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Farm Market Patron Behavioral Response to Food Sampling

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Abstract

This study examines farm market patron responses to food sampling experiences and provides a baseline of regional differences of consumer interest in various products selling in the farmers market. Results show that the sampling strategy can highly engage consumers' attention and easy to spread the product information. Food sampling showed a number of immediate product purchasing impacts, as well as other behaviors positively impacting vendor sales. The most important reason patrons identified that encouraged them to try a sample was friendliness of vendors. Sampling is a highly experiential merchandising strategy that fits in well with the farm market venue. More than half of the patrons indicated actually purchasing after sampling that were not planning to buy the product that day before the food sampling.

Keywords: consumer behavior, farm market, food sampling

JEL codes: Q13, Q18

Introduction

Food sampling is a widely used strategy to introduce products in an effort to facilitate market penetration and increase product demand. Food sampling can be a highly interactive and experiential activity at any market. So what is food sampling? According to the definition of the KDPH (Kentucky Department for Public Health, 2013), a food sample is "a food product promotion where only a bite-sized portion of a food (or foods) is offered free of charge to demonstrate its characteristics. A whole meal, individual hot dish or whole sandwich, is not recognized as a sample." The strategy of food sampling served at the farmers' market is not only for promotional purposes but also for educational purposes and ideally needs to be adapted to every kind of customer. Through food sampling activities at the farmers' market, vendors have

an opportunity to introduce their products, provide education about product benefits, and collect feedback from patron responses to their products. The objective of this study is to investigate farm market patron purchasing behavior and responses to food sampling.

In Kentucky, local food farmers and entrepreneurs are able to enhance their opportunities to sell products directly to their customers over the past decade. With this direct marketing opportunity, small-to-medium sized farmers are able to increase their farm revenue because of more retail food dollar. Although many new local food farmers and entrepreneurs have experienced in learning the way to engage and interact with their customers, not many resources are available for farmers and entrepreneurs to be well-informed and have better marketing communication and promotion. Unlike the commercial products by using mass media branding strategy, local food farmers and entrepreneurs have to build their product image and perceptions themselves via these producer-consumer relationships which determine consumer satisfaction and direct response (Andreatta and Wickliffe, 2002). Food sampling as a part of direct marketing opportunity determines how consumer utilizes the sampling experience to respond to their purchasing behavior. Hence, this study goes beyond simply awareness and interest on food sampling at the farmers' markets.

Consumers have many opportunities to experience food sampling at many different venues, including community farmers market, grocery store, and other retail venues. A total 3,406 respondents from farm market patrons were able to recall their "best ever" food sampling experience at any market, and indicate the specific venues where they had tried the food sampling. Figure 1 summarizes respondents' "best ever" food sampling experience among ten market venues. Community farmers market was most frequently listed as the venue for the best ever food sampling experience—a good signal for farm market sampling in general. We can

identify information behind the food sampling activity from consumer best ever food sampling experience, like why or why not they tried a food sampling, what encouraged/impacted them to try the sample, and what are their reaction after they took the sample.

This study adopted a qualitative method analysis to understand why and how farm market patrons' decision making in this specific topic. An extensive survey was generated to investigate consumer purchasing behavior and responses to food sampling at the farmers' market. This study focuses on the eight states surrounding the Ohio River Valley regions, including Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, and Virginia. The contribution of this study covers a better understanding of farm market patrons' purchasing behavior via food sampling and provides more information and resources to local food farmers and entrepreneurs in order to have better direct marketing strategy and practice at the farmers' market.

Literature Review

How do consumers make a purchasing decision for local food at the farmers' market? According to the Consumer Decision Process (CDP) model (Blackwell et al., 2001), consumers go through seven stages: Recognition for the Need, Searching for the Information, Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives, Purchase, Consumption, Post-Consumption Evaluation, and Divestment. Utilizing a merchandising strategy like food sampling, consumer food purchasing experience involved within this activity is shortened and efficiently determined within from Pre-Purchase Evaluation to Post-consumption Evaluation stages. Consumers can make their purchase decisions faster and more decisively with more information.

Consumer behavior can be highly related not only to socio-demographic characteristics of buyers but also to the environmental influences related to culture, ethnicity, social class, and

family as well as friend influences (Blackwell et al., 2001). Not all kinds of consumers would like to be involved or interact with vendors. Each consumer may have high or low levels of involvement with vendors. The overall level of involvement can be derived from consumers' intra-individual and situational factors (Celsi and Olson, 1988). A higher level of consumer involvement can trigger a high likelihood of consumption on organic foods (Aertsens et al., 2009), sustainable featured products (Bell and Marshall, 2003), and fair trade featured and locally sold products (Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine, 2008; Yang et al., 2012). Therefore, consumer behavior and involvement can be positively correlated in some cases.

