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## ALTERNATIVE ACTION OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY TO BETTER SERVE THE HOUSEHOLDS OF THE AGED AND AGING

by:

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### Introduction

There are many unanswered questions regarding the interaction of the elderly and the food marketplace. Do they encounter unique problems in food stores because of their age? How satisfied are they with products and services, package sizes and store facilities? What changes would they like to see take place? The research represented by this report addresses these and other questions and provides insight into ways in which the food industry can better meet the elderly's needs and prolong their independence in the marketplace.

### Research Objectives

The goal of this research project was to enhance the quality of life for

the elderly by improving their food shopping and consumption experiences.

More specifically, this project pursued the following objectives:

1. To identify the food shopping problems experienced by the elderly.
2. To identify key grocery product modifications and service adjustments that would minimize the food shopping problems of the elderly.
3. To determine the justifying circumstances for product modifications and service additions.
4. To develop specific priority actions and recommendations for the food industry.

## Methodology

### **Phase One - Focus Group Interviews**

Thirteen focus group sessions involving over 100 elderly persons were conducted in Denver, Colorado; Phoenix, Arizona; and Fort Collins, Colorado. The purpose of these interviews was to identify the food shopping problems faced by the elderly and gather background information for the development of a questionnaire for in-depth personal interviews.

### **Phase Two - In-depth Personal Interviews**

Personal interviews were conducted among 420 elderly in Fort Collins, Denver, and Phoenix. Demographic information along with data on their food purchasing and food consuming activities were collected. A series of bivariate analyses were performed on the data for the purpose of uncovering any associations between selected characteristics and shopping problems.

### **Phase Three - In-store Observations**

Upon completion of the personal interviews, 224 elderly shoppers were observed in 11 stores. These observations were intended to verify the data obtained through the personal interviews.

### **Phase Four - Laboratory Observations**

Twenty elderly Fort Collins residents were observed in simulated food preparation activities. These observations, in the Food Preparation Laboratory of the College of Home Economics, were used to depict problems and situations faced by the elderly once they had food products in their residences.

## Summary of Results

### **Focus Group Interviews**

The major findings emerging from the focus groups can be summarized as follows:

The elderly took great pride in being able to live independently. Females viewed grocery shopping as an enjoyable experience, but males living by themselves viewed shopping as a task. The elderly apparently have not made major changes in their grocery purchases in spite of the recent inflationary conditions. Most female participants enjoyed cooking but disliked preparing meals just for themselves. Many of the elderly were on some type of restrictive diet. Key factors in store selection were proximity of the store and breadth of offerings.

The problems identified in the group sessions were: a lack of an in-store storage place for their personal shopping cart; difficulty in separating store shopping carts; difficulty in placing items in or taking them out of deep carts; identification of product contents due to small print on labels; and the lack of accurate produce scales.

Special privileges desired by the focus group participants were: senior citizen discounts, a rest area in the store, more accessible restrooms, and a central information location on store specials.

### **In-store Observations**

As a result of the observations, it was found that the elderly shoppers tended to shop alone. The elderly shoppers with a mobility problem used the cart as a support while walking.

Shoppers frequently conversed with store employees and fellow shoppers in

the store, and often requested help from store personnel--usually asking the location of a particular grocery product.

A large number had difficulty in locating products. They frequently asked employees for directions and they often pursued a rather haphazard shopping pattern. Many of the elderly had difficulty in reaching products, especially on top shelves. Many of the elderly seemed to have trouble reading package information and store signs. A significant number of the elderly appeared to be more tired at the end of their shopping trip and were moving slower.

Cart handling difficulties included separating the carts and pushing the cart. The elderly had difficulty lifting products, especially detergents and pet foods. There were comments that sections of the store were uncomfortably cold, especially the frozen food section.

#### Laboratory Observations

The twenty laboratory observations revealed several problems the elderly person had in preparing food.

The persons observed rarely read package labels for information on product content, directions for opening the package, or for preparing the food. They apparently assumed that the preparation was similar for all comparable products, package sizes and shapes.

Those observed had difficulty in opening glass containers and relied either on some utensil or a special action (putting under hot water) rather than on their own hand strength. Stiff cardboard packages such as milk cartons were difficult to open and the elderly often used some utensil, frequently puncturing the pour spout. Bags were the preferred package for frozen foods. They were suspicious of products in boxes (especially cereals) because they felt

they received more box than product. Canned goods posed a problem since the storage of unused portions was difficult. They often purchased the smallest can size which usually was more expensive on a per ounce basis. They preferred wall or hand held can openers to electric can openers.

Price usually took a back seat to quality in the selection of food products. The elderly preferred well known brands (even though they cost more) and tended to ignore generic products because they felt they were of significantly lower quality.

#### The Personal Interviews

The personal interviews were used to probe food consumption and shopping activities, food shopping problems, and demographic characteristics.

#### Food Consumption Activity Profile

The food consumption activities of the "typical" elderly interviewee were as follows:

- Ate three meals a day.
- Ate the main meal at noon or in the evening.
- Ate about 86 percent of the meals in their own residence, and about 8 percent at some meal preparation site for the elderly.
- Enjoyed cooking.
- Felt their food preparation facilities adequately met their cooking needs.

#### Food Shopping Profile

- Had no regular shopping day. Preferred Wednesday through Friday.
- Had weekly grocery expenditures of about \$25.00.
- Shopped 1.3 days per week, usually before noon.
- Used a shopping list.

- Spent slightly less than one hour per food shopping trip.
- Shopped a chain store.
- Shopped the same store for over 10 years.
- Drove car to the store.

