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AN APPROACH TO MONITORING THE CHANGING ATTITUDES OF TODAY'S CONSUMER

by

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Super Market Institute has a long-standing reputation for gathering industry operating results and statistics. One area we have not recently explored on an industry-wide basis is consumer attitude research.

With the rapidly changing economy, it now becomes even more important to understand consumers' feelings and attitudes toward the shopping experience, specifically for us -- super market shopping.

Many studies have been recently completed that measure, for example, who the shopper blames for the increase in food prices. The study we are undertaking will explore consumers' feelings and attitudes above and beyond immediate reactions to the recent food price hikes and shortages.

In the 50's, for example, it was thought that shopping in super markets was a great escape for the American housewife -- a chance to get out of the house and fill her needs from a dazzling array of products. Now, perhaps she feels frustrated and angry at the high prices that weekly threaten to wreck her household budget.

If this is the case, super market operators should be aware of it -- not only the big, bold indications evidenced by boycotts or picketing, but the subtleties of feeling that cause shoppers to feel they're justified in changing price labels on canned goods, eating produce in the store without paying for it, or leaving the shopping cart in the street.

SMI has contracted with Dan Yankelovich, Inc., a highly respected social research firm, to conduct a long range project probing the entire spectrum of feelings and attitudes that shape consumer response to super market shopping.

Six objectives have been set for this project.

1. To find out what the public attitudes toward super markets really are.

-to what extent are people hostile or indifferent or friendly.

-how do super markets compare with other types of retail outlets in terms of offering value, quality, efficiency, convenience, friendliness.

2. To find out what super market operators are doing wrong -- what practices may be inadvertently "turning off" the shopper.

-what practices symbolize supposedly indifferent, or greedy, or exploitative aspects of the super market -- for example, perhaps games, promotions, or even the new larger supers invite antagonism.

3. Equally important is to find out what operators are doing right -- which consumer attitudes, beliefs, values lead to positive feelings toward super markets.

4. To develop a broad context of understanding how consumer attitudes toward super markets fit into the consumer's overall life style. For example, the role food and food preparation plays in the life-style of the individual, the consumer's general price consciousness, the

individual's shopping habits and how much of a pleasure or chore shopping is.

The last two objectives prepare the way for a public information program for the food industry.

5. To segment the public and to identify reasonable targets for a public information program.

6. To develop useful information about which media reaches the people the super market operators want to reach.

The entire research program covers a two-year period, based on a three-phase approach. Yankelovich, Inc., divides the project into

- Discovery Phase
- Stimulus/Response Phase
- Base Line Reading

Phase I, or the Discovery Phase, consists of 300 in-depth personal interviews collected from 20 cities across the U.S. These interviews will explore conceptions about super market profits and prices, attitudes towards both shopping in general and super market shopping, the lifestyle, feelings about institutions other than the super market, and level of skepticism which may influence their view of super markets.

Interviewing for this Phase is going on right now. Results will be presented at our Midwinter Convention in early January.

Phase II, the Stimulus/Response Phase, is scheduled to begin February, 1974. This phase will further quantify the basic factors influencing a shopper and will segment the population based on their shopping attitudes. Also key to this part of the project is the testing of consumer

response to various messages on ideas super market operators wish to communicate to the consumer. For example, we might wish to test how consumers react to "low, budget prices" versus "the best quality available."

Concept testing of these messages will be done with 10 to 12 focused group discussions. A pretest of 100 interviews will firm up the instrument which will monitor attitudes in Phase III.

This third phase of the project will begin to monitor consumer attitudes toward super market shopping and determine if various segments of the population shift or stay the same in regards to these attitudes.

Phase III will hopefully be conducted in the second year of the program, perhaps after a communications program has begun. A representative and projection-able sample of 2000 men and women would be used in this phase.

At the end of these three phases the project will yield a meaningful understanding of the public's attitudes toward super markets as an institution; the sources of these attitudes; the consequences of these attitudes; the population segments who hold varying attitudes and their implication for the direction of the future.

The tracking instrument developed in Phase III can be used, in whole or in part, for future phases to continue to monitor the ever-changing attitudes of today's shoppers.

It is an ambitious and exciting project that will provide a method to track, industry-wide, the way consumer attitudes may possibly change over time.
