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Selling Locally Grown Fresh Produce: Consumer Perceptions of Green Grocers in Tennessee*

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Small volume fruit and vegetable grocers have access problems reaching the commercial distribution system. Limited quantities, in particular, make it difficult for individual producers to sell to brokers, wholesalers, or directly to many supermarkets. Green grocers can be viable alternative outlets for these growers. Implicit in farmers' pursuit of green grocers is the assumption that there is adequate consumer demand at these retailers.

Building upon consumer demand requires an appreciation of store attributes that attract/repel customers. However, little is known about consumer perceptions of green grocers as sources of locally grown fresh produce. In order to fill this void, it is necessary to gather information from food shoppers at these outlets. Preliminary results of a survey of patrons at green grocers across Tennessee during the summer of 2000 were presented. Selection of the sites was based on a census of green grocers operating in the state during the spring of this year. Cooperating markets reflected the distribution of green grocers operating in the state.

The survey instrument was designed as a variant of SERVQUAL.¹ Emphasis was given to shopper comparisons of attributes of the ideal green grocer versus those present at the outlet in which the questionnaire was received.

Surveys were randomly distributed to people shopping at the various outlets. Postage paid pre-addressed envelopes were provided with the questionnaires. A total of 1,118 questionnaires were returned. Preliminary results indicate the following. Quality was the most important attribute. Customer service was also highly rated. There was extensive agreement among respondents across stores with re-

spect to the ideal ratings for the 24 SERVQUAL questions, but considerably less agreement with respect to experiences on their last visits. Correlations ranged from .87 to .97 for the ideal ratings, and from .56 to .90 for the experiential ratings. This suggests shoppers have similar valuations of the store criteria but differ in terms of their evaluations of outlet features based on their last trips to the respective outlets.

Further analyses of the data are underway. These pertain to comparisons of ideal versus the ratings based on the last visit to the respective outlet. Results will point to features that are relatively important and meet the shoppers' ideal and those for which there is room for improvement. Thus, each outlet can view its features and determine where it is doing well and where there is room for improvement.

Changes in U.S. Food Consumption Patterns by Region

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There is considerable variation in the sales of many foods across geographies. Marketers often exploit these variations with regional or local marketing campaigns. An important question is whether these differences are stable. If regional food consumption patterns undergo significant shifts over time, marketers need current information to develop their geographically targeted marketing programs. If regional food preferences remain relatively stable, firms may not need the most current sales data to design their programs and may not need to make frequent revisions of their target markets. In addition, policies encouraging dietary change may need long time horizons.

This research examined the stability of regional food consumption patterns in the United States. SAMI sales data from 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1990 for more than 100 food categories were included in the analysis. Preliminary results suggest that most regional consumption patterns and many food categories exhibited some stability over the 15 year period.

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¹For a description see Bearden, W. O. and R. G. Netemeyer. 1999. *Handbook of Marketing Scales*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: SAGE Publications.