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A Focus Group Study of Factors Influencing Consumers' Potato Purchasing Decisions*

by

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Abstract

This research reports the findings of focus group interviews which explored potato buying motives and preferences for russet, red skinned and round white potatoes among selected Northeastern consumers. The results indicate that the group members perceived all russets as "Idaho" potatoes, associated the red potatoes with gourmet meals, and viewed the round whites as generic potatoes, unsuitable for company meals. However, participants identified round whites as their personal favorite and as the kind they purchased most often.

Statement of the Problem

Round whites are a predominant type of potato grown and marketed in Northeastern United States. However, changes in buyer behavior have led to a decline in round white consumption. Some reports attribute this trend to consumers' growing preferences for russets over round whites (McBratney, 1989; U.S.D.A., 1986). But outside of conjecture, this apparent preference has not been adequately tested or explained. The U.S. potato industry needs to identify and understand the nature of consumers' potato preferences so that effective marketing tactics can be developed to augment the customer base for specific types of potatoes. This study was designed to gain information about the attitudes and preferences held by

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Northeastern consumers for different types of potatoes.

Objectives

The purpose of this research was to obtain information on consumer behavior that could be used to enhance the positioning of round white potatoes. The study encompassed three specific objectives:

- 1) To analyze consumer attitudes toward the russet, round white and red-skinned potatoes and identify consumer preferences for these three types.
- 2) To detail the positive and negative attributes consumers associate with each of the three types of potatoes.
- 3) To understand how consumer preferences are influenced by the intended preparation or meal setting, and to identify characteristics that make one type preferable to another in particular situations.

The central focus is on the underlying dynamics of these preferences and the decision making process behind potato purchasing. This requires further insights as to why consumers feel the way they do about different types of potatoes, how important these reasons are to them, and why they select one type over another.

Methodology

Focus group interviews were held in April, 1989 to meet the objectives of this research project. This is a sophisticated interviewing procedure that is especially useful when the intent is to elicit information of a qualitative nature, rather than to generate statistical data (Krueger, 1988). In this procedure, people are selectively invited to participate in a one to two hour discussion on the product being studied. The interviewers mediate the group so that the discussion addresses the specific research questions.

While the focus group interview obtains in-depth information on the subject, the results cannot be generalized to a broad range of consumers.

The small, non-random sample does not necessarily reflect the entire population of U.S. potato buyers. Consequently, the findings offer impressions, ideas and suggestions, which in turn, may be used to make cautious generalizations about the way consumers feel and act and what motivates their behaviors (Morgan, 1988). At the very least, a well conducted interview allows generalizations to other consumers who possess characteristics similar to the interview respondents (Krueger, 1988).

Springfield, Massachusetts was selected as the study site. Panelists were recruited through an advertisement in the *Springfield Union News* that requested applications from people interested in participating in a food products study being conducted by University of Maine researchers. Applicants were screened so that selected participants were the primary food shoppers in the household, lived in multi-person households with annual incomes over \$20,000, and prepared potatoes at home at least once a week. Group 1 consisted of eight individuals between 22 and 42 years old, and Group 2 included seven people between 45-54 years old. This determination was based on the considerable market power of these particular consumer groups. Together, they currently account for about 49 percent of food-at-home spending and over 50 percent of foodservice expenditures (The Food Institute, 1987).

Focus group interviews attempt to elicit candid reactions, thoughts and feelings from the participants. To ensure this requisite spontaneity, participants were not given details about the intent of the study. Instead, they were told that the general purpose of the meeting was to learn more about how they bought and used different food products, particularly produce. During the interviews, both groups were asked the same rudimentary questions that guided the flow of the discussion. Each interview session was videotaped so that the discussions could be reviewed by the two interviewers. Participants were also sent a post interview evaluation form to obtain feedback on how each member felt about their experience in the focus group and what he or she thought was the general tone of the discussion. The similarity of the post interview responses confirmed that the

salient points of the discussion were captured in the analysis.

Results

Consumers' Shopping and Eating Habits

In the initial phase of the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their general shopping and eating habits. There were notable similarities between the two groups regarding shopping, food preparation activities and dietary concerns. Not surprisingly, time was mentioned by all participants as a major factor influencing their shopping patterns, especially among the women with children. The microwave oven was a mainstay for most and they typically reported using it at least once a day. In addition, all participants attested to being heavy users of fresh produce. For many, the variety and quality of produce carried by the different local stores influenced where they shopped.

