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Food Literacy and Its
Implication to Consumer Marketing Programs

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A. The Critical Role of Literacy Knowledge

Much of the basis of publicly supported consumer marketing rests upon some basic assumptions concerning literacy and desirable actions. Generally, it is assumed that when people are poorly or inaccurately informed their resultant decisions and actions fall short of the best possible from both the individual's and society's viewpoint. It furthermore is assumed that if the information level is improved there will be changed decisions and action - and these changes will be in the direction of "improvement".

- Accepting this reasoning at least part of the role of consuming marketing programs can be summarized as developing efficient techniques for improving consumer literacy.

In order to do this, certain information is necessary. These areas of information can be stated as follows:

- 1) What is the state of consumer literacy - in what areas is she well informed, poorly informed, inaccurately informed?
- 2) Who are these consumers with various levels of literacy?
- 3) What are the "nerve spots" and interest areas of these consumers which can be touched so that the new or correct information will be accepted with least resistance.

B. State of Knowledge In These Three Areas.

1. We know some scattered detail about the level of consumer literacy. Research has usually demonstrated the limitation of consumers knowledge concerning grades and standards in such areas as meats and eggs. Scattered research also points to inadequacies in consumer nutrition information and product use (such as what kind of apples for what purpose, etc.). We also know from research that knowledge of such general issues such as seasonality of prices, nature of marketing costs, etc. apparently is quite inaccurate.

Though no complete "literacy profile" is available, the evidence indicates there is enough lack or inaccuracy of knowledge to make work in the area of literacy improvement worth while.

2. We know very little, however, about what kind of consumers are poorly informed and what motivating interest areas are of most use as an avenue of transmitting information. It is a small study in this particular area of relationships along with its implications that I wish to report.

C. Interrelationships of Various Consumer Characteristics and Motivational Interest Areas To Consumer Literacy.

1. Source of Data:

The following reports are taken from the work of Dr. A. J. Burns and myself. The data was taken from a small highly stratified panel

of consumers, located in a medium size city which were interviewed in considerable depth over a period of one year's time.

2. Limitation of Findings:

Because of the small and selected nature of the sample no quantitative conclusions generalizing to large groups should be made. The focus is on significant relationships within the panel and these offer reasonable first estimates or hypothesis.

3. The Procedure:

Several questions were asked to establish the relative literacy in three major knowledge areas which are pertinent measures of level of information held by homemakers:

- 1) Knowledge of prices of food items
- 2) Knowledge of brands and grades and qualities of food items
- 3) Knowledge of size and quantity issues in canned goods.

4. The Findings:

Levels of Knowledge and Homemaker and Household Characteristics

The panel had homemakers with high, medium and low levels of information literacy in all three of the areas. Though probably of no real significance in a sample of this kind, it was interesting that proportion of high literacy homemakers was greatest in the price area, lowest in the quantity and size area.

* There was little interrelationship among the levels of literacy in the three areas held by a specific homemaker. Very few ranked high in all areas or low in all areas. The usual picture was of varying levels of this information held by any one consumer. However:

- Low knowledge of brands and grades and low knowledge of sizes and quantities tended to go together.
- High knowledge of prices and high knowledge of sizes and quantities tended to go together.

* Levels of knowledge in the price area was significantly tied to the economic conditions of the family -- greater price knowledge was held by those whose income and purchasing power conditions were more limited.

- higher price knowledge was held by those whose families had lower total or per capita incomes; whose families were large (6 or more); whose children were of school age.
- higher price knowledge also was held by the higher educated (college) homemakers.

* Levels of knowledge about brands and quality were associated with economic conditions directly. Higher knowledge was held by the higher income groups.

- no other family characteristics appeared to be related to this area of knowledge.

* Levels of knowledge about sizes of canned goods and quantities were related to several family factors

- the greater the levels of education of the homemaker, the more knowledgeable she was.
- newly married homemakers and the older homemakers whose families had grown and gone had lower levels of knowledge than those homemakers who had growing families, especially in the pre-school and grade school brackets.
- no significant relationship between this knowledge area and the economic conditions of income was found.

* Levels of Knowledge and Homemaker Interest in Specific Motivational Areas

The various homemakers in the panel, through a large group of questions and actions were assigned a rating in each of five possible Interest or Motivational areas about food. These areas broadly center around (1) price or economizing, (2) quality, (3) nutrition, (4) novel, the new and different and (5) convenience, time saving. The extent to which consumers held these different interest areas were associated to some degree with the levels of knowledge held.

- * The level of knowledge about prices was not related in any particular way to any of the motivational interest areas of consumers. A high interest in prices, quality, etc. indicated nothing about the homemaker actual level of price knowledge.
- * A higher level of knowledge about brands and grades was held by those homemakers who had a higher responsiveness to quality, nutritional and "new and different" factors in food buying.
- * A higher level of knowledge about sizes of canned goods and quantities was held by those homemakers who had a higher responsiveness to quality factors and had a low responsiveness to the "new and different" aspects of food buying.

"Felt Need" Levels of Homemakers and Their Levels of Literacy.

During various visits to the panel, homemakers were asked (and encouraged) to discuss or list any information they thought they needed or would like to have concerning purchasing or preparation of food. Homemakers were then rated according to the relatively intensity of their "felt or expressed need" for food marketing information.

- * There was no relationship between the level of knowledge concerning prices and the "felt need" for information.
- * The more that the homemaker knew about the sizes of cans and quantities, the greater her "felt need" for additional information. However, the more she knew about quality, the less her "felt need" for information was.

The extent of this "felt need" for information had some interesting relationships with the family itself.

- * Homemakers from families with higher incomes (both absolute and per capita) expressed more need for additional information than those of lower incomes.
- * Homemakers with less-than-high school education expressed less need for information.
- * Newly married homemakers or those with very young children expressed more need of information than those from older more established homes.

Implications of These Findings To Consumer Marketing Programs

Some of the more pertinent conclusions which this work indicates concerning consumer extension programs could be briefed as follows:

1. The easiest group to reach through mass media is probably already the best informed group. Homemakers who were basically better informed and who read more about food were the homemakers who felt they need to learn still more about food.
2. We cannot depend upon the idea that the vocalized demand from the "grass roots" will guide or push for a consumer education program. Those we "hear from" most readily are probably the already best informed.
3. Information to find greatest acceptance needs to be packaged with appeal to more than one motivational or interest area. No narrow, clear-cut relationships exist between literacy of different types and any single specific "interest area" for most homemakers.