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ON DOING EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH IN SUPERMARKETS

by

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This presentation concerns itself particularly with that class of in-store experimental research involving manipulation of one or more merchandising variables and the measurement of resultant changes in unit sales. Primarily such experiments are designed by academic and other researchers, rather than by supermarket personnel. Typically these researchers seek chain cooperation to test their hypotheses under on-going operating conditions. It is to both parties, researchers and supermarket management, that these comments are directed.

Successful execution of experimental research is contingent upon obtaining chain agreement to provide test stores, to allow necessary in-store and/or extra-store promotional manipulation, and, in general, to provide a positive climate for the research.

Test store selection generally involves four dimensions: unit size, geographic location, quality of store personnel and characteristics of store clientele. Large, accessible, homogeneous stores should be selected. Ethnic and extreme trade characteristics should be avoided unless these are specific test variables. The initial attitude of store personnel should be less important given proper organization of the experiment.

Test products should include store-door items wherever possible. Products

should be chosen on the basis of a taxonomy incorporating such factors as whether an item is the leading brand, second brand or follower in its merchandise category; whether it has a high or low advertising to sales ratio; whether it is in an early or later stage in its product life cycle; and similar considerations -- rather than on the basis of membership in conventional merchandise categories.

Because of the large number of variables involved in most research, two-stage testing may be in order; a "rough cut" to identify important variables, and "fine tuning" to refine findings. Partial factorial designs would seem to be particularly useful to this process.

Store experimental research involves two operational problems: performance - the manipulation of test variables (and, equally important, the non-manipulation of control variables) and measurement - the tallying of sales for test and control periods. Practical implications of organizing and conducting research are stressed.

The opportunity to conduct experimental research in stores using electronic point-of-purchase check-out equipment will greatly facilitate the conduct of such research and will likely lead to increased informal testing of merchandising options by supermarket management.