Food sampling at the farmers' market offers an opportunity for patrons to taste and experience products in an already highly interactive setting. Through this process, patrons are able to perceive quality by the application of their product knowledge and experience (Sprott and Shimp, 2004). Food sampling has the ability to create a product's image, introduce a new product, and/or generate word-of-mouth promotion (Marks and Kamins, 1988). Many researchers have focused on the power of word-of-mouth promotion (Holmes et al., 1977; Herr et al., 1991; Bone, 1992 and 1995; Wirtz and Chew, 2002). Although satisfaction does not necessarily associate with a high likelihood of word-of-mouth (Wirtz and Chew, 2002), not many studies have concentrated on how food sampling programs can be managed more effectively and what reasons can encourage/impact farm market patrons to try the sample.

Sampling promotions can enhance in-store product sales about five to ten times, and even the sales continue up to 12 weeks above the base level after the sampling offered (McGuinness, 1988). An indirect benefit of product sampling is increasing product awareness. Another sampling impact study showed that other similar products to the one being sampled resulted in

about a 10% decline in the sale of these substitute products (Lawson et al., 1990). Hence, food sampling has a high correlation and potential effect on product sales.

Although the correlation between consumer involvement (active versus passive shopping) and consumer behavior may be positive, the deeper question is whether consumers are willing to interact with vendors or not. It is possible that consumers can be uninvolved/conservative and careless. This type of consumers has been focused and discussed on their demographic characteristics (Hamlin, 2010; Nie and Zepeda, 2011), but there is no such study that these “uninvolved” consumers become more active shoppers when interactive merchandising options such as sampling are made available.

A food sampling program that is integrated into other marketing strategies, such as educational, promotional, and entertaining, can enhance consumer involvement. With a better consumer involvement, it is possible to positively influence consumer behavior through a food sampling activity, making greater contact with customers, grabbing the consumers’ attention, shaping consumers’ opinions, and helping consumers to develop a positive association with both the product and the vendor (Blackwell et al., 2001). In order to contribute to the literature of consumer behavior and food sampling, this study focuses on the management of food sampling programs and the potential factors to encourage/impact patrons to try the sample. Food sampling programs within the community farmers market have been on-going for couple years in Kentucky and surrounding states. This study attempts to sort out the potential impact of food sampling in the farm market context, understand any difficulty of food sampling from patrons, and address the potential benefits of food sampling at the farmers’ market.

Data

This study goes beyond simply awareness and interest on food sampling at the farmers' markets. In order to include all possible questions and answers comprehensively before the design of the questionnaire, a focus group was established during the mid-September, 2011. A total of 12 people, including vendors, market patrons, faculty, and students participated the focus group. The completed questionnaire went through pre-test procedure by the members of Agricultural Economics at the University of Kentucky.

A web-based survey was used to target the population of respondents that have visited either a community farm market or an on-farm market within the last 12 months. The primary data were completely collected during the mid-January, 2012. An extensive survey of 3,406 farm market patrons was conducted through an existing consumer panel maintained by Zoomerang.com, an affiliate of MarketTools, Inc., exploring a variety of food sampling questions in eight states surrounding the Ohio River Valley regions, i.e. Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, and Virginia.

This study investigates various aspects of their recent farm market sampling experience by utilizing a variety of qualitative evaluation methods primarily related to data associated with market and sampling event recall. Most farm market patrons were able to recall their past sampling experiences and able to point out the locations where they had sampled and their responses in terms of their purchasing behavior after food sampling. The consumer sub-segments we further examined with regard to sampling behavior included *Age* (28% respondents under age 34), *Regions* (63% of respondents who are urban residents), and *Bring Kids to Market* (16% respondents who have brought kids to market). Respondents younger than 34 are typically referred to as the Millennial group. Urban respondents are represented here as from both city and suburb residences. The main surveyed results of this study focus on five dimensions: (1) Purpose

of food sampling; (2) Preference of food sampling; (3) Sampling barriers; (4) Key points when offering sample; (5) Action Responses to Farm Market sampling.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, our surveyed results are examined and consistently confirmed. Consumers with respect to different groups were performed a *t*-test to demonstrate any specific difference in demographic characteristic factors, such as age, regions, and patrons who bring kids to market.

Purpose of food sampling

This study examines why patrons want to try a sample at the farmers' market. There are positive and negative factors shaping the shoppers decision to sample. Consumers often have multiple reasons for initially trying a sample. Consumers identified and ranked their purpose behind trying food sampling at the farmers' market, including, 1) "Decide if I like the taste of something"; 2) "Decide if I will buy a product"; 3) "Learn about new recipes or flavors"; 4) "Have a fun activity or entertainment"; 5) "Support a vendor"; and 6) "Interact with a vendor I don't know". The results are summarized in Table 1.

