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TABLESTOCK (FRESH) MICHIGAN POTATOES A SYNTHESIS OF FOUR FOCUS GROUPS

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By

Mary D. Zehner
Bonnie J. Knutson

Department of
Agricultural Economics
MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY
East Lansing

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A Synthesis of Four Focus Groups**

by

Mary D. Zehner

and

Bonnie J. Knutson

Department of Agricultural Economics
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

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Tablestock (Fresh) Michigan Potatoes
A Synthesis of Four Focus Groups

by
Mary D. Zehner
and
Bonnie J. Knutson 1/

BACKGROUND

This research was conducted through the Agricultural Experiment Station (AES) of Michigan State University and funded as a part of the Potato Research Special Federal Grant (#88-34141-3372). The overall project is designed to impact several key issues which are of concern to the potato industry of Michigan. The specific issues were identified by potato industry leaders and MSU researchers.

The fresh fruit and vegetable industry in the U.S. has been experiencing significant growth during the last decade due to consumers' changing lifestyles and a desire for more healthful, natural foods. At the same time, Michigan has been losing market share for tablestock round, white potatoes.

The Michigan potato industry is extremely interested in developing marketing and/or operational strategies to regain market share and both improve both the sales and profitability of round white potatoes.

To better understand the perspective of fresh potato consumers, a focus group study was conducted which was subcontracted with Knutson and Associates. This report presents the findings from that effort.

1/ Department of Agriculture Economics, Michigan State University, East Lansing and Knutson and Associates, Lansing, Michigan.

In reading this report, it is important to remember that the focus group technique is qualitative, not quantitative, in nature. Therefore, findings cannot be statistically projected to the general population. Rather, this methodology provides the opportunity to gain some insights into the consumers' decision-making process relative to fresh potatoes. It also offers direction for a follow-up survey of Michigan consumers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

While the overall goal of the study was to suggest how the industry might best recover its share of the fresh potato market, specific objectives included:

- * Identify how Michigan white potatoes are positioned in the minds of consumers; i.e. positive and negative perceptions.
- * Discover underlying reasons for consumers' purchase patterns.
- * Learn what, if any, consumer needs exists which could provide the Michigan fresh potato industry with new opportunities to regain market share.

METHODOLOGY

Four focus groups were held with consumers of fresh potatoes, two with heavy users and two with light users. In this study, a heavy user was defined as someone who purchased ten or more pounds of fresh potatoes in an average month. A light user was defined as someone who purchased less than ten pounds of fresh potatoes in an average month.

Respondents were recruited by telephone. Confirmation letters were sent and reminder calls made the day prior to the scheduled discussions. Selected participants were adults most responsible for menu planning and meal preparation in their households. The groups were recruited to include a representation of age, employment patterns, household income and race.

One heavy user and one light user focus group were held in Lansing on Wednesday, October 19th; they were duplicated in the Detroit (Southfield) area on the following evening. The sessions were conducted by Bonnie J. Knutson, Ph.D. and were audio taped. Members of Michigan Potato Industry Commission observed all discussions from behind one way mirrors.

The groups began at 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. and lasted between one (1) and one-and-a-half (1-1/2) hours. Light refreshments were served. Participants were paid a \$25 honorarium.

SYNTHESIS OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Awareness and Perceptions of Fresh Potatoes

Brands/Types

With few exceptions, consumers were aware of the various types/brands of potatoes available in the market place. They identified Michigan potatoes, white potatoes, red potatoes, Idaho, baking, Michigold, and sweet among others. Differentiation was made primarily on use (baking vs. other) and shape (oval vs. round).

Interestingly, while both Lansing groups were aware of and some had used the Michigold potato, this was not the case with the Detroit groups. It may be speculated that either the variety is not available in that market area or is not stocked/promoted by the stores in which the participants shopped.

Michigan Potatoes

In general, Michigan potatoes enjoy a favorable position in the minds of consumers. They are thought of as utilitarian in nature, a basic all purpose product which can be prepared as a side dish or combined into a soup, stew, casserole or other main part of the meal. Respondents did not consider them to be in the same premium category as Idaho.

The most frequently mentioned drawbacks of Michigan potatoes were their many irregular shapes and many eyes. These characteristics were most problematic in the peeling/preparation process.

