and evangelizing something I value so highly.*

5. Implications and conclusions

Dieters are the protagonists of an "authentication" process that substantiates the effectiveness of the LCHF movement in destroying the value of the conventional food market and prompting the consolidation of a new regimen of values. Scientific evidence, divulged in a hardly understandable language by the masses in established food businesses to demonstrate the validity of conventional dietary recommendations, is replaced by "personal evidence". Cold and distant epidemiological data is swapped by warm and familiar peers' piece of advice, which sounds more reliable and trustworthy, leveraging on sympathetic and empathic feelings among equals (Cova, 1997). Images, and the veracity they are able to convey play a paramount role in such legitimation process. The further convincing argument enabling the movement spreading resides in the transposition of dietary habits from the mundane and secular world of nutrition to that of the sacred (Belk et al., 1989). Dietary plans are not eating regimens, they are journeys, made of struggles, pitfalls, temptations, and redemptions. Dietary plans are pilgrimages. LCHF nutritionists are not solely experts in the dietary field, they are the bearers of knowledge, those whom you owe your life to, who have finally told you the truth about good living (against the establishment). LCHF diets have the mighty (miraculous) power to make you lose weight, recover from illness, rejuvenate, and be happy. The shift from the adoption of a mere and decisively earthly dietary plan to devotion and consecration to the LCHF faith constitutes an incredibly persuasive argument to engage and enroll consumers, ending up creating new market opportunities in the nutrition sector. These findings provide useful indications to re-think the

arguments that incumbents and authorities use in communication activities aimed at promoting their nutrition advice.

A further recommendation for incumbents consists in monitoring consumer movements, even if not formally organized, that might spread and give rise to market trends challenging their business status quo. Lifestyle movements (Haenfler et al., 2012), in fact, seem to be harder to detect than more overtly attained social movements if not when their effects are concrete and visible at the market level i.e. product (category) sales drop. In addition to defend their market position, the monitoring of the movements could represent a valuable means for planning innovation. The same monitoring activity could help potential entrants that, attracted by the profitability of the sector related to emerging market segments, could gainfully enter the business. Finally, as it is in this case, consumer convictions about low-carb dieting involve their entire life, therefore reverberating on multiple aspects of their existence, such as in the way they nourish their pets with grain-free food. As it happens, for example, for vegans, their lifestyle embraces all aspects of living, not only their eating habits, but also housing, clothing, travelling. This opens up a multiplicity of business opportunities, being at the basis of the emergence and development of new market segments.

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