Decision making about taste is on the top of the list. When patrons are taking the sample at the farmers' market, the decision of preferring the taste and the decision of the purchase are the first directly affected by food sampling. Other factors, like *learning new recipes* and *entertaining with fun activity*, are also important to food sampling at the farmers' market. Farm market patrons may have better involvement with vendors by entertaining activity, but the core value of food sampling is still born from pre-testing the product itself helping patrons to make their purchase decision. *Supporting a vendor* and *interacting with a vendor I don't know* appear to have less impact on patrons' judgment to take a sample at the farmers' market.

The demographic characteristic factors reveal significant differences in making decision and having a fun activity or entertainment across population sub-segments. Comparing the mean differences, younger consumers and patrons who brought kids to market are more likely to decide if they like the taste and if they will buy the product. In addition, older consumers, rural shoppers, and patrons who went to market without kids are more likely place a higher weight on sampling as a means to have a fun market activity and entertainment, although few differences in rank order were observed between groups.

Preference of food sampling

Not all customers would like to try every kind of food product. A wide range of possible food products were included and interest in sampling each was elicited. Figures 2 and 3 reveal how likely patrons would be to take a sample if the corresponding food products were offered to them. A seven point Likert scale from 1: “not at all likely” to 7: “very likely” was provided. Respondents were asked to recall any specific sampling event at a farmers’ market within the past 12 months and indicate the food category most closely representing what they sampled (Figure 4).

Traditional items such as fresh fruits and vegetables were noted to be among the more popular items to sample. Shoppers do not limit themselves to only trying that which is unfamiliar. It is evident that shoppers have their favorite products common to the market, but like to have samples available even if it is to just add to the experience or confirm the quality of the product that day. While some of the unusual items were indicated as less likely to be sampled, there was still very positive willingness and likelihood to try most products listed.

Sampling barriers

When the advantage of food sampling is discussed, it is important to understand any potential barriers that may hinder customers to take a sample. Therefore, an extensive list of potential sampling barriers was provided for shoppers to evaluate. They were asked to consider a situation at a farmers market when they did NOT take a sample and reflect on the reasons. Table 2 indicates that both “no sample available” and “crowded sampling area” are the top two barriers. Many vendors and markets don’t offer samples, especially in smaller or rural markets. Rural resident market visitors were more likely to indicate that no sample was available to them compared to urban respondents; but urban respondents were more likely to indicate that the sampling area is crowded. Respondents who brought kids to market seem more concerned with the issues of samples ran out comparing those who did not bring kids to markets. Hence, the farmers’ market either at the urban or rural area should have a better organized set-up for food sampling programs.

Sampling barriers, such as food taste, ingredients, safety concern, and related nutritious, are also important to patrons whether or not to take a sample. Older generation and respondents who brought kids to market have higher concern of food itself. Pricing may be not as a big barrier, but it seems to have higher barrier to older generation comparing to younger patrons. Although the barrier of pressure from vendor is not the most important, younger generation do have higher barrier to take a sample comparing to older patrons. These results indicate that food sampling barriers are not only from food product itself but also from the vendors and the atmosphere of the market as well as the way how market booth set-up for participants is easy to engage and interact.

Key points when offering sample

In order to enhance to the advantage of food sampling, it is important to discuss what encouraged and impacted patrons to try a sample. Table 3 displays a list of key points for vendors when offering food sample. Although the pressure from vendors is not the top barrier for patrons to take a sample, the friendliness of the vendor is the most encouragement and impact on patrons to try a sample. Over 90% of respondents rate that the friendliness of the vendor can have at least some impact to try a sample. Other factors, such as ease of accessing samples and presentation of the samples and display, are also significant reasons for patrons to try a sample. Therefore, the key points of offering sample are to make sure that samples are displayed nicely, samples are easy to access, and the person offering samples is friendly. More sampling details of instructions and practices also can be found at Woods and Hileman (2012).

Action Responses to Farm Market sampling

It is important to understand the benefits of food sampling at the farmers' market specifically. Respondents were if they could clearly recall their most recent sampling at a farmers' market within the past 12 months. For those who could recall a specific food sampling event at a farmers' market within the past 12 months (1,132 out of all market visitors surveyed), respondents were asked to indicate their responses (Table 4). Over half (55%) of respondents who could recall a sampling event, indicated they did purchase the product that day, even though they had not planned to purchase the item that day. Some differences in response were observed within subgroups. Older consumers (over 34) and market patrons who typically brought kids to the market were more likely to make an impulse buy as a result of sampling. No meaningful differences to sampling response were observed between rural and urban consumers.

The second largest response category was still positive for sampling: respondents who did not make a purchase but planned to in the future. The second largest group can be

represented by younger patrons, urban consumers, and shoppers who did not bring kids to market. However, there were only about 11% of respondents who had a negative response to the sampling event, indicating they did not purchase the sampled product and didn't want to or were going to but changed their mind. In sum, the advantage of food sampling is quite positive and has higher chance to help farm market vendors to promote and sell food products.