Uses

Potatoes, as a generic product, were essentially seen as an integral side dish to a "main" or "big" evening meal by most respondents, often evoking images of homey, family experiences. This was more prevalent in the Lansing groups. Additionally, several indicated that they frequently use the potato as the center of a meal. Notable examples were given by a woman who was a semi-vegetarian and one who served stuffed (ala Wendy's) potatoes as an entree to her family. Yet many -- especially the heavy users -- also used the potato as part of other meals or snacks, with pancakes, fries and/or hashbrowns often being given as examples.

Very few participants did not own a microwave. All who did, used it to some degree to prepare potatoes. Most commonly it was to bake them, although several heavy users reported frequently using it to prepare such potatoes dishes as scalloped. Additionally, light users were more dependent on the microwave for cooking potatoes than were their heavy user counterparts.

Detroit heavy users also mentioned a variety of non-food uses for potatoes, such as medical (drawing boils), cleaning (removing burnt residues/odors) and artistic (cut out stamps used in school art projects).

Packaging

Whether consumers purchase potatoes in bags or individually from bulk was more dependent on whether the potato was to be used for a specific purpose than whether the respondent was a heavy or light user. Instances often cited for individual selection included (1) special occasion dinners when appearance was a major consideration and (2) baking several/many potatoes at once thereby requiring similar sizes so they would be done at the same time.

Consumers did not initially appear to have a preference for a type of package, indicating that they bought potatoes in plastic bags, paper bags with mesh windows, all mesh bags and sometimes in small square cartons. Each form was thought to have its own benefits and drawbacks. Plastic allowed the shopper to "see" the freshness, shapes and sizes of the potatoes; they didn't allow the potatoes to "breathe". While paper bags with the mesh windows allowed breathing, shoppers were not able to judge the quality of all the potatoes inside.

Consumers told of shaking the bag in order to see more of the potatoes through the mesh window, of squeezing the contents to judge firmness/quality, and even of sniffing through the window to see if they could detect the clearly recognizable odor of spoiling potatoes. The all mesh bag was positively seen as allowing the potatoes to breathe and the shopper to see the freshness/quality of each one. However, dirt embedded in the eyes and on the potato, in general, easily fell out.

In talking about the size of the bags, the Lansing groups, particularly the light users, said even the five (5) pound sacks were often too large for them. Since they use them

infrequently, potatoes often dried out, "grew eyes" or just plain rotted. When this occurred, the respondents felt like they were losing value -- like they were getting "gypped". More importantly, however, they reported feeling guilty about having to throw food away.

Uniformity

The possibility of offering bags in which the potatoes were of uniform/similar sizes was moderately received by the groups. The strongest support was from lighter users, particularly in Lansing. All groups made it clear, however, that while uniformity could be a benefit, they did not want to pay more for this consistency. (Parenthetically, it should be noted that when consumers buy potatoes from a bulk display they pay significantly more per pound for the more uniformed sized potatoes.)

Storage

Home storage patterns varied widely, with the two most common places being in the refrigerator and in a kitchen cabinet/cupboard. Interestingly, there does not appear to be a clear understanding about the advantages and disadvantages of various storage methods, specifically refrigerator storage.

Storage was more of a concern for infrequent potato users and was directly related to preserving the quality of the potato (making them last longer). Because they don't use potatoes as rapidly, lighter users were more likely to keep them in refrigerators, viewing the colder conditions as a good way to keep potatoes from drying out and from growing the tubular "eye" extensions. On the other hand, heavy users didn't have a storage problem because, as one Detroit woman pointed out, potatoes don't stay around long enough to go bad.

Greening

With few exceptions, respondents were not knowledgeable about either the greening process or the impact of packaging and storage methods on that process. They were not aware of the factors that cause greening of potatoes nor the reasons why Michigan potatoes were sold in paper in order to decrease the exposure to florescent light in retail stores (a major contributor to greening).

Nutrition

Consumers were aware of the nutritional value of a potato. They talked about low calories, potassium and the merit of eating the skin because that's where the nutrients are. While discussions indicated that slight taste differences could be detected across types, the consensus was that potatoes were bland. Thus they had to be "topped with" such things as gravy, sour cream, bacon bits, etc., thereby reducing its low calorie benefit.

