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# Foodstores' Information Programs

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If U.S. dietary recommendations are to modify food-buying patterns, nutrition information must be readily available in an easily understood format at the point of purchase. However, food shoppers are often victims of "information overload" for food-purchasing decisions, becoming confused and frustrated by the massive amount of technical information that can accompany a product.

As a result, supermarkets are increasingly expected to help their customers make informed choices in terms of value and nutrition. Almost two out of three shoppers believe it is the supermarket's responsibility to provide information on how to save money and feed the family more nutritiously.<sup>1</sup> In response, many food chains as well as independent retailers, have been sponsoring nutrition information programs.

## Types of Programs

Retailer-sponsored programs can be either general nutrition information programs or specialty diet programs. General information programs usually offer information with pamphlets containing recipes and food preparation tips, in-store signs and posters, newsletters, and newspaper and/or radio ads. These programs stress the basic food groups and provide suggestions for long-term diet considerations. Some retailers provide home economists and consumer affairs specialists in the store to answer questions and provide assistance.

Specialty diet programs have emerged more recently for consumers who either have a special health problem that must be regulated through diet or are interested in avoiding specific ingredients

as a preventive measure. These specialty programs attempt to meet the needs of an increasing number of households in which at least one member requires a special diet. Of 1,400 households recently surveyed, about half of the household members had changed their diets because of health concerns, and in three out of five households there was at least one person on a special diet.

## Study Participants

A list of retailers with existing nutrition information programs was developed from current literature. Each of the 25 largest retail food chains was telephoned to determine their involvement with nutrition information programs, the type of programs, and how the program was developed. In addition, 11 smaller food retailers known to have existing nutrition information programs were contacted. Several leading retailers offered nutrition films, or had nutrition study groups which spoke at schools or clubs, but these activities were not included in the study because they were not ongoing programs at point of purchase.

Of the largest chains, eight had an ongoing point-of-purchase nutrition information program. Sixteen retailers had no specific current program, although five said they were developing such programs. One chain did not disclose any information. Of the smaller retailers contacted, five sponsored specialty diet programs while six have implemented general nutrition information programs.

Depending on the size and scope of the project, the internal planning and coordination by management can take anywhere from a few months to several years. There appears to be no set format for creating nutrition programs, but there are several ways to determine

which type of program would be most beneficial for the company's needs.

Some retailers have used feedback from a consumer board or panel they sponsor in developing nutrition information programs.

## Minnesota

Byerly's, an independent retailer located in Minnesota, sponsors a nutrition information program called "Special Foods for Special People," to assist shoppers with special diet needs.

Byerly's provides a home economist to help consumers with their special diet concerns. For those on sodium-restricted, fat-modified, and calorie-controlled diets, food guides are used along with color coordinated shelf tags (e.g., a pink guide for calorie-controlled diets would have a corresponding pink shelf tag under diet salad dressing). Recipes and special shopping lists are provided for persons on diets under a doctor's supervision, or those persons interested in health maintenance. "Special Foods for Special People" is designed to provide versatile recipes for the dieter as well as the whole family.

## Washington, D.C.

Giant Foods, a Washington, D.C. based chain, developed a pilot nutrition education program in conjunction with the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute entitled "Food for Health." The program, which was operated for a 1-year test period, provided consumers with accurate nutrition information at point of purchase relating to heart health. At the end of the test period, the potential impact of the program would be determined through purchasing changes documented by the electronic scanner system. To isolate those changes in food purchasing patterns due to in-store nutrition information, 17 Balti-

<sup>1</sup> *Supermarket Trends-1979 Update*, prepared by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White for the Food Marketing Institute.



more stores not participating in the program were used as a control group.

Giant tried to convey heart-health related messages to its customers with the use of shelf signs. For example, a shelf sign listed the percentage of fat in products such as cheese or milk, and then simply stated "You Decide." Other in-store signs, displays, posters, and newspaper and radio ads provided dietary messages and suggestions. In addition, a bi-weekly pamphlet, "Eaters' Almanac" covered topics concerning diet and its relationship to cardiovascular diseases; sodium as contributing to high blood pressure; and general nutrition information on food selection and preparation and recipes that were economical, healthful, and seasonal.

#### Boston

Stop and Shop, a Boston chain, developed a general nutrition information program called "Great Shape," using advertising and in-store signs.

The company sponsored their Consumer Dialogue in 1977, the same year a symposium called "Nutrition and the

Health of America," was held and the Senate Dietary Goals were published. The idea for a nutrition program developed from these events. The company then created a special task force which, along with their advisory panel, studied current trends in buying behavior, nutrition awareness, and the changing role of food. The company's Industry Advisory Board and Nutrition Advisory Committee comprised of educators, health experts, and nutritionists, offered guidance and suggestions to direct consumers toward better nutrition habits.

Easy to understand signs are displayed over each of the basic four-food groups and remind consumers of nutrition concepts. Each week different recipes that utilize special sale items are featured in their food ads. In addition to recipes, there are economical food preparation and storage ideas, along with suggestions on snacks, ethnic foods, and current nutrition topics.

#### Most Are Satisfied

Quantitative results of the Giant program will be available in 1980. Some retailers have had negative reactions to

their nutrition information programs. Of the leading 25 retailers contacted, 3 said they had either discontinued or were not planning to develop programs due to cost and lack of consumer response. Most retailers contacted said they were satisfied with results. Success can also be inferred from the increasing number of retailers offering such programs. ■

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