Conclusion

The implication of the food sampling strategy at the farmers markets is definitely a powerful tool to introduce a variety of products by vendors. Consumers are often curious and expect to see or taste something new. The most important factor to encourage and impact patrons to try the sample is the friendliness of the vendor. Further, one of top reasons why patrons did not try the sample is the pressure from vendor (uncomfortable with confrontation). Behavioral response among patrons suggests sampling frequently achieves the goal of changing consumer perception, leading often to immediate or near future purchases. This includes rural and urban markets.

Market vendors are understandably reluctant to commit time and resources to the sampling function. It can be difficult to obtain the various health certifications required, and some producers may wonder about the potential impacts. This study suggests, however, that the return to sampling efforts can be significant.

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Table 1. Purpose of Food Sampling

Sampling at the farmers' market as a way to	Age			Regions			Bring Kids to Market			Overall Average Rank
	Under 34	Over 34	<i>t-test</i>	Urban	Rural	<i>t-test</i>	Yes	No	<i>t-test</i>	
1. Decide if I like the taste of something	<u>2.25</u>	<u>2.10</u>	***	2.16	2.08	-	<u>2.29</u>	<u>2.10</u>	***	2.13
2. Decide if I will buy a product	<u>2.69</u>	<u>2.35</u>	***	2.43	2.41	-	<u>2.55</u>	<u>2.40</u>	**	2.42
3. Learn about new recipes or flavors	3.29	3.29	-	3.32	3.24	-	3.27	3.29	-	3.28
4. Have a fun activity or entertainment	<u>3.85</u>	<u>4.31</u>	***	<u>4.14</u>	<u>4.32</u>	***	<u>4.04</u>	<u>4.24</u>	***	4.20
5. Support a vendor	4.28	4.28	-	4.29	4.26	-	4.22	4.29	-	4.27
6. Interact with a vendor I don't know	4.65	4.68	-	4.66	4.69	-	4.62	4.68	-	4.67

Note: N = 3,406. Mean comparisons are examined by t-test. Asterisks indicate levels of significance: ** = 0.05, and *** = 0.01.

For this question, respondents were asked to rank these reasons that they perceive as most important (1) to least important (6) in food sampling at the farmers market.

Table 2. Sampling Barriers

The reason why did not take a sample at farmers market	Age			Regions			Bring Kids to Market			Overall Average Rank
	Under 34	Over 34	<i>t-test</i>	Urban	Rural	<i>t-test</i>	Yes	No	<i>t-test</i>	
1. No samples available	0.425	0.423	-	<u>0.403</u>	<u>0.459</u>	*	<u>0.352</u>	<u>0.433</u>	*	0.42
2. Crowded sampling area	0.364	0.358	-	<u>0.393</u>	<u>0.300</u>	***	0.410	0.352	-	0.36
3. Uncertain of taste	0.275	0.276	-	0.282	0.264	-	0.266	0.277	-	0.28
4. Uncertain ingredients	0.238	0.270	-	0.268	0.254	-	<u>0.345</u>	<u>0.252</u>	**	0.26
5. Food safety concerns	<u>0.161</u>	<u>0.292</u>	***	0.252	0.283	-	0.188	0.295	-	0.26
6. Not appearing healthy or nutritious	0.170	0.189	-	0.194	0.168	-	0.266	0.263	-	0.19
7. Samples offered, but ran out	0.178	0.174	-	0.161	0.141	-	<u>0.201</u>	<u>0.147</u>	*	0.15
8. Cannot ingest ingredients - food allergy, diabetes, celiac disease, etc.	0.109	0.111	-	<u>0.126</u>	<u>0.085</u>	**	0.100	0.112	-	0.11
9. Not worth the price	<u>0.080</u>	<u>0.119</u>	*	0.114	0.105	-	0.086	0.114	-	0.11
10. Pressure from vendor - uncomfortable with confrontation	<u>0.137</u>	<u>0.097</u>	*	0.106	0.105	-	0.107	0.105	-	0.11
11. Didn't trust the vendor	0.097	0.078	-	0.077	0.092	-	0.071	0.084	-	0.08
12. Others in my household would not like it	0.068	0.053	-	0.053	0.063	-	0.043	0.058	-	0.06
13. Product not likely to be safe for environment or ethically produced	0.064	0.052	-	0.058	0.048	-	<u>0.086</u>	<u>0.050</u>	*	0.06
14. Ingredients not grown or prepared to standards (organic, natural, kosher, halal, etc.)	<u>0.064</u>	<u>0.031</u>	**	0.036	0.044	-	0.021	0.041	-	0.04

Note: N = 1,123. Mean comparisons are examined by t-test. Asterisks indicate levels of significance: * = 0.1, ** = 0.05, and *** = 0.01.

