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A NOTE ON SURVEY RESEARCH

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How do consumers evaluate the performance of the food delivery system? What characteristics do they consider when they rate their satisfaction with food products and services? These questions require measures and analyses of consumer attitudes, preferences, and behavior. Analyzing consumer responses to such questions will, through the policy process, encourage a more satisfactory delivery of foods and services.

Surveys of consumer attitudes, opinions, and practices, such as those conducted by the USDA, are designed to help us learn more about consumer behavior. And the results help identify both successes and imperfections in the food delivery system.

But conducting and analyzing the results of such surveys is a difficult process since consumers are not always sure of their own reactions to certain changes. And they do not always communicate or want to communicate those reactions. In addition, researchers do not always ask the type of questions or use the type of approach that encourages consumers to state their concerns clearly.

After determining the objectives and hypotheses of the

survey, specific questions are designed to elicit meaningful responses.

How questions are stated is important in interpreting results. For example, when consumers are asked how satisfied they are with beef, they may respond with any of five preselected answers—"always satisfied," "almost always satisfied," "sometimes satisfied," "rarely satisfied," or "never satisfied." However, when consumers are asked to what extent they agree with the statement, "I am always satisfied with beef," their response may be interpreted quite differently. Agreeing slightly with the latter statement is, of course, different than being "almost always satisfied" with beef.

Once the questionnaire is drafted, it is tested so problems like those mentioned are noticed and corrected. In addition, "pretesting" gives a preliminary insight into what the results might indicate. Again, if the test results are confusing or indicate ambiguity, questions can be rewritten.

A sample of consumers is then selected according to prearranged criteria (region, marital status, income, age, or whatever). Interviews are often conducted by personal visits, though telephone surveys can be used. Difficulties often occur

at this stage. Respondents may refuse to be interviewed or they may not be at home. Interviewers, too, differ in their ability to communicate with respondents.

Responses to the questions are studied and interpreted. Averages can be computed to provide benchmark measures, but examining only averages and deviations from the average may mask important information. An analysis of the distribution of responses may identify characteristics of consumers or products. These characteristics may relate to problem areas or represent links between attitudes and actual behavior.

For example, suppose consumers were asked to rate their satisfaction with two products. The average of responses to each product could be the same, but the distributions could be quite different. The average response for both products was 2.3 on a 5-point scale. For product A, responses clustered at 1, "always satisfied," and 2, "almost always satisfied," with a few at 5, "never satisfied." Responses for product B concentrated at 2 and 3, "almost always satisfied" and "sometimes satisfied."

HYPOTHETICAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES FOR PRODUCT A

| Degree of satisfaction | | Product A number of responses | Weighted score |
|------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Always | 1 . . | 20 | 20 |
| Almost always | 2 . . | 14 | 28 |
| Sometimes | 3 . . | 5 | 15 |
| Rarely | 4 . . | 3 | 12 |
| Never | 5 . . | 8 | 40 |
| Total | | 50 | 115 |
| Average | | | 2.3 |

HYPOTHETICAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES FOR PRODUCT B

| Degree of satisfaction | | Product B number of responses | Weighted score |
|------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Always | 1 . . | 6 | 6 |
| Almost always | 2 . . | 26 | 52 |
| Sometimes | 3 . . | 16 | 48 |
| Rarely | 4 . . | 1 | 4 |
| Never | 5 . . | 1 | 5 |
| Total | | 50 | 115 |
| Average | | | 2.3 |

Another research approach compares responses to two or more questions. Do consumers rate product A in a similar way that they rate product B? Is there an association between socioeconomic groups and satisfaction with a product? For example, the distribution of responses indicates that there is little association between consumer satisfaction with product A and product B. Consumers that were always satisfied with product A were almost always satisfied with product B while consumers that were almost always satisfied with product A were sometimes satisfied with product B.

Satisfaction with a food product may bring to mind satisfaction with more than one attribute of that product. In turn, the satisfaction with the attributes or product characteristics may be related. Satisfaction with the taste of beef may be related to satisfaction with beef in general, but taste is also associated with fat content, tenderness, and freshness. Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine what characteristics are most important in evaluation of product performance.

Consumer characteristics also affect responses. Region, income, family size, race, and other factors enter into the evaluation process. People have different tastes, preferences, prior experiences, and performance standards.

And of course, price and other market factors also may influence performance standards. Advertising builds expectations. Doctors, health professionals, and other sources of information on health and diet affect consumer concerns and, perhaps, behavior. Time and environmental

pressures influence what is purchased and how those purchases are perceived.

A careful analysis of behavior would include some exploration of the effect of many of these characteristics on the attitude that is being measured.

No single approach, question, statistical technique, measurement scale, or number captures consumer attitudes or satisfaction. The marginal contribution of any one characteristic of a product or a population is difficult to distinguish from the contribution of other characteristics. These difficulties in measurement and interpretation demand clearly stated objectives and the use of a combination of appropriate measurement procedures. Each procedure, approach, and statistical technique provides a unique insight into consumer attitudes, behavior, and evaluation of market performance that might be useful in identifying problems, constraints, or elements of success in the food system.

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES FOR PRODUCT A COMPARED WITH RESPONSES FOR PRODUCT B

| | | Product A | | | | | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------------------|---------------|-----------|--------|-------|-------|
| | | Degree of Satisfaction | | | | | |
| Product B degree of satisfaction | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| | | Always | Almost Always | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | |
| Always | 1 . . | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Almost always | 2 . . | 10 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 26 |
| Sometimes | 3 . . | 4 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 16 |
| Rarely | 4 . . | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Never | 5 . . | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | | 20 | 14 | 5 | 3 | 8 | 50 |