

A Guide to Help Consumers Choose Apps and Avoid App Overload

Abstract

Mobile technology has transformed the way consumers access and use information. The exponential growth of mobile apps makes finding suitable, easy-to-use nutrition and health-related apps challenging. A guide for consumers helps them ask important questions before downloading apps. The guide can be adapted for other Extension disciplines.

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Mobile technology has transformed the way consumers access and use information. According to PEW Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, Americans spend about 81 minutes a day using apps (Choney, 2011). In 2012, U.S. smartphones had an average of 41 apps (Insider, 2012). In 2010, there were over 7,000 health-related apps in the Apple AppStore (Mobihealthnews, 2010). In 2012, more apps were downloaded than in the previous 5 years (PortioResearch, 2013). Many Extension programs are reluctant to use technology (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011). However, there are many opportunities for Extension clientele to be reached with relevant mobile apps (Drill, 2012). Apps may be used in Extension nutrition and health education programs in a variety of ways:

- To provide information—apps that provide the nutritional information for foods
- Track/monitor/assess—apps that ask users to track health-related information and behaviors such as food intake and physical activity
- Location-based—apps that find restaurants for special diets such as low carb or gluten-free

Overview

A team of University of Missouri Extension campus and regional specialists formed in 2013 to explore the integration of technology in nutrition and health Extension programming. Specifically, the goal of the team was to determine how technology can be used to enhance or support nutrition and health programs and address

program participant learning needs. For example, an app might help with a learner challenge for a strength training program by providing motivation to complete exercises 1 or 2 additional days outside of class.

A top priority of the team was to identify and evaluate nutrition and health-related apps to be used with MU Extension nutrition and health programs to reinforce and support healthy behaviors such as tracking and monitoring. The apps reviewed for these programs focused on six areas: food and nutrition; finding healthy recipes; managing diabetes; physical activity; managing stress and being mindful; and food preservation.

During the review process the team realized challenges associated with reviewing apps, primarily that the number of apps continues to grow exponentially. It was decided that the public would benefit from general guidance to aid in their selection of nutrition and health apps before downloading. The guide *SMART Start to Finding Nutrition and Health Apps* was developed to meet this need.

Breakdown of Guide

The guide was created using the acronym "SMART," with each letter corresponding to a tip to help the public make decisions before downloading nutrition and health apps.

- What's the **S**ource of the App? Consumers need to determine the credibility of app developer and content.
- Does it **M**eet your needs? Before downloading an app, consumers should decide if the information such as the database of foods or recipes are compatible with their needs and preferences.
- What **A**ctions will you take? Apps can help reinforce healthy food choices and integration of daily physical activity only if the app is easy-to-understand and use.
- What do the **R**eviews say? Checking to see if an app has online reviews can help consumers make informed choices.
- Do you have the **T**ime? Many nutrition and health-related apps ask the user to track dietary intake, physical activity, or other information. Will the consumer take the time to do this regularly?

Informed app selection may help consumers avoid unnecessary purchases of apps that don't meet their needs. In addition, downloading of apps that are not usable may lead to consumer "tech fatigue" and abandoning use of apps that could help reinforce healthy behaviors.

How Is the Guide Being Used?

The guide has been available for free downloading on the Web at extension.missouri.edu/p/N581 since the October 2013. Upon its availability in October through December 19, 2013, it was downloaded 2,896 times. The guide was promoted through various nutrition and health Extension and professional listserves. One state Extension Service asked to insert the guide in their newsletter. A blog post about the guide was posted on Mizzou Nutrition Mythbusters at nutritionmythbusters.blogspot.com. Visitors to MissouriFamilies at missourifamilies.org/ were informed about this guide as well as over 1,000 subscribers to the MissouriFamilies e-newsletter. An article about this guide was posted to SurroundHealth, an online community of over 5,000 health professionals at surroundhealth.net.

Applicability of the Guide Across Extension Disciplines

The SMART Guide is a tool that may be used by other Extension educators to help the public evaluate apps. The tool is easily adapted to fit with other disciplines because many of the tips are universal. A more general guide such as this one may help consumers select the most appropriate app for their needs and avoid the unnecessary cost of purchasing apps that are not suitable for them.

Conclusions

The proliferation of mobile apps is likely to continue in the future. A guide to help consumers make informed decisions before downloading nutrition and health-related apps may help consumers identify apps that are best for their needs. The guide can be adapted for other Extension disciplines as the tips are universal.

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