

JUGGLING ACT

THE FOOD INDUSTRY, CONSUMERS, AND NUTRITION

Okay, let's do the math.

There are **50,000 items** in the average supermarket.

The average supermarket shopper buys **60 items** in 26 minutes.

That's **2.3 items** bought per minute (and **1,921 items** rejected per minute).

All of which leaves precious little time to, oh, **compare brands** or to spend time reading all the **nutritional information** on the side of the box of Cap'n Crunch your child just dropped in your cart.

That's where NuVal comes in. And the Aggregate Nutrient Density Index. And other nutritional rating systems that make it simpler for consumers to make wiser nutritional choices in those 26 minutes you're cruising through those grocery aisles.

NuVal, for one, is in some 17,000 stores across the country. The company uses an algorithm to measure the nutritional quality of foods and beverages, rating them on a 1-to-100 scale—the better the nutrition, the higher the score. The scores are displayed on products' shelf price tags—helping consumers compare not just overall price, but overall nutrition, quickly and easily.

NuVal's algorithm is based on the dietary goals established by the Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It quantifies the presence of more than 30 nutrients, both good and bad, as well as the quality of protein, fat, and carbohydrates, and takes into consideration calories and omega-3 fats, too.

Other nutritional rating systems communicate their evaluations to the public in a variety of ways. For example, Guiding Stars uses zero through three stars to rate food products; NutriPoints assigns points based on the positives and negatives in foods; Nutrition iQ uses color-coded tags to denote nutritional values; and the Aggregate Nutrient

Density Index scores foods on a scale of 0 to 1,000, based on nutritional value per calorie.