For this question, respondents were asked to "check the reasons why you did NOT take a sample at the farmers' market (check all that apply)."

Table 3. Key Points When Offering Sample

What encouraged/impacted you to try the sample?	Can't Recall	No Impact	Some Impact	Significant Impact
1. Friendliness of the vendor	1%	5%	19%	72%
2. Ease of accessing samples	2%	6%	19%	70%
3. Presentation of the samples and display	1%	7%	23%	67%
4. Curiosity about an unknown product	2%	12%	18%	54%
5. Familiarity with the product	3%	15%	25%	51%
6. Signage	5%	22%	28%	26%
7. Cooking demonstration	5%	21%	13%	23%
8. Recipe cards	6%	28%	14%	16%
9. Offer of other benefits (cash, coupon, gifts, etc)	6%	29%	10%	16%
10. Pressure from friends/family	7%	42%	9%	11%
<p>Note: N = 1,133.</p> <p>For this question, respondents were asked to rate the factors associated with this product to the best of your memory. "What encouraged/impacted you to try the sample?"</p>				

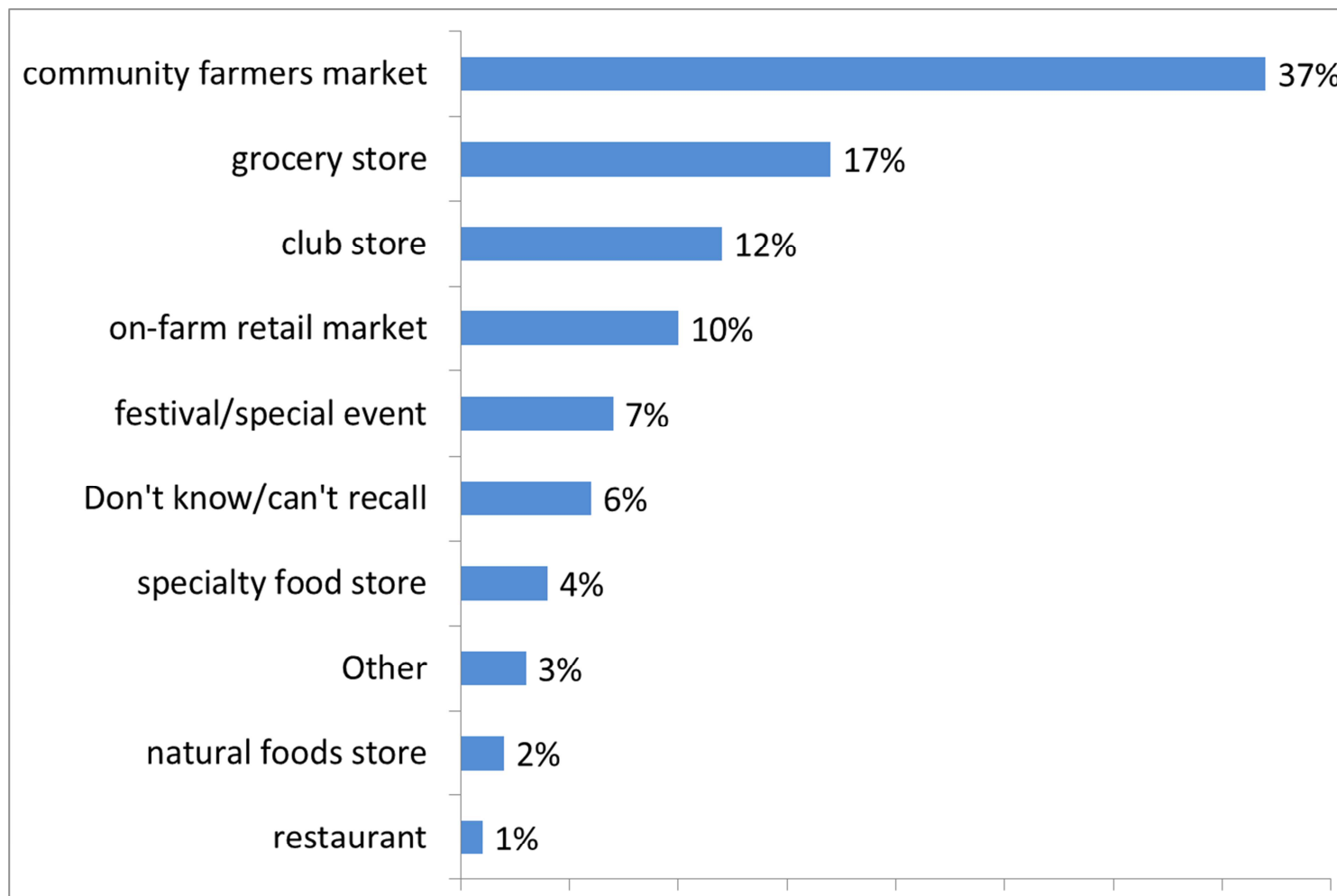
Table 4. Action Responses of food sampling

