

Labels and Illusions by Lourdes Barronco

Let's face it, these days we all are worried about the expanding size of American waistlines. Some of us worry about our own waistlines; others are concerned with the rise in obesity among Americans in general. One thing we should examine more closely is how marketers—the people who devise strategies to make us buy certain products—are contributing to the rise of obesity in our country.

Marketers have developed some fanciful food labeling strategies to make us think we are consuming less food, when in fact we are not. (10) For example, you might order a medium soft drink in a fast food restaurant (seemingly a wise move if you're trying to eat less). You later discover that the same size soft drink has magically transformed itself into a "large" drink in another restaurant. Which size soda did you actually drink: a medium or a large? Perhaps you ask for a small order of french fries in a restaurant, and when you get it, it seems huge. The labeling of these food and drink items seems whimsical, if not completely inaccurate. What's going on?

For those of us trying to eat reasonable portions, an additional problem can arise from our own inability to judge the size of our (20) meals. Consider the following optical illusion, first documented in 1875: the Delboeuf [del boef] effect. Start with two dots of equal size. Then surround one dot with a large circle and the other with a small circle. Guess what happens—suddenly the second dot, the one surrounded by the small circle, looks much larger than the first dot, even though they are the same size.

What does this have to do with the amount of food we eat? Koert van Ittersum, a professor of marketing at Georgia Tech, and Brian Wansink, director of the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell, found out. They performed a series of experiments to measure the effect of the (30) Delboeuf illusion on people's perception of portion size. They served two groups of people the same size portion but on different-size plates. People who were served on larger plates thought that they had been served a small portion. People served on smaller plates thought that they had been served a large portion. The research showed that our eyes can deceive us about the amount of food we're actually eating.

To make the problem worse, marketers working in the clothing industry have created strategies for making us think that we are thinner than we actually are. A common dilemma faced by people of

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all ages is trying to determine which size of an article of clothing fits (40) them. Their confusion is understandable. Depending on the store, a pair of slacks labeled size 8, 6, or 4 might fit the same woman. A sweater labeled extra large or medium might fit a large man.

What causes these differences? The answer is “vanity sizing,” the practice of labeling clothes as smaller sizes than they really are. In other words, a dress that is really a size 8 may be labeled a size 2. By using vanity sizing, clothing manufacturers flatter people into thinking that they are not as large as they may actually be. Apparently, this encourages people to purchase the items of clothing. Remember, the marketers who devise these labels are people who (50) want you to buy their company’s products.

What can consumers do? First, we should ignore the labels “small,” “medium,” and “large” as they apply to food and drink. We’re probably buying a lot more than we need. We should also be skeptical of clothing labels. We may not be as trim and physically fit as the label would lead us to believe. To stay healthy and avoid obesity, we must rely on our own good sense and on our knowledge of what characterizes a healthy person.

Questions over story:

2. Reread lines 8-17. A contrast between what is expected and what actually occurs is called irony. The use of irony can create strong effects, including humor. What words and phrases add an ironic tone to this paragraph?
3. As you read lines 18-36, continue to cite textual evidence.
 - Underline (write down) the results of each experiment.
 - In the margin, explain how the results of the Delboeur effect compare to those of the van Ittersum/Wansink experiment.
4. Reread lines 18-36. State the main idea of this section and explain how both experiments support it.
5. As you read lines 37-58, continue to cite textual evidence.
 - Underline phrases (write down) that suggest that “vanity sizing” makes people feel good.
 - Highlight (write down) the conclusion that sums up the central idea of this essay.
 - In the margin, restate what consumers can do to counteract the influence of marketers.