Underlying Reasons for Purchase Patterns

Implied throughout all discussions were two obvious motivators for purchasing potatoes: 1) The Comfort Factor, 2) Basic Wholesome American Food. Virtually everyone grew up with potatoes being served in their homes. The food may even go so far as being thought of as an extension onto the advertising slogan: "Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie and Chevrolet." Therefore, the food is familiar and may draw images of positive meal experiences from youth. In addition, ordinary preparation methods -- baked, mashed, boiled, and even fried -- are considered uncomplicated, not requiring elaborate recipes or cooking/serving equipment.

Heavy users, principally in Detroit, are also driven by two other strong motivators: 1) Preference and 2) Price. In short, people who use a lot of potatoes overwhelmingly like potatoes. They used words like "wonderful", "yum", and "delicious" to describe their feelings, with their body language supporting their comments. These consumers are prone to use potatoes in a wider variety of ways, seek out and experiment with new recipes and eat them at more meals during the day than are the lighter users. Although everyone saw potatoes as high in price-value, heavy users frequently cited their "cheap" price as a major reason for buying large quantities.

The Ideal Potato and Potato Market

All groups were asked to "design" what, for them, would be a perfect potato. While a myriad of responses were offered, the dominant ones may be synthesized as follows:

- * Medium size oval shape with fewer eyes
- * Light to medium brown in color
- * Availability of a 2-1/2 or 3 pound bag (light users)

- * A type of bag which would allow consumers to better judge the contents relative to quality, freshness, and uniformity of shape and size
- * More facts about nutritional benefits
- * Better information about storage methods
- * Additional ways of using potatoes developed for convenient preparation and microwave cooking
- * More uniformity in size of potatoes in bags only if it won't raise the price.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the four focus groups clearly demonstrate that there is no one single target market for Michigan potatoes. Instead, a wide spectrum of opportunities exist to address the varying needs and wants of consumers. While the question of how to most effectively address the specific interests of each segment needs to be further investigated, this study suggests that there are several common threads which can be utilized throughout all strategies. They are presented below.

The Positive Image of Michigan Potatoes

Promotion of fresh Michigan potatoes should incorporate the three aspects which consumers view as the product's strengths.

First, potatoes, in general, are associated with "home, hearth, and good food." National trends point to a return to the home (sometimes called "cocooning") fueled by the baby boom generation being in the family formation stage. Additionally, interest in American and regional cuisines, freshness of food products and food as an art is on the rise.

The Michigan potato industry should build on this homey image with the Michigan potato's positive position of high price-value and a good all-purpose product. Recent successful examples of similar efforts for other food product are Kellogg's Corn Flakes ("Taste corn flakes again for the very first time.") and Campbell's Soups (Soup is good food.).

The Need and Desire for Information

Next, there is an opportunity for an intensive educational program for consumers. People not only need, but want information that will teach them:

- More and new ways to prepare potatoes that stress (1) variety, (2) ease and convenience (time) in the preparation process, and (3) utilizing the microwave for more than just baking.
- Methods of storing potatoes in the home to prolong freshness and shelf life, including where to best store and the advantages/disadvantages of various locations.
- How to retain/enhance the nutritional value and desirable taste characteristics without having to add on what consumers clearly recognize as high-calorie, low-nutrition items.

- The part that greening of potatoes plays in the entire ground-to-table process. Respondents desired increased visibility of the potatoes in the bag on the one hand, yet they were not aware that the clear poly bags allowed light exposure and greening of the potatoes.

In this regard, the industry might also consider developing a more "market-friendly" term to identify the greening process. When many people think about any vegetation greening, it is usually in a positive light, i.e., the trees are getting green, the tomatoes and apples are getting ripe (losing their green). But in the potato industry, greening is a negative process. This may cause confusion in consumers' minds. Therefore, while the industry may continue to use and understand the term, a more effective name may be desirable in the marketplace.

The most effective vehicles for informational materials seem to be at point-of-purchase locations. Most participants indicated that small tear off sheets/cards placed by the potatoes would be good. Some information, if presented clearly and attractively could also be placed on the (paper) bag or on a paper insert in the bag. All educational materials must, of course, invite attention by suggesting that reading will be quick, easy and valuable.