After sampling, did you buy the sampled product that day?	Age			Regions			Bring Kids to Market			Overall Average Rank
	Under 34	Over 34	<i>t-test</i>	Urban	Rural	<i>t-test</i>	Yes	No	<i>t-test</i>	
1. Yes, and I hadn't planned to	<u>0.48</u>	<u>0.56</u>	*	0.54	0.54	-	<u>0.58</u>	<u>0.50</u>	***	0.55
2. No, but planned to in the future	<u>0.22</u>	<u>0.15</u>	**	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.14</u>	**	<u>0.14</u>	<u>0.20</u>	***	0.17
3. Yes, but I already planned to	0.16	0.15	-	<u>0.13</u>	<u>0.19</u>	**	<u>0.17</u>	<u>0.14</u>	*	0.16
4. No, and I didn't want to	0.07	0.08	-	0.08	0.07	-	<u>0.05</u>	<u>0.10</u>	***	0.08
5. Was going to but changed my mind	<u>0.04</u>	<u>0.02</u>	*	0.03	0.02	-	0.03	0.02	-	0.03

Note: N = 1,132. Mean comparisons are examined by t-test. Asterisks indicate levels of significance: * = 0.1, ** = 0.05, and *** = 0.01.

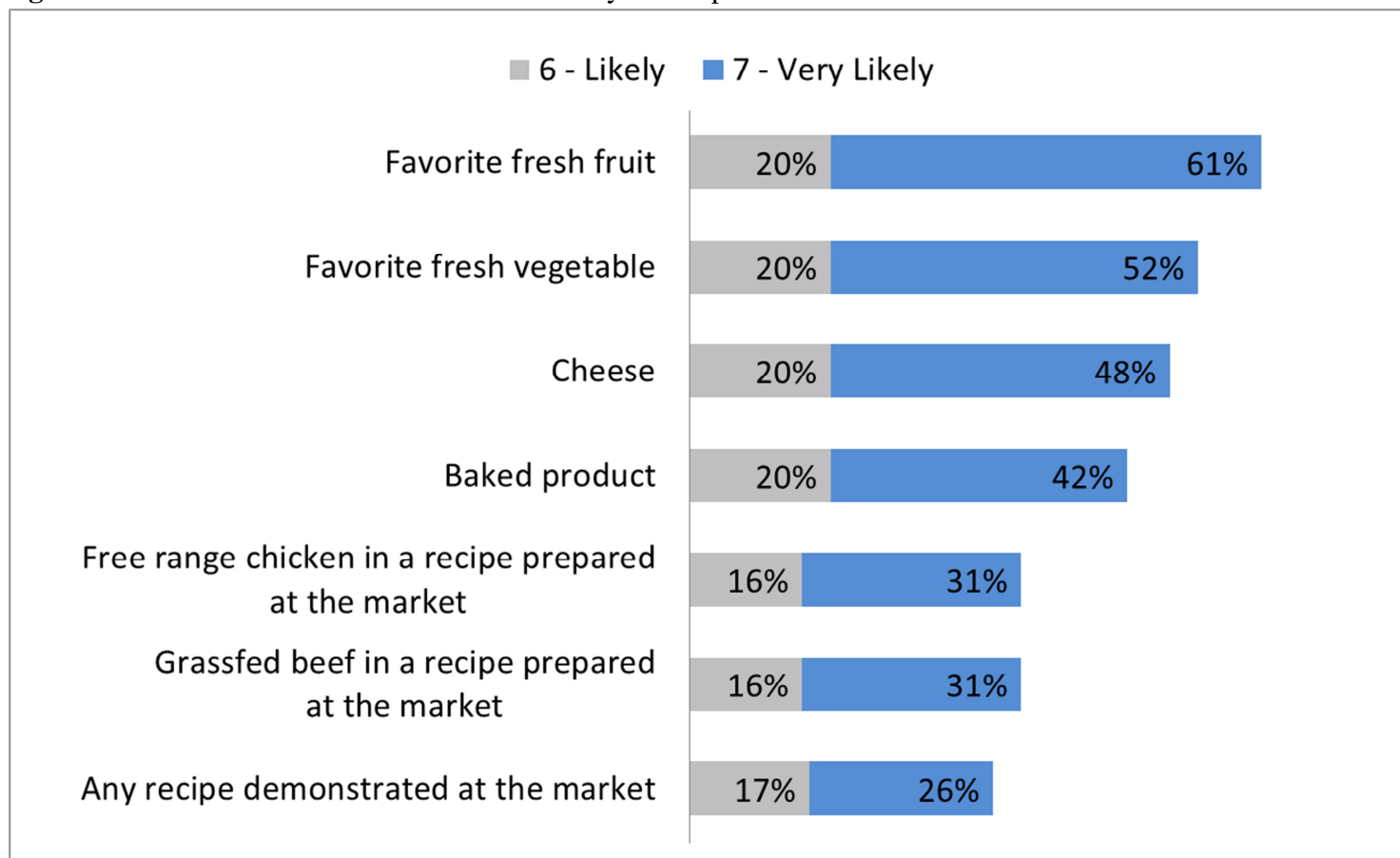
For this question, respondents were asked to indicate their action response to the food sampling.