Coupon usage was an agitated topic that was initiated by members in each group. They indicated that coupons do encourage them to try new products. Intense discussion of this subject also centered on an issue specific to the Springfield area. The participants explained that the local stores were competing with each other by offering double coupon savings and sometimes triple values. They expressed strong animosity about this strategy because they "knew" that stores were inflating their prices in order to offer the coupon specials. Many participants felt that as a result of this competitive strategy, consumers were "forced" to save coupons, and they vehemently asserted that they would prefer to eliminate the time consuming task of coupon cutting. Nevertheless, many spoke of "couponing" as if it were a challenging hobby and boasted about the amount of money they save through their efforts. For the most part, they gave the overall impression that coupons are a fact of life they had begrudgingly learned to instill into their shopping behaviors.

Another spontaneous theme was health and nutrition. Calories, blood pressure readings and cholesterol counts were part of most everyone's vocabulary. Generally, the younger group tended to be more concerned about maintaining healthy

eating habits. Most of these people reported that they rarely served red meat, opting instead for chicken and fish. In contrast, the older participants were not as critical of red meat. In both groups, individual accounts of dietary habits were not entirely consistent with their avowed concerns over health and nutrition. But it was apparent that these individuals liked to think of themselves as health conscious consumers, an image that can be reinforced through effective promotional messages.

One meaningful distinction between the groups is that the younger members freely admitted that the prices of different products, especially produce items were a minor consideration to them, while the older group members indicated that they were extremely price sensitive. Other statements, however, qualified the intensity of this message, because the older consumers also expressed strong opinions about differences in the quality of various products. Their dual concerns over price and quality gave the impression that they generally liked to think of themselves as frugal shoppers who will not compromise quality for cost.

Consumers' Produce Buying Habits

The second phase of the discussion was initiated by displaying four specific produce items and waiting for a response. The first items were two apple varieties, a Red Delicious and a Yellow Delicious. Next, a package of fresh broccoli was presented, followed by an orange. Responses to these products provided a benchmark for evaluating basic concerns when buying produce and also helped identify individual differences or similarities in the motives underlying general produce buying habits.

During this phase, it became clear that these consumers used different criteria to evaluate each of the products. For example, the participants felt that the most important consideration in shopping for oranges is that they are seedless. Orange varieties were only understood in terms of this characteristic. In contrast, apple varieties were visually recognized and described in terms of a specific use or taste. Most were able to identify the two different varieties displayed to them, and

these were commonly referred to as, "good for eating, but not for baking." Broccoli selection was the most straightforward, based simply on the product's appearance. The discussants pointed out that unlike other produce items, there is very little variation in the quality of broccoli sold in stores where they usually shop. Consequently, they have not needed to adopt more elaborate methods of judging the product.

None of these products were strongly associated with a particular growing region. When pressed about where they thought each of the items might have been produced, Washington was the typical response to the apple, Florida and California were associated with the orange, and most shrugged when asked about the broccoli. Regional influence was significant only to the extent that participants preferred to buy local produce. They equated local with fresher, less handling and fewer chemicals. However, to have any bearing on the purchasing decision, local produce had to be of equal or better quality, even if it was cheaper.

Reactions to the Three Types of Potatoes

After this precursory stage, the three potatoes were individually displayed. The russet was presented first, followed by the red and then the round white. Finally, all three potatoes were shown simultaneously. At this point, the interviewers explained the concept of potato varieties and described the results of sensory laboratory tests. Participants were asked for their impressions about this information and were encouraged to give suggestions on how to market round white potatoes.

The descriptive statements detailing the response to the potatoes should be interpreted as a synthesis of the viewpoints and behaviors of these consumers. The study does not intend to assess the validity of their responses. Rather, it is based on identifying and analyzing their perspectives as a reflection of the reality of these consumers.

Russets

Presentation of the russet potato verified that Idaho's advertising and promotion strategies have effectively created and shaped consumer attitudes. Without exception, the participants identified the russet as an "Idaho potato." In contrast to the lack of regional identification associated with the four preliminary produce items, the term "russet" as a type of potato was not understood without reference to Idaho. Most panelists thought all russets were Idaho potatoes, as evidenced by several participants who asked if Idaho potatoes were grown in Maine.

It was also apparent that "Idaho" is synonymous with "baking." When queried about why they felt "Idaho" potatoes should be used for baking, several explained that the shape of the russet facilitates uniform baking, especially when microwaved, one of the most popular preparation methods used by these people. But most agreed that the basic reason for their usage habits was that they have been taught to use them this way. As one example of the strength of these convictions, several participants reported that they used russets in salads or served them mashed, but they also admitted, "I know you're not suppose to, but I sometimes boil them." No one could offer an explanation as to why "Idahos" shouldn't be boiled.

The russet is perceived to be a quality potato, strongly associated with microwaving, company dinners and restaurant meals. Many participants pointed out that their perceptions have been influenced by pictures of russets, typically presented as baked potatoes, which make them look "delicious" and "classy."