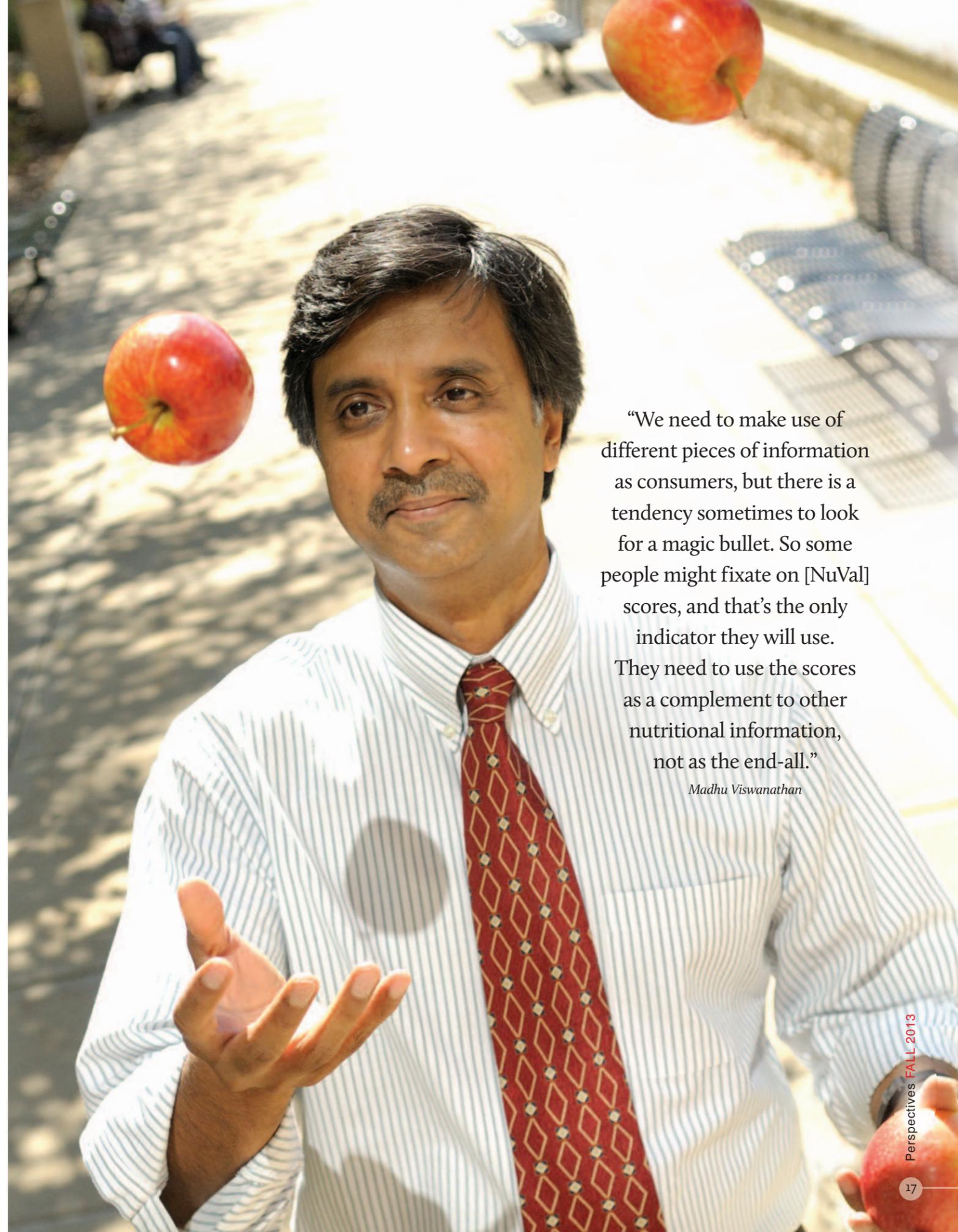
ALL SYSTEMS GO

Madhu Viswanathan, the Diane and Steven N. Miller Endowed Professor of Business Administration, has conducted studies on how consumers use nutrition information. "Having these systems out there and people using them are, of course, two different things," he says. "NuVal is a good source of information, but you need to be educated to understand what that number means. For many people, numbers will be good shorthand, but for people with lower levels of literacy, a graphic system would be

better. Low-literate people might select only very high numbers, or see the information as something abstract they cannot relate to and, therefore, stay away from it. Not only do such systems need to be well thought out and based on scientific fact, they also must be easily understood and communicated, if they are to be beneficial to the consumer."

The NuVal system, developed by independent nutrition and medical experts from leading universities and health organizations, has come under fire from some food manufacturers. Some companies may be critical because they take exception to the scores their products receive.

Others, like General Mills, question the for-profit



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Madhu Viswanathan



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Brenna Ellison



model of the system, which charges grocery stores for its use, and its proprietary algorithm, which is not shared with the public. Other rating systems have their critics as well.

“Any system can be criticized since it is an effort to summarize complex information,” Viswanathan says. “You don’t want to throw out the indicator because it has some criticisms. There’s no magic indicator out there. I think NuVal provides valuable information to consumers.”

The NuVal system—and other nutritional rating systems and tools—was devised with people’s health in mind. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports a dramatic

increase in obesity in the United States from 1990 through 2010 and notes that:

- 35.7% of American adults are obese
- The obesity rate (17 percent) has nearly tripled since 1980 for children and adolescents
- The estimated annual medical cost of obesity is \$147 billion
- No state met the nation’s Healthy People 2010 goal to lower obesity prevalence to 15 percent
- In 2000, no state had an obesity prevalence of 30 percent or more; in 2010, 12 states had such a prevalence

GETTING THE GREEN LIGHT

Grocery store aisles aren’t the only places consumers make nutritional choices. In fact, Americans eat at restaurants about five times a week. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that every meal away from home increases an adult’s average daily calorie count by about 135 calories. That can really add up, translating into 10 extra pounds each year.

It’s one reason why experts like Brenna Ellison, assistant professor of agricultural and consumer economics, are looking at the best ways to help consumers make healthy choices while dining out.

The first step is adding calorie information to menus. Ellison says many restaurants are already including these facts, which will soon be required for chains with more than 20 locations as part of the Affordable Care Act. In addition to listing the calories for each item, restaurants will need to include the FDA’s 2000-calorie daily intake recommendation.

“The more informed the consumer, the better,” says Ellison, whose research has focused on what information influences consumers’ choices at a restaurant. Along with colleagues at Oklahoma State University, she conducted a study of diners using three different menus—one with no values



next to menu items, a second with calories listed, and a third that featured calories plus additional information in the form of traffic symbols. A green light represented a food that was 400 calories or less; a yellow light signaled a choice between 401 and 800 calories; and a red light was used for an item over 800 calories.

“What we found is that calories alone don’t influence decision making to a great degree. However, when we added the traffic light symbol, the choices that were made reflected a decreased calorie intake of 70 calories. The effect was most obvious with larger parties of four or more people,” she says, perhaps reflecting peer pressure to make better choices.

While there are no requirements for traffic symbols or any information other than calories to be included on menus for the time being, Ellison is interested in broadening her research to see how a total nutrient rating system might influence diners’ choices.

“Calories aren’t always the best indicator of overall healthfulness. Ratings that include a broad range of nutritional factors provide a lot of value for the consumer, whether they’re in the grocery store or in a restaurant. Generally, people don’t want to be told what they should eat, but they are happy to have the information and decide how they want to use it.”

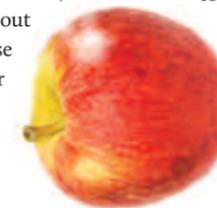
Cathy Lockman

AN APPLE A DAY

To combat obesity and its related diseases (heart disease, stroke, some cancers, diabetes, and many other ailments), the government has come up with food pyramids, recommended daily allowances, and assorted guidelines. And companies such as NuVal have developed nutritional assessment systems designed to help consumers make healthier choices.

“The obesity trend is stunning,” says Viswanathan, who studies and works with low-income, low-literate populations. “It’s a huge threat to our society. But the focus for many people in the store is not what is the daily nutritional value, but what is the best product I can find in a certain category, such as the best potato chips or cereal. I’m pleased to see in the last decade there is not a singular focus on the daily values. There has to be a more holistic approach to our diet.”

For example, he says, if you focus only on products that score in the 90s in the NuVal system, you will not have a well-rounded diet. “You need to compare foods within a category,” he says. For example, if you find that most breads score in the 30s, and you’re a bread eater, you’re not likely to cut out bread. But you can use the scores to make wiser choices.



“Everything in moderation, right?” Viswanathan says. “We need to make sense out of different pieces of information as consumers, but there is a tendency sometimes to look for a magic bullet. So some people might fixate on these scores, and that’s the only indicator they will use. They need to use the scores as a complement to other nutritional information, not as the end-all.”

GOOD FOR COMPETITION

Nutritional rating systems not only help consumers make wiser food and beverage choices, they provide a basis for competition among manufacturers. Lower scores will prompt manufacturers to try to improve their products to top their competitors’ products, Viswanathan says. “I’m going to say, okay, how do I change my product to move it up?” he explains. “It makes companies work harder to improve their products.”

And that, he adds, is good for consumers.

“Accurate information is always a good thing,” he says. “Certainly people need to change their eating habits and become more aware of nutritional values. But systems need to change, too. And nutritional rating systems like NuVal will help.”

Tom Hanlon

KNOW THE SCORE

With the NuVal system, foods receive a score on a scale of 1 to 100. The higher the score, the better the nutritional value. NuVal scores appear on the product shelf, not on the product itself. This system is currently found in more than three dozen grocery chains across the country, including Meijer, Kroger, and Festival Foods.

Fruits and veggies

- Broccoli – 100
- Blueberries – 100
- Del Monte Fresh French Green Beans, No Salt Added (canned) – 100
- Pineapple – 99
- Avocados, fresh – 89
- Del Monte Fresh Cut Whole Green Beans (canned, with salt) – 47

Snack foods

- Kellogg’s All-Bran Crackers Bite Size Baked Snacks – 35
- Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Flavor Blasted Cheddar Snack Crackers – 20
- Pringles Reduced Fat Sour Cream & Onion Crisps – 9
- Crunchy Cheetos – 4
- Keebler Townhouse Bistro Multi Grain Crackers – 3
- Lays Stax Original Potato Crisps – 3

Breads and cereals

- Hodgson Mill Unprocessed Wheat Bran – 100
- General Mills Whole Grain Cheerios – 37
- Pepperidge Farm Whole Grain Bread 100% Whole Wheat – 36
- Healthy Choice Hearty 7-Grain Bread – 34
- Wonder Classic White Sandwich Bread – 28
- Sara Lee Honey Wheat Soft and Smooth Bread – 27
- Cap’n Crunch Sweetened Corn and Oat Cereal – 10

Seafood and meats

- Atlantic Salmon Fillet – 87
- Shrimp – 75
- Turkey Breast (skinless) – 48
- Chicken Breast (skinless) – 39
- Ground Sirloin (90% lean) – 30

Oils and shortening

- Canola Oil – 24
- Shortening – 1