Figure 1. Consumer “Best Ever” Food Sampling Experience at Various Venues



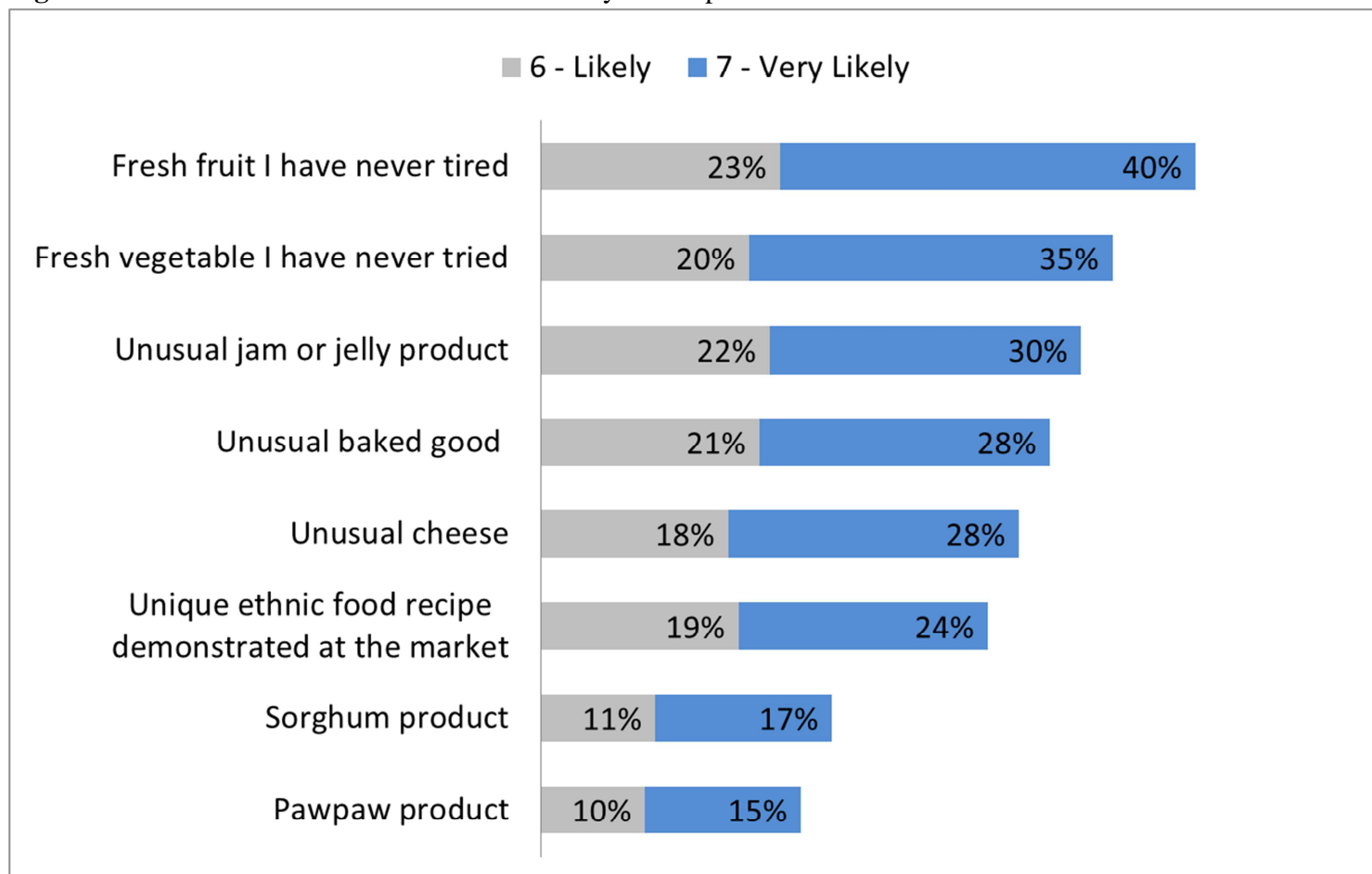
Note: N = 3,406. Respondents were asked to “Try and recall the BEST EVER food sampling experience you have had at any market. Where did you sample the product?”