Red Skinned Potatoes

Red potatoes are not as common in Northeastern markets as they are in other regions. Responses to the red skinned potato indicate that it is both prestigious and mysterious to these consumers. The color was associated with a "clean skin" and several people remarked on the attractive appearance of these potatoes in the store bulk bins. Very few had ever bought red pota-

toes, but there was extensive interest and excitement over them.

Red potatoes are a curiosity. Most said they had always wanted to try them, but didn't know how to prepare them. One woman related the experience she had the first time she served them to her family; "My kids thought I had done this marvelous thing, creating these red potatoes, like colored Easter eggs." Others commented that it was hard to think of them as potatoes and one person asked if something was added to the soil to give them the red color.

The red potato has no regional identification whatsoever. Some referred to it as a "new potato," but no one was aware that a new potato was actually one that had not been stored. It was also identified as a boiling potato, especially good in salads. Among the few participants who used them, recipes and fine-dining restaurants had been the two major sources of introduction. They enthusiastically described them to the others as "creamy" and as having a texture that is "smooth, but firm." Only one woman who regularly purchased this type said she would microwave them. The other group members felt that red potatoes merited a special preparation.

One person summed up the general response by stating, "I look at that potato and it says gourmet." They are perceived as high priced, relative to other types, and only sold loose. Both of these perceptions are generally inaccurate, but indicate the distinction of red potatoes in the minds of these consumers. Among those who had tried them, there was clearly no equal substitute in terms of flavor and aesthetic attributes. All users declared that they are definitely worth a premium price.

Round White Potatoes

When first presented to the group, the round white was called "all-purpose," "generic," "regular," "the kind you get in bags," or simply, "a potato." In effect, it did not have a distinct identity. This is not a prestigious potato, nor is it viewed as a quality potato. But one of the most significant findings of this study is that the majori-

ty of respondents said, "those are the kind I always buy."

Just as the russet was specifically associated with baking, "all purpose" suggested how respondents used round whites. Presentation of this potato elicited more recipe exchanges among the discussants than any of the other produce items.

The most remarkable disclosure was that participants generally expressed a preference for eating round whites, even as a baked potato. Although this was partially based on the perception that round whites are cheaper than other potatoes, taste was the key attribute mentioned by all:

- "I prefer them (round whites). The other ones (russets) taste too dry."
- "It doesn't matter all that much. But I do like those (round white) better than Idahos."
- "Idahos are too expensive. The round ones are the kind I always buy. We like them."

However, their comments made it clear that round whites are unsuitable for special occasion meals unless they were disguised in preparations such as stuffed, mashed or scalloped potatoes. When asked why, their reasons outlined a subtle but well defined social guideline that supercedes their personal preferences; Guests are likely to be offended by being served the common, everyday potatoes. The comments of two respondents captured this assumption and seemed to reflect the consensus of the group:

- "It's the symbols of entertaining that are important. Even though I personally like the round ones, I want to make a good impression. I guess I'd fork out the extra buck and buy the Idahos."
- "I may know it's a good potato, but everyone else might be thinking, 'what is she serving us here? Cheap potatoes?' I don't want to take the chance."

When all three potato types were simultaneously displayed, the comments confirmed that round whites were the potato of choice to these participants. However, they still felt that their own tastes were aberrations. One basis for this belief is that when eating out, they noted that round whites are rarely served, especially at upscale white tablecloth restaurants. Consequently, they assume that most people prefer russets, the mainstay of restaurant side dish offerings:

- "It wouldn't bother me to get the round kind at a restaurant. But you tend to expect Idahos."
- "I like those kind (round whites), but I'm not sure if my husband would. Probably not."
- "You always get Idahos at a steakhouse. People like them I guess."

Red potatoes were identified as more unusual, but preferable for company meals or fine restaurants. One panelist suggested that the red potato should be called the "entertaining potato," because it signals sophistication and distinction.

Marketing Round White Potatoes

One research objective was to evaluate the strength of the participants' preferences and to assess the rigidity of their beliefs about potatoes. To test their beliefs and opinions, the interviewers gave a brief talk on potato varieties and explained that in blind laboratory sensory tests, certain varieties of round white potatoes were often preferred to the standard "Idaho" russet potato, in terms of both internal appearance and taste (True, Work, Bushway, Smith and Kezis, 1989).

These findings were readily accepted by the panel members who generally concurred with the results. Placed in this scientific research context, the information carried greater credibility than did the testimonies of fellow participants, which clearly indicated that most of them also preferred round whites.

They were genuinely interested in the discussion on potato varieties and quickly drew

analogies to apple buying and their conceptions about different apple varieties. They enthusiastically suggested naming the potato varieties. They agreed that featuring a product in this way aroused interest, made the product sound exciting and elevated round whites out of the generic arena.

