Why Grocery Shoppers Do Not Use Supermarket Food-Service
Forrest Stegelin

In the past decade, grocery shoppers have observed larger store footprints of grocery stores as retailers attempted to be a one-stop convenience shopping site, complete with food-service (delis, cafes, wine shops) and non-food-oriented (banks, pharmacies, florists) businesses. Data indicate that consumer expenditures for ready-to-eat meals and eating away from home increased during the 1990s and 2000s, which suggests that grocery chains made the right decisions as to square footage, floor planning, and layout.

The past couple of years have witnessed a shift in food-service purchases from eating away from home at restaurants to purchasing meal components to prepare at home or some retention of purchasing ready-to-eat meals for eating at home, bucking the earlier trend where supermarkets faced more competition for the consumer’s food dollar from other food-service businesses than ever before. So why are consumers apparently ambivalent, according to grocers, about the deli department in the supermarket for ready-to-eat prepared meals, snacks, sandwiches, salads, side-dishes, casseroles, and desserts?

Undergraduate students in Food & Fiber Marketing surveyed grocery shoppers in the Athens, GA vicinity to identify traits/characteristics of take-out shoppers and why the grocery stores were not their first choice for take-home meals. Only one in five shoppers considers the supermarket most often when looking for take-out food. Nearly one-third acknowledge they do buy ready-to-eat meals from the supermarket, but because they pass by the deli, while in the grocery store shopping for meal ingredients and components and the convenience tempts them. Take-out from fast-food to white-tablecloth restaurants still ranks first with consumers for convenient meals; home-cooking is still the top preference and activity for nearly one-quarter of grocery shoppers.

Three types of “take-out” customers were identified: the “generalist” or “family-shopper,” the “up-markets” or “gourmet shoppers,” and the “value-added” or “health-conscious shoppers.” For the generalists, time is the biggest cost; they prefer food-service to cooking (time and fatigue) and purchase assortment, value, and quantity over quality. The up-markets are shopping for the unique: different ethnic foods or unusual ingredients; and single-serving or portion-control packages. They will pay premium prices, are sensually stimulated, and have culinary expertise but reserve cooking for special occasions. The value-added actually prefer to cook (food-safety concerns) but lack time and energy; they seek low-fat, low-salt, low-carbohydrate, and high-fiber products, but still seek taste and excitement in eating, and are characterized by reversion to the mean in terms of extremes.

Evaluating the Impact of an Electronic Food-Marketing Network
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Market Maker (MM) is one of the most extensive collections of electronic searchable food-industry-related data in the United States, with over 324,440 profiles of food-related enterprises, including more than 6,000 agricultural producers. Initially developed and administered by the University of Illinois Extension Service, MM has grown into a collaborative effort of land-grant Universities and Departments of Agriculture from more than a dozen states.

The goal of this project is the development of an evaluation protocol that generates information for the assessment of the long-term economic impact of MM. Specific objectives are: 1) to develop a structure and strategy for the ongoing collection of quantitative evaluative information, 2) to develop a set of evaluation tools for state-level MM program implementations, and 3) to collect qualitative information from current users to complement the quantitative evaluation framework.

Methods

Our research protocol consists of four separate yet inter-related stages. The first stage involves the development of a series of program logic models for various user groups. In the second stage, we will develop a comprehensive set of quantifiable evaluation indicators. Third, we will conduct a series of focus groups with MM users to gather information regarding their expectations and identify potential barriers to the adoption and use of MM. The final stage will combine the results of Stages 1, 2, and 3 into a ready to use state-level MM evaluation plan to allow comparisons across states and aggregation to build a national-level impact assessment.

Preliminary Results

Logic models have been developed for producers, consumers, retailers, wholesalers, chefs/restaurants, and farmers market participants. For example, the logic model for producers describes the interaction between resources at the national, state, and individual levels (e.g., human resources at the national and state purview and farmers’ technical ability and willingness to participate in MM), activities (e.g., site development and programming), and outputs (e.g., complete MM website). This logic model also suggests that the final outcome of MM use should be an increase in the profitability of a producer’s operation due to the reduction in transaction costs and rise in sales from new and existing customers. Based on the logic models, we are developing primary and secondary data collection protocols and procedures for MM member states to implement in their respective states.