

Dieting pixel by pixel

Service grades users' food choices via cell-phone snapshots

By Joyzelle Davis, Rocky Mountain News
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It's Thanksgiving, and as we're sitting down to our plates of food, I whip out my cell phone to snap a picture - not to capture the moment of smiling friends and family, mind you, but to photograph my food. I'm trying a dieting service called MyFoodPhone, which uses camera phones to keep track of customers' eating habits. A nutritional adviser then reviews the photos to provide advice on healthier eating. Let's just say pumpkin pie never looked so good - on my cell-phone camera.

Believe it or not, MyFoodPhone is only one of a growing list of mobile services, including Atkins2Go and Nutrax, that help users keep track of their food either online or through mobile devices.

About every two weeks a "nutritional adviser" delivers feedback about nutritional content and balanced meals in the form of a video clip.

Clearly, the tech industry has figured out a way to insinuate itself into the most silicon-free part of life - the dinner table. Quebec-based MyFoodPhone, which costs \$9.99 a month on top of the user's existing phone plan, is available on most cell-phone providers, including Sprint, Verizon and Cingular.

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As they say, the camera doesn't lie.

MyFoodPhone subscribers begin by filling out a questionnaire on the Web site, www.myfoodphone.com, that includes easy questions about exercise habits, goals, weight as well as some - like cholesterol and glucose levels - that I had passed on. Next was an online video introduction from my "nutritional adviser," Laurie, who has a lovely French Canadian accent, directing me on how to use the site.

Then it was time to photograph. That is, if I didn't forget. My biggest challenge was remembering to whip out my cell phone every time I sat down to a meal.

But when I more often got into trouble was when I wasn't actually sitting down - like the time when a box of cheese arrived in our newsroom one midafternoon. I had already polished off six slabs before it dawned on me that this was technically a "snack," if not several meals, deserving of a photograph.



Amy Speer © News

Studies have shown that keeping track of every pumpkin spice latte and tortilla chip that passes your lips is one of the best ways to lose and maintain weight loss. But it's not always easy to keep track of the paperwork, or keep yourself honest. MyFoodPhone is one of a growing list of mobile services that help users chart their food intake either online or through mobile devices.

In fact, there seemed to be a direct relationship between the virtuousness of my meal and my ability to remember to document it. My daily apple, carrots and hummus and seven-grain hot cereal with flax seed are well chronicled. The hot cocoa with eight large marshmallows, midmorning doughnut and the time I licked the bowl of muffin batter? Mysteriously absent.

When MyFoodPhone launched in 2004, customers paid \$99 a month in exchange for meal-by-meal comments and comprehensive weekly critiques.

That turned out to be too pricey for many subscribers to stick with the service, said Sebastien Tanguay, MyFoodPhone's general manager, so the company scaled back to the current \$9.99, biweekly feedback plan. The company expects to add new plans and services next year, he said.

So what did Laurie have to say? She posted a video (see sidebar) that essentially told me to eat more whole grains and protein and suggested ways to integrate more into my meals.

Admittedly, that wasn't a surprise, but it was a good reminder that my meals tend to be unbalanced.

Laurie's advice helped me make a few changes in my diet: On my last grocery run, I made a concerted effort to pick up more protein and grains.

But I'm sorry to admit, Laurie, that during the holidays I fell a bit off track - I don't think the crust in the third helping of pumpkin pie counts as whole grain. It's a reminder that regardless of the technology involved in a food journal, you only get back what you put into it.

Mary Lee Chin, a Denver-based registered dietitian who isn't affiliated with MyFoodPhone, said the service sounds like a convenient way to give guidance to people who are generally in good health but "know that their diets need fine-tuning." She also praised MyFoodPhone's emphasis that it's a tool to help subscribers make better food choices and maintain or achieve a healthy weight.

"All good goals," she said. "And I like the fact that they are not basing this on fast and easy fad diets, strange foods or combinations of food, pills or false promises."

But the service isn't a good idea for someone with a serious medical condition, such as diabetes, heart disease or hypertension, who would need more specific recommendations and frequent feedback. It also largely ignores the exercise part of the equation that's needed for optimal health, she said, and depends on the subscriber to be honest about whether there's actually some - or perhaps even a lot - of mayo in that sandwich.

"This is not for someone looking for a 'magic bullet,' " Lee said. "To make the best use of the tools provided, the individual needs to put in some serious work as well."

How it works:

Dieting is not always easy, but keeping track of what you eat can be - with www.MyFoodPhone.com. Here's what you do:

1. Use your cell phone to snap a picture of your food before you eat. If you forget, there's an option on the site to describe what you ate.
2. Keep track of your meals for at least two weeks. Your nutritional adviser will share informational video clips. You can join in forums, too.
3. Get feedback. After you've sent photos for two weeks, the nutritional adviser critiques your diet and offers suggestions.

The feedback

Here's what adviser Laurie said about reporter Joyzelle Davis' diet about 10 days into her food log:

"Hi, Joyzelle. I can see that you have a quite healthy diet in general. That's great. You eat regularly. You eat breakfast every day, and you choose healthy meat alternatives.

"However, I noticed that your meals are not always complete or balanced. Your breakfast is usually complete and healthy, that's great, but sometimes some of your other meals are not complete. It can be either protein food that is missing or carbohydrates or starchy foods.

"For example, when you have pasta or soup with a roll or another vegetarian dish, make sure you always include some protein food with your meal. And when, for example, when you had the tofu salad, make sure you always include crackers or a bread roll for some complex carbohydrates and a complete meal.

"Including complex carbohydrates at every meal, especially choosing whole grains, will help you to increase your intake of whole grains, which is low. That's it for this time.

"Have a good look at the two videos I'm sending you for more advice and tips, and keep the photos coming."