- "It sounds new and exciting when you add a name to it."
- "It gets my curiosity."
- "I'd try something different like that."

They also pointed out that if the consumer liked the potatoes, he or she would be able to look for the same variety again.

"Tell us how to use the potatoes" was a common request. Participants explained that although they think of round whites as all purpose potatoes, this usage identification was not especially meaningful. They felt that, ideally, the product name should be tied to a specific preparation. The name "Golden Nugget Baker" was approved by the participants as a good example of their suggestions. Recipes were cited as particularly motivational and their comments made it clear that microwave recipes are very important.

Generally, any point of purchase material was judged useful. They admitted that while shopping they would not be inclined to stop and read pamphlets and brochures, but they would scan these at home. Without a doubt, visual advertisements displaying a round white as an elegant and sumptuous potato seem to be an extremely effective means of gaining instant attention:

- "If I can see a picture of it, it's quick and it grabs me."
- "Present it as a mouth-watering baked potato."

They suggested that posters and other advertising vehicles should show round whites being served at company dinners and in restaurants, thereby legitimizing their use in these settings. Recipes were

also described as having greater impact when accompanied by a picture of the results.

Another common recommendation was to have demonstrators offer samples or conduct taste tests at the stores. Many were also enthusiastic about featuring the potatoes through coupons. Since they have never seen a coupon for produce, they felt this would be a particularly effective means of capturing their interest.

These ideas drew the strongest support from the members of the two groups. But the prevailing attitude was that no matter what promotional strategy was used, round white potatoes need to be given a name, one that can be identified and recognized by the consumers.

Conclusions

The results of the focus group interviews point out that potato preferences are based upon more than simply the price of the product. The challenge is to define the needs people want to satisfy through their potato selections and to determine what factors are influencing those needs.

The discussion highlights indicate that the type of potato selected by the consumer has certain social ramifications. For example, "Idaho" potatoes are the first choice for serving to company. Red potatoes are even more preferable for special occasions, but many participants do not know how to prepare them. These consumers were willing to serve a round white in this meal situation only if they used a preparation in which no one would be able to identify them as "the cheap potatoes."

However, on a daily basis, round white potatoes, currently enjoy a high level of acceptance to the extent that they were commonly cited as the overall favorite. Participants indicated that they preferred the taste and texture of round whites for everyday use, and rarely bought either of the other two types of potatoes.

There was a pervasive belief that everyone else preferred russet potatoes. Yet, the effect of information given to the panelists suggested that this belief could be altered by credibly relaying

the message that many people prefer round whites over other types.

Implications

The implications of this research need to be understood within the limitations of the methodology. These results are based on a small number of selected individuals who volunteered to participate. Because of the limited and non-random characteristics of the sample, the preferences and attitudes of these consumers cannot be generalized to the population of U.S. potato consumers. However, the thoughts and beliefs expressed by the participants in the two interviews give impressions about Northeastern consumers and their behaviors that may pertain to consumers in other areas. The three types of potatoes are differentiated goods in the minds of these respondents and although consumers in other regions may have different opinions and preferences, they are also likely to have distinct impressions about these three types of potatoes. The results provide ideas about possible marketing strategies which, with further verification, may help enhance the positioning of different types of potatoes, especially round whites.

This research exposed marketing needs in two areas. First, consumers should be encouraged to continue buying round white potatoes for everyday use by distinguishing their cooking and culinary characteristics. Second, promotional efforts should concentrate on cultivating the social acceptance of serving round white potatoes.

Those who are marketing round white potatoes for tablestock need to differentiate their product. According to these consumers, this can be effectively accomplished by marketing selected varieties by a commercial name and promoting them for particular preparations. Potato recipes should be disbursed with the product and should also list the nutritional and caloric content of the preparation. Microwave recipes featuring round whites are essential.

Social acceptance of serving round white potatoes can be boosted through advertisements that show baked round whites served in special occasion settings, such as a Sunday dinner or a

restaurant meal. Since many consumers hinted that their own tastes were different from the crowd, when in fact, they appeared to be fairly typical within the group, consumers might also identify with an advertising theme such as "the closet round white potato eater." The foodservice market should continue to be a major focus of round white potato suppliers. By penetrating this market, round whites can gain extensive exposure in a desirable setting.

There currently exists a strong foundation in the potato industry for meeting these marketing challenges. Merchandising is central, but success in this area is directly related to the consumer's ability to differentiate one type of potato from another. Genuine differences in the physical and culinary attributes of the round white, russet and red potato are irrelevant to product differentiation unless the desirable characteristics are purposefully communicated to consumers. By monitoring the attitudes, needs and subsequent behaviors of consumers through periodic focus group interviews and other research techniques, potato suppliers can continue to market and promote their products in ways that effectively attract consumers.

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