

Let's All Go to the Lobby...

By Reg P. Wydeven
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I absolutely love going to movies. I love the whole experience: the smell of the popcorn in the lobby; the trivia questions on the screen before the movie; the dimming of the lights as the show starts; and especially the coming attractions, so I know what to look forward to the next time I go to the movies.

Unfortunately, with ticket prices creeping up in a difficult economy, we don't go to many movies on opening weekend. After paying for dinner and a babysitter, we try to save money by going to budget movies.

Going to the cheap seats started after the last time we went to a first-run movie. We didn't have time to eat dinner before the movie, so we got the "value pack" at the theater. The combo had two drinks, nachos and pretzel bites and cost as much as dinner at a 5-star restaurant. Now I know why businesses have defibrillators because I'm pretty sure I went into cardiac arrest when the kid at the counter told me the price.

I was taken aback by the cost of the food because the prices weren't posted anywhere. I already had taken a drink of the coke and ate two nachos, so it probably would have been a little gauche to return them. While I did not know the cost of my food, I also didn't know its nutritional value. After all, even if the shock from the price didn't kill me, I should know if the contents would.

Thanks to new proposed federal rules, I may be able to learn the nutritional contents of my costly cuisine. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is crafting a law that would require establishments that are part of a chain with 20 or more locations that offer substantially the same menu items to list calorie content information on menus and menu boards, including drive-through menu boards. Other nutritional information, such as total calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, complex carbohydrates, sugars, dietary fiber, and total protein, must be made available in writing upon request.

In addition to movie theaters, the new regulations would apply to coffee shops, delis, bakeries, and ice cream shops. Even vending machine operators who own or operate 20 or more vending machines are required to disclose the calorie content of their items. Similar rules currently exist for chain restaurants, such as McDonald's or Taco Bell.

The new rules are part of President Obama's healthcare reform law. The FDA is proposing the new rules to educate consumers about what they're eating. Hopefully the new law will lead to healthier lifestyles. For example, a large bucket of buttered popcorn from a movie theater has 1,460 calories. To put that into focus, that's the equivalent of almost three Big Macs from McDonald's. The USDA recommends that the average woman have a calorie intake of 1,600 to 2,400 a day.

Movie chain operators are obviously opposed to the new rules, claiming the original health care bill was never intended to include them. Supporters of the proposal believe profits motivate theaters. If we are deterred from buying snacks, movie theater owners may lose up to one-third of their total revenue, as experts estimate that is the amount generated by concession stand items.

Not only is popcorn high in calories, it's also high in profit. A large bucket usually sells for \$6, while it is estimated that it only costs 15 to 20 cents to make it.

I think I may need that defibrillator again.