Figure 2. General Food Products Patrons are Likely to Sample



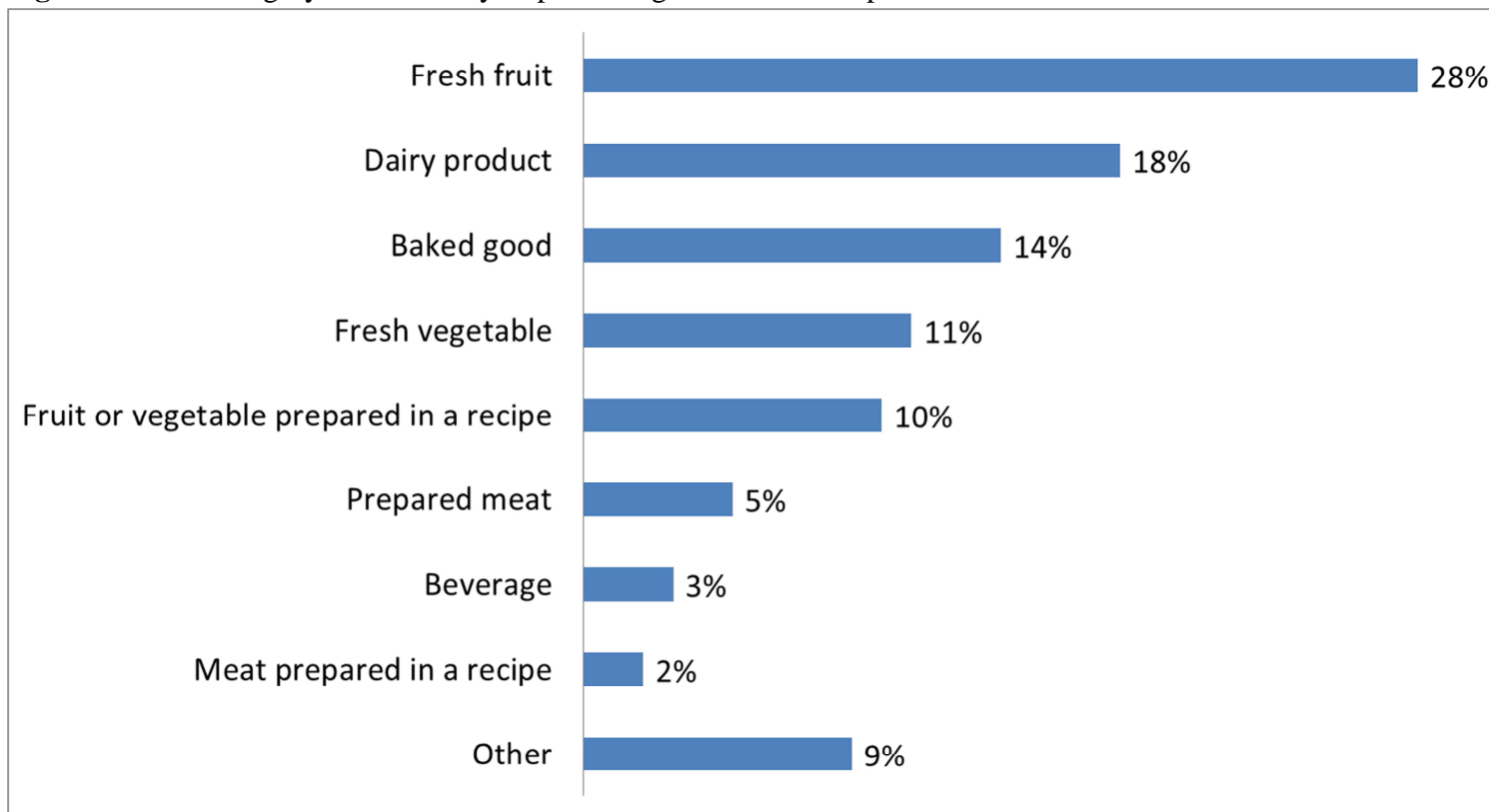
Note: N = 3,406. A seven point Likert scale from 1: “not at all likely” to 7: “very likely” was provided. Respondents were asked to indicate “how likely you would like to sample general food products if they were offered during your farm market visit?”

Figure 3. Unusual Food Products Patrons are Likely to Sample



Note: N = 3,406. A seven point Likert scale from 1: “not at all likely” to 7: “very likely” was provided. Respondents were asked to indicate “how likely you would like to sample unusual food products if they were offered during your farm market visit?”

Figure 4. Food Category Most Closely Representing What You Sampled at the Farmers' Market



Note: N = 1,133. Respondents who were able to recall any specific sampling event at a farmers' market within the past 12 months were asked to indicate the food category most closely representing what they sampled.