

TIPPING THE SCALE

Empowering Low-Income Americans
to Take Back Control of Their Diet

Leslie Ferguson

The Problem

Quality vs. Quantity

With over half of all American adults and a quarter of all children considered to be overweight or obese, the growing issues of weight and health in this nation are hard to ignore. This problem has been the topic of countless news reports and scientific studies in the past 20 years. Through these investigations it has been discovered that the highest rates of obesity occur within population groups with the greatest poverty rates and the least education. Simultaneously, as these possible causes and effects of this “epidemic” are discussed, venture capitalists play on the emotions of the public while trying to sell their ‘cure.’ Consequently, a \$30 billion-dollar-a-year weight loss industry has emerged, and yet the problem remains visibly and mentally unchanged. However, it has been shown that successful weight loss stories often come through a collaborative effort with a more personal approach. By creating a personal, yet global community of people with the intention of sharing knowledge and experiences in an easy to access way, a change in lifestyle at its most basic level can occur.

For this subset of marginalized Americans who struggle to pay the bills, when it comes to making healthy food decisions education is key and staying within a budget is non-negotiable. Unfortunately, most people who find themselves in this population feel forced to trade off the quality of their food for quantity. The mentality is often that buying a handful of items off of the McDonald’s dollar menu is more filling or satisfying than an apple and some peanut butter.

The Cause

A Lack of Resources and an Outdated Plan

Unfortunately, the reality is that often healthy foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and fish are much more expensive than those that are made from refined grains, added sugars, and have a high fat content. However, there are still many low cost options available that provide the nutrition necessary to maintain a healthy diet. In addition, taking advantage of grocery store sales can offer variety by acting as a base for new meal plans. Furthermore, these ingredients can undoubtedly be used in quick and easy recipes that are inexpensive alternatives to the current trend. However, all too often we see commercials for fast food and frozen microwave dinners instead of nutritional recipes and other alternatives.

This general lack of resources and education leaves people in the dark about nutrition and the options that are available. This void becomes the foundation of bad habits. However, it is possible to change the behavior of people and the ways in which their decisions are made if information is accessible when you need it, where you need it, and how you need it.

Often when faced with tight constraints a well thought out plan is necessary. Currently, this holds true when it comes to grocery shopping on a budget. In the past, money conscious housewives could more easily cater their meals to the coupons found in the Sunday newspaper before even entering the grocery store. However, as time (and newspaper coupons) have slowly become more scarce, more and more shoppers enter the grocery store without a plan. With infinite options on grocery store shelves and little knowledge of what is currently a 'good deal' shoppers are again forced to rely on old habits or corporate advertising to lead them in the right direction.

Redefining 'The Plan'

A Communal Approach to Grocery Shopping

Through the steady rise of obesity in America it is obvious that this current system is failing its users. However, by changing how people *approach* making decisions about what goes in their grocery cart, a change in habit can occur. For example, if a user is able to instantly see a summary of what is on sale at their grocery store right when they enter through the shiny sliding doors, then they no longer have to wander the aisles comparing prices and weighing their options. Furthermore, if they could instantly plan a meal based on low cost or sale items, then the question of "what's for dinner?" is no longer a drawn out process involving several cook books and a call to your mother.

If these people could then share their own recipe discoveries and constructive grocery shopping experiences to others in similar situations, then a community of sorts can form. Instead of focusing on weight loss plans such as low-carb recipes and 10 day cleansing diets, this community would center around how to get the nutritious foods people need despite the obstacles within their environment. By empowering a person with this knowledge in a simple, useful way, and at the moment they need it can change their behavior and in this case their quality of life.

The Walkthrough

What could it really look like?

When short on time and money and meal time comes around a quick stop by the local McDonald's is an easy solution. A problem arises when this becomes the default solution because it is inevitable that you are not receiving the nutrients necessary to maintain a healthy physical state. However, another problem arises when you enter a grocery store and the options are overwhelming. It can also often seem like you are getting a lot less "bang for your buck." However, what if instead of wandering the aisles and settling on a corn-dog that has been sitting under a heat lamp for the past three hours, you could pull out your mobile device and have an updated list of sale items provided by the grocery store and filtered by some set of preprogrammed preferences. Perhaps you see that red peppers are on sale and you quickly read that they are good for you because they help with your maintain healthy cholesterol levels. As you head to the produce section you look up a few quick, easy, and cost effective recipes. You quickly cruise through the store and pick up a few other items listed in the recipe before checking out. You then try out the recipe. If it is particularly noteworthy in some aspect you might leave some feedback or rate it based on your experience to help others in the future make an informed decision. And as simple as that, another routine meal is over and your day continues. Therefore, by being as unobtrusive as possible and providing useful information when necessary – this plan to promote healthy eating has a chance to succeed in changing how people decide "what's for dinner."