### Shopping Problems

Table 1 summarizes the important shopping problems reported by the elderly grocery shoppers. The percentage numbers under the shopping problem column represent a composite of all the times each problem area was mentioned throughout the personal interview questionnaire and should be construed as a problem intensity indicator only and not representative of the absolute number of responses to the questions asked during the interview.

### Specific Problems and Recommendations

Table 2 presents some of the most important problems expressed by the elderly shoppers and the immediate recommendations to the food industry.

### General Conclusions

If the food industry effectively responds to the problems of the elderly, they will be improving shopping conditions for most customers since many of the "elderly" problems apply to shoppers of all ages.

Some identified problems (such as store temperature) might appear to be petty but to those people who identified them, they are conditions that detract from their food shopping experiences. Many firms are now promoting the concept "We care about you." However, unless they respond to customer complaints, such promotional themes and the dollars spent on them are wasted.

The research indicated that the elderly did not want to be considered a

disadvantaged market segment. Thus, products and services must be integrated into the regular merchandise mix and should not be conspicuously offered only to the elderly.

The elderly shopper exhibited a significant amount of loyalty. They patronized the same stores for many years and often reported a reluctance to switch brands or try new products. Perceptions of price and convenience appear to be the most effective motivators for change. However, even these considerations frequently cannot override long established loyalties.

It is hypothesized that these combined loyalties explained a great deal of the behavior of the elderly grocery shopper. The shoppers' ability to recognize and report problems and their willingness to accept changes may be overshadowed by their existing loyalties and habits. The effect of these combined loyalties and the reluctance to accept change should be carefully assessed before specific product modifications or service adjustments are instituted.

Most grocery stores recognize that the elderly segment is not the most profitable customer segment to serve. They buy less groceries per capita. They buy fewer of the stores' higher margin, "frill" items. They probably require a disproportionate amount of store employees' time by asking product locations, requesting smaller cuts of meat or slowing down the checkout line. But these considerations should not lessen the food industry's desire to satisfy the needs of elderly shoppers. The food industry should take the attitude that they, like all businesses, have a strong obligation to this group of people whose work and purchases over the years were primarily responsible for our present advanced state of economic development.

TABLE 1

The various shopping problems reported during the focus group sessions, the personal interviews and observations in the grocery stores; a recap of the total project findings, as reported by the elderly grocery shoppers, Spring 1980.

Food Shopping Problem Area	Method of Data Collection			
	Focus Group Sessions	Personal Interviews		
		Shopping Problems	Store Selection Reasons	In-store Observations
		Percent	Percent	
Economic/Income/Prices	*	18	15	
Variety (meals and products)	*	6	10	
Shelving	*	1		*
Restrooms/rest areas	*	3		*
Item location/relocation	*	2	4	*
Package size (waste)	*	3		
Label print size (small)	*	1		*
Dietary; salt and sugar	*	5		
Personal cart storage	*			
Store cart separation	*			*
Scales, location and accuracy	*			*
Legible price marks	*			
Transportation	*	3	1	
Package opening				
Physical/Medical (taste)		5		
Nutrition education		2		
Adverse Cooking Attitude		5		
In-home storage facilities		1		
General health		6		
Inconvenience of location		5	23	
Services in general		4	3	
Store environment (Cleanliness, Layout)		1	2	
Parking		1	1	
Carrying groceries		2		*
Cluttered aisles		1		*
Store/aisle temperature				*
Crowded conditions		1		
Miscellaneous		1	2	

TABLE 2

## Identified problems and recommendations to the food industry.

Shopping Problem	Recommendations
Economic: Limited incomes Increased prices	a) Specials on smaller sized packages. b) Run more early and mid-week specials.
Brand and quality consistency	a) Make sure purchases of product are based on specs which can be verified and enforced. b) Change brand name with changes in quality.
Store location	a) Advertise and promote convenience. b) Provide transportation service.
Meal and product variety	a) Create side-panel or package one-person menus. b) Create position of shoppers' aide for meal planning assistance.
Item location or relocation and display changes	a) Display signs with new location of items moved. b) Display signs with location of close substitutes for products which have been discontinued. c) Store directory listing to take home.
Lack of rest area or restrooms	a) Provide benches for a "rest area." b) Provide restrooms, policed and supplied. c) Restroom easily accessible, on shopping floor level, easily accessible from shopping area, with location publicized for shoppers.
Shelving height	a) Place high turnover "elderly" purchased products within easy reaching distance. b) Print shelf labels (prices) in larger print for lower shelves. c) Ask elderly consumer advisory panel for recommendations. d) Determine if a special display will appeal particularly to the elderly shopper. e) Ensure shelves are stocked "out front" to reduce reaching.

TABLE 2 - (Continued)

Shopping Problem	Recommendations
General in-store service	<p>Implement awareness training for checkers and front end personnel to facilitate an attitude accomodation of the elderly by personnel, through such things as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Extra service or consideration.</li> <li>b) Lighter shopping bags.</li> <li>c) Item location assistance.</li> <li>d) Reading prices slowly and distinctly.</li> <li>e) Carrying groceries to transportation.</li> </ul>
Temperature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Monitor aisle temperatures for drafts especially in front of low temperature display cases.</li> </ul>
Cluttered aisles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Schedule stocking and restocking times during less crowded shopping times.</li> <li>b) Train stockers in more effective stocking and refuse removal.</li> <li>c) Remove special displays from aisles.</li> </ul>
Shopping Carts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Have employees alert to cart handling and separation problems.</li> <li>b) Consider having shallow basket carts for elderly.</li> <li>c) Maintain a "secure" area for holding personal carts of elderly customers.</li> </ul>

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