Improved Bagging Alternatives

Finally, the Michigan potato industry should investigate the need for increasing bagging alternatives. Of particular appeal to light users would be the availability of a smaller (three pound) bag. In addition, development of a better potato bag should be explored. Characteristics of a superior bag would include (1) expanded visibility of all contents, (2) enhancement of the products shelf life and freshness, and (3) prevention of any dirt present on the potatoes escaping.

The focus group interviews generated qualitative findings with some insights into the consumer decision-making process related to fresh potatoes. Several directions might be appropriate for follow-up quantitative research.

One approach is a telephone survey of a random sample of Michigan consumers to quantify the results revealed in the focus groups discussions. Are the purchase patterns and the differences between the light and heavy users of fresh potatoes also true for the

general population? Heavy users really liked potatoes, but respondents considered them more of a commodity since "cheap" price was a major reason cited for buying large quantities. (It should be noted that it was difficult to recruit the heavy users for the focus groups although potato growers likely would not consider 10 lbs./month as heavy use.) Light users tended to consider convenience an important factor in buying and even the 5-lb bag was frequently too large for their use.

A second research approach might be targeted to the light household users of fresh potatoes. In the focus groups they were identified as buying less than 10-pounds of fresh potatoes in a average month. The light users like potatoes, but for convenience-sake, ease of storage and preparation at home are shifting towards processed potato forms, rice and pasta products. They do buy fresh potatoes from a bulk display, frequently for baking in the microwave oven. The challenge is to provide round, white potatoes in the package size which meets the needs of these smaller households (over one-half of the U.S. population comes from one and two-member households) where an increasing proportion of women are employed outside the home.

For light potato users, develop a quality pack of round, white potatoes (U.S. Extra No. 1 grade) which holds up to three pounds. Evaluate the consumer acceptance first through focus groups discussions, then conduct mall intercept interviews to determine level of acceptance with larger groups of consumers in several Michigan communities. The new package would then be available for a group of innovative growers to test market through selected Michigan retail stores.

APPENDIX

MICHIGAN POTATO COMMISSION

FOCUS GROUPS

TELEPHONE SCREENER

OCTOBER 19 (LANSING) - 20 (DETROIT AREA)

Good (morning/afternoon, evening). I'm _____ name _____ and I'm calling from _____ name _____, a national marketing research firm. Today we are conducting a study about potatoes and I'd like to ask you a few questions. Let me assure you that we are not selling anything at all. We'd simply like your opinions which are very important to us. May I speak to the person who does most of the shopping and preparing of food for your household. (REPEAT INTRO IF NECESSARY) Do you have a few minutes?

YES - CONTINUE

NO - DETERMINE CALLBACK TIME. IF REFUSED, TALLY AS INITIAL REFUSAL.

1. Are you, or is anyone in your immediate family, involved in a marketing research or grocery store/supermarket business.

YES - TERMINATE

NO - CONTINUE

2. (RECORD ONLY; DO NOT ASK)

_____ MALE

_____ FEMALE

3. For classification purposes only, which of the following best describes your age category?

_____ 45 years or less

CHECK QUOTAS

_____ 46 years or more

4. Are you employed full time outside the home, part time outside the home, or a full time homemaker?

_____ Employed full time

_____ Employed part time CHECK QUOTAS

_____ Full time homemaker

5. Which of the following best describes your total household income last year before taxes? (READ EACH)

_____ Under \$25,000

_____ \$25,000 - \$50,000

_____ Over \$50,000

6. Again, for classification purposes only, what is your race?

(DO NOT READ; RECORD AND CHECK QUOTAS FOR MINORITY).

_____ Caucasian

_____ Black

_____ Other Minority

7. In an average month, about how many times do you prepare and serve _____ (read each of the following separately and record) _____ for a main meal in your household?

_____ Rice

_____ Pasta (spaghetti, lasagna, macaroni, etc.)

_____ Potatoes

8. In an average month, about how many pounds of fresh or raw potatoes do you buy to prepare at home? (NOT FROZEN, CANNED OR OTHERWISE PREPACKAGED)

_____ (RECORD ACTUAL AMOUNT)

CHECK QUOTAS FOR HIGH USERS (10 LBS OR MORE/MONTH)

AND LOW USERS (LESS THAN 10 LBS/MONTH)

9. When you do buy fresh or raw potatoes, do you generally buy them:

_____ Individually, picking out the ones you want

_____ In 5 lb. bags

_____ In 10 lb. bags

_____ In bags larger than 10 lbs.

_____ Other: _____

10. When you think about potatoes, what are some things that come to your mind?

INTERVIEWER - PLEASE EVALUATE RESPONDENT ON FOLLOWING:

Very Articulate/good ideas and experience _____ CONTINUE

Average/Poor on above _____ TERMINATE

YOUR PERSONAL EVALUATION IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THE SUCCESS OF THESE GROUPS. THE MODERATOR IS RELYING ON YOUR JUDGEMENT.

