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ASPECTS OF THE CONSUMER'S SEARCH FOR FOOD INFORMATION

By

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Sources of consumer information and their relationship to purchasing decisions are analyzed.

Introduction and Purpose

The need for consumer information seems to grow greater and greater every year. Today's food consumers, unlike their grandparents, or even parents, seldom know where their food products come from, much less who produces them. The search for information takes on many shapes and forms. It may range from an intensive examination of advertised qualities to merely reading food labels. Whatever form it takes is important for the food distribution industry to understand this search for information.

The study reported here deals with the sources of consumer information and how they influence food purchasing decisions. Consideration was given on certain factors to possible differences between urban and rural consumers. Focal points of the study were possible implica-

tions and suggested directions for the food industry.

Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of 171 households in Georgia. The subjects were drawn from two urban and two rural counties in the metropolitan Atlanta media catchment area. Chi square was used to test for statistical significance on those variables where an urban/rural delineation was sought.

Results

Newspapers, both Atlanta and local, were the main source of consumer information (see Table 1). Slightly less than half of the consumers (both urban and rural) made fairly high use of the Agriculture Extension Service. This would seem to suggest a course not normally associated with consumer information, at least not for urban consumers. Television and radio were only used about one-third of the time. This may indicate some dissatisfaction or mistrust with consumer information from these sources.

Table 1. Sources and utilization of consumer information.

Source	Utilization of Information
	(percent)
Radio	31.0
Newspaper (Atlanta)	56.1
Newspaper (local)	59.6
Television	36.3
Extension Service	43.9
Friends and relatives	43.9
Consumer type magazines	39.2

The influence of advertisements/commercials on food purchasing decisions was also addressed (see Table 2). There were no appreciable differences between urban and rural

consumers on this factor. The results suggest that other factors in addition to advertising/commercials probably influence consumers in food buying.

Table 2. Influence of advertisements/commercials on food purchasing decisions.

Amount of Influence	Consumer Response
	(percent)
Very much	7.8
Somewhat	52.5
Very little	39.7

Price was the factor most checked before buying food with consumers in the sample (see Table 3). Unit pricing presented an urban/rural differential ($p < 0.04$) with urban consumers checking this factor before

buying food at a higher rate than rural consumers. This finding is perhaps explained by a higher frequency (see Table 4). Perhaps more significant was the finding that 17.3% of the rural group didn't know what

unit pricing was versus 5.7% of the urban group. This observation is supported by the finding that more than three-fourths of the consumers did utilize unit pricing where it was available (see Table 5). This would

seem to point to a potential area for market expansion in that this would lead to more knowledgeable food consumers. Unit pricing would also address the problem presented consumers by different container sizes [3].

Table 3. Items of product information checked before making food purchase decisions.

Item	<u>Consumer Responses</u>	
	Urban Consumers	Rural Consumers
	(percent)	
Price	91.4	91.0
Unit Pricing *	59.1	42.3
Nutritional Information	59.1	47.4
Grade **	38.7	52.6
Pull Date, Use Date, Package Date	79.6	71.8
Coupons	50.5	47.4

*Statistically significant at the .04 level.

**Statistically significant at the .09 level.

Table 4. Unit pricing availability in consumer's shopping location.

Pricing Availability	<u>Consumer Responses</u>	
	Urban Consumers	Rural Consumers
	(percent)	
Yes	71.3	56.0
No	11.5	17.3
Haven't noticed	11.5	9.3
Unfamiliar with unit pricing	5.7	17.3

Table 5. Utilization of unit pricing if available.

Utilization	Consumer Responses	
	Urban Consumers	Rural Consumers
	(percent)	
Yes	75.3	79.2
No	24.7	20.8

Food labeling regulators have in recent years drawn criticism in that they don't reflect current technologies and innovations in the food industry [4]. Slightly over one-half (53.8%) of the respondents in this study reported that they checked the nutritional information on food before purchasing. While less than one-half (45.0%) reported checking grades before buying food, rural consumers were more likely ($p < .09$) to check grades than urban consumers. Although it is hard to determine if this moderate usage of nutritional information and grades is a trend that is representative of a feeling of only average expectations regarding consumer information, it would appear to be incumbent upon the food industry to provide nutritional information that reflects current demand for such information.

Approximately three-fourths (76.0%) of the participants in this study reported checking the pull date/use date/package date before purchasing. Almost all (95.8%) of the sample reported looking for these dates and using this information. However, over half (57.6%) reported that, in their opinion, the difference between pull date/use date/package date were not clear. Consumer education on these dates would seem to be a way of both helping the consumer as well as providing good will for the grocer and

reducing out-of-dates left on the shelves.

Approximately half of all the consumers in the study reported that they used coupons. Determination will have to be made by the food industry as to whether or not this rate of usage justifies the use of coupons. There was no real difference between urban and rural consumers on the influence of coupons on food purchasing decisions.

Age emerged as a significant factor in the study when consumers were asked whether the differences between use date, pull date and package date were clear to them. Although no more than half of the members of each age group felt the differences were clear, the older two groups felt the differences were clearer ($p < .04$) than the youngest group (see Table 6). This would strongly suggest the need for an educational program aimed at younger consumers.

The rating of the usefulness of the ingredients list found on packaged foods was somewhat mixed. Almost one-half of the sample found this list very useful with urban consumers having a slight edge (see Table 7). The main difference between urban and rural consumers on this factor was that twice as many rural (17.9%) as urban did not find the ingredients list useful enough.

Table 6. Opinions of clarity on differences between use date, pull date, and package date.

Opinion	Consumer Age Group		
	Under 40	40 - 60	Over 60
	(percent)	(percent)	(percent)
Yes	28.0	50.0	46.9
No	72.0	50.0	53.1

Table 7. Usefulness of list of ingredients found on packaged foods.

Usefulness	Consumer Responses	
	Urban Consumers	Rural Consumers
	(percent)	
Very useful	47.3	50.0
Somewhat useful	44.0	32.1
Not useful enough	8.8	17.9

Almost two-thirds of all consumers checked specifically for certain factors when looking at nutritional information (see Table 8). It would seem that the number of calories per serving, as well as information about preservatives, salt and sodium is important to a majority of food consumers. Currently, about 60% of all processed food has nutritional labeling [5]. Given the type of information sought by the type of consumers in this survey, it would appear that there is potential for growth in the area of providing nutritional information for food consumers as these specialized needs are highly important to a small segment of the population [2]. Again, an increased

emphasis on this aspect of food marketing as well as an update in keeping with changing usage ingredient information would seem to be in the best interest of the food industry. Although much of this nutritional information is probably not used by many consumers, additional information (and in a simplified format) would definitely lead to a higher level of consumer satisfaction [1].

Summary and Implications

The majority of consumers (75%) in this study, reported that inflation has caused them to seek more consumer information on food products. It would therefore seem that there is an

Table 8. Items under nutritional information checked before making food purchase decisions.

Item	Consumer Responses (Affirmative)
	(percent)
Number of calories per serving	62.4
Preservatives, salt, sodium	66.1

expressed need to provide more consumer food information. This study revealed some confusion with regard to unit pricing, differences in package dating, and varying impressions as regards to the list of ingredients found on packaged foods. It is important that the food industry respond to these issues on their own initiative. This voluntary compliance would seem most advisable as this study also revealed the desire on the part of some consumers for stricter federal food laws concerning food. Only 19.5% opposed such stricter laws compared to 48.2% in favor, and 32.3% with no opinion on the subject. It would seem that there exists a great opportunity for the food industry to further develop the market by providing, on its own, additional food information and education.

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