

*ADC Info #26**November 1998*

Consumer Preferences and Low-fat and No-fat Food

Kent Wolfe

Assistant Extension Specialist
Agricultural Development Center

Introduction

Investigation into the low and non-fat food market reveals significant changes have occurred in consumer food preferences over time. Currently, consumers are less likely to choose a food product based on its health claims and they are more likely to choose a fresh food product with a good taste. At the same time, consumers are becoming more adventuresome and trying flavorful, fresh, ethnic and regional foods. These changes provide marketing opportunities.

Consumer Perceptions

The results of a 1996 HealthFocus Trend study found that 57% of the respondents would eat more "healthy foods" if they tasted better. Taste is a major obstacle to the healthy food industry given that only 28% of respondents think that healthy foods taste good. The perception is that products labeled as "low fat" or "no fat" do not taste good. This data suggest that taste considerations outweigh the health benefits of eating low or no fat products and that consumers are **not** willing to compromise taste for health benefits. In the past, the Tennessee Ostrich Company has positioned its product as a "healthy red meat substitute." Given the current perception of health products, this image may not be the most beneficial in attracting new consumers.

Food Content Concerns

The taste "perception" of low and no fat foods is carried over into consumers selection of foods and reported eating habits as discussed in "*The Report on Eating Patterns of Baby Boomers.*" The Tennessee Ostrich Company has a low fat, low cholesterol heart friendly product. Given the increasing age of the baby boomer population¹ (and their focus on health, it would seem natural to try and promote ostrich meat as a healthy alternative to beef. However, the results of a 1994 survey focused on baby boomer eating patterns² found baby boomers are less concerned about fat, cholesterol, salt, additives, preservatives, sugar, caffeine and other harmful ingredients than the general U.S. population. Baby boomers are also less likely to read labels, are less likely to worry about foods containing "harmful ingredients," and less likely to diet than the general U.S.

¹American citizens born in the post-World War II baby boom, usually defined as being born between 1946 and 1964 and which represent 30% of the population and the largest consumer group in the U.S. today.

²The NPD Group's National Eating Trends Service's *The Report on Eating Patterns of Baby Boomers*

population. The results of a 1997 HealthFocus Trend survey indicate that product “freshness” has become more important than less fat, convenience, price or other product considerations.

These findings have significant implications for low and no-fat food products. As health related food concerns wain among baby boomers and product freshness and taste become more important to consumers, companies producing reduced fat products may need to reposition their products in the market place to become more aligned with changes in consumer preferences. This does not mean that the health benefits associated with eating these reduced fat products should **not** be included in their promotion, on the contrary, it is still very important. However, the idea or concepts of **freshness and taste** needs to be incorporated into any new promotional campaign to meet the new trend in consumer preferences. Companies producing reduced fat products should try and position their products as being fresh, tasty and healthy.

Suggestion for Addressing Consumer Perceptions and Food Content Issues

There are many ways to influence consumer perceptions and because consumers appear to be concerned with taste and freshness, all promotional material should emphasize the taste and freshness of the product. For example, including consumer testimonials in advertising and promotional material may be one way