11. About how many times a month do you go to a grocery store or a supermarket to do your grocery shopping? Please count only major shopping trips, not stopping in a store to pick up only a few items.

_____ (RECORD ACTUAL NUMBER)

12. On an average, about how much do you spend a week for groceries?

_____ (RECORD ACTUAL AMOUNT)

IF QUALIFIED:

We would like to invite you to a group discussion about potatoes. Please let me emphasize that we are not selling anything but rather would like to hear your opinions on this topic. Most people that participate in these discussions find them to be very interesting and I think you would too. The discussion will be held on _____ day at _____ time at _____ location. You would receive \$25 for your participation. Light refreshments will be served. The discussion should last about 1 1/2 hours. Will you be able to attend?

_____ YES

_____ NO - (THANK AND TERMINATE; TALLY AS QUALIFIED REFUSAL)

This will be a small discussion group. There will be only 8 - 10 participants and we will be counting on your attendance. Your opinions are very important to us, so please check your calendar to make sure you can be there.

We will be sending you a letter with directions, and we will call you a day or two ahead of the group to remind you of the time. Please let me verify your address, and a telephone number where you can be reached during the day.

MODERATOR'S OUTLINE: FOCUS GROUPS
TABLESTOCK (FRESH) MICHIGAN POTATOES
M.S.U. AND THE MICHIGAN POTATO COMMISSION
LANSING (10/19/88) AND DETROIT (10/20/88)

- I. INTRODUCTION
 - PURPOSE OF GROUP
 - PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND
- II. PRESENT PURCHASE AND USE PATTERNS
 - A. PRE-MADE LIST VS. IMPULSE PURCHASE
 - B. HOW FREQUENTLY/OFTEN BUY POTATOES
 - C. WHERE BUY: SUPERMARKET/NEIGHBORHOOD STORE/FARMERS MARKET
 - D. STORAGE IN HOME
 - E. HOW USE AND PREPARE IN MENU/MEALS
- III. KNOWLEDGE (AWARENESS) AND PERCEPTIONS OF FRESH/RAW POTATOES
(POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES)
 - A. TYPES OR BRANDS
 - ROUND VS. LONG
 - COOKING VS. BAKING
 - MICHIGAN VS. OTHERS
 - B. PACKAGING
 - PAPER BAGS W/MESH WINDOWS VS. POLY/PLASTIC BAGS
 - 5 LBS. - 10 LBS. - 15 LBS. - OTHER
 - INDIVIDUAL SELECTION FROM BULK
 - C. SIZE OF INDIVIDUAL POTATOES
 - UNIFORMITY IN BAGS
- IV. POSSIBLE INCREASE IN USE OF FRESH/RAW POTATOES
(UNAIDED RESPONSES FIRST THEN AIDED)
 - A. DESIGN OF "IDEAL" POTATO/PACKAGING
 - TYPE/SHAPE
 - COLOR (SKIN AND INSIDE "MEAT") - MICHIGOLD
 - SIZE OF POTATOES
 - PACKAGING SIZE/INDIVIDUAL (BAG OWN)
 - * NEED SMALLER BAGS? - 3 LBS.

- * PAPER/POLY/MESH OR OTHER
- * COLOR/GRAPHICS
- * SIZE OF MESH WINDOW IN PAPER BAGS
- QUALITY
 - * GRADING OF POTATOES FRO UNIFORMITY/SIZE
 - * QUALITY PACK
 - * "EYES"
- LONGER "SHELF LIFE"
- INFORMATION FROM INDUSTRY
 - * NUTRITION
 - * MENU/PREPARATION
 - * BEST STORAGE
- OTHER DESIRED CHARACTERISTICS

V. CONCLUSIONS/WRAP-UP/SUGGESTIONS