I actually wanted to write something about climate change. Because, to put it mildly, the public discussion is naive. Human behaviour and the discussed formulae don’t go together. And – it is very complex. But the climate isn’t the only thing that’s ‘growing’ over our heads, but also global abdominal girth, and at a much faster rate. Let me start with being overweight. It is easier to observe. It’s true that both topics have nothing to do with each other, but at the same time, we can see very similar behaviour patterns.

Today, over 40% of Americans are now obese, and all other nations are catching up quickly. And this is a problem. The myth that you can be ‘fat and fit’ has been ridiculed by scientific data⁷. In the UK, obesity has already replaced smoking as the main cause of four types of cancer, including bowel cancer and ovarian cancer. Now, we can observe increasing cases of cancer even in younger overweight people, in particular liver cancer and thyroid cancer⁷. The fact that a high level of excess weight causes the widespread disease diabetes, and that in turn, diabetes is closely linked with cardiovascular diseases, shows that being highly overweight is anything but a purely private lifestyle topic. It doesn’t just threaten overweight people, but also the performance of our healthcare services. Diabetes alone, along with its consequences, can bring the American state budget to its limits within a decade.

What the world’s increasing obesity shows us about human decision-making behaviour and why ‘fat shaming’ has the opposite effect.

The societal challenge is recognised. But what shocks me, as a brand consultant, are the kinds of outdated ideas about human behaviour which are thought to avert this health crisis. It is an ineradicable misconception that more information in particular would lead to a different kind of behaviour⁴. If you are severely overweight, you know about the danger to your health! At the end of the day, it’s a constant topic in the media. Unfortunately, there is only a very weak link between knowledge and attitude and behaviour. If this surprises you, then please read it again. This didn’t work with smoking either. Tests with calorie information on foodstuffs also didn’t show any societal effectiveness⁵.

Too many people are not familiar with current psychological research. In this way, there are experiments for achieving changes in behaviour by way of social pressure. We refer to this by the delightful term ‘fat shaming’. The effect of such measures is the opposite, however. The stress and frustration felt by many of those affected merely increase, and this results in an even higher calorie consumption.
It isn’t called comfort food for nothing. Meanwhile, the competition in the food industry is continuing unchecked towards ever tastier offers at affordable prices. More and more empty calories for money.

Contrary to the stereotypical perception, obesity is also not an expression of a lack of willpower. There are three large influential factors when it comes to a too high calorie uptake. Biological (genes understand scarcity, but not excess; neurochemistry and the gutbiome), lifestyle (sedentary work) and environment (home, surplus of nutrient-poor fast foods with mega calories). German train stations are one such environment of maximum calories and marginal nutrients.

The experience of constant stress, particularly in childhood, is psychologically linked. Fat shaming adds to this stress. The people who have to endure fat shaming are three times more likely to remain overweight.

The context of our lives plays a big role in the galloping increase in weight. In times of excess in all spheres of life, human behaviour orient itself more and more around the simplicity of processes. For example, habits offer a great relief.

Changing behaviours is precisely the opposite for people, namely very, very complex. Diets are pure horror. This is why they rarely last. To make matters worse, there is still not a consensus about what good nutrition really is. Outdated approaches are very stubborn. That fat is bad. That people predominantly require carbohydrates. That cholesterol is a strong driver for heart attacks.

That you can lose weight well through sport. Nutrition philosophies are becoming religions and their followers are leading the new crusades.

At the moment, the two extremes are raw vegans and carnivores (dispensing with plant-based components). But if you can’t do it properly, why even get involved in the war?

There are no easy solutions with high impact. However, if you rely on the ‘responsible’ citizens (knowledge about calorie information or traffic lights), you are throwing in the towel. We are already responsible. Responsible is a euphemism for political failure. We need other approaches which do not burden us further as consumers, but which make our life and consumer decisions as simple as possible. People do not understand calorie information and drastically underestimate their actual calorie consumption. Calorie counting is a lot of effort and inefficient. Everyone knows that their comfort food can never be green, but gold as comfort food. I also have hopes pinned to Silicon Valley. I am waiting for the app which can tell through photos what you have eaten, roughly how many calories it was and which nutrients you have consumed by eating it. That would be a really efficient support tool. Rough information would be dramatically superior to human self-assessment.

Many small, effective measures are better than hoping for behaviour changes out of insight. The experiments with higher costs for calorie bombs are an indication. For example, the sugar tax on soft drinks. In Berkeley (USA), this led to a 50 % reduction in sales.

And it is efficient. Because the decision at the POS is fast. Boris Johnson wants to get rid of the successful sugar tax in the UK again. He flaunts his weight and says that the tax would affect above all those with very little in life. Sugar as Valium for the lower classes?
Costs are effective – unfortunately, the reverse is also true. This is why new offers with a higher density of nutrients also don’t get far. A processed noodle-based meal is cheaper than a home-cooked meal prepared with more vegetables and a good source of protein. And it takes much less effort to prepare. If travelling by train shall become cheaper to encourage more people to get on board (German government slashes VAT), what kind of ideas are there to encourage the decision for foods higher in nutrients?

What it needs is for politicians to wake up and get the ball rolling with controlled nutritional studies (no questionable epidemiological observations) to find the answers for the correct behaviour around nutrition in our current societal context. This would create a reliable basis for food providers to create better offers for society. This would actually be a good project for the EU, wouldn’t it? At the end of the day, this also affects states’ ability to compete in the medium term. Once more to conclude: nothing will work if it expects a greater amount of process complexity from consumers.

Would cookery courses help? Not based on the old model. Convenience products are much more efficient. Cookery programmes on TV also don’t help, as these have nothing to do with the context of people’s lives. Most people would rather watch sport than take part in it.

I find the attempts of American health bloggers to drive forward so-called meal prep creative⁶. You group cooking to once/twice per week and prepare a big enough portion so that you have enough for several meals during the week in just one session. It thus presents a new, clearly more efficient form of cooking.

Sources:
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6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmdITEguAnE (Meal prep)
7. https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2747758 (Obesity, age and cancer)
Book recommendation:

By Ralph Ohnemus:

**Markenerleben.** Die Strategie im Hyperwettbewerb und Informationstsunami [hier bestellen]

**Markenstaunen.** Gewinnen im Informationstsunami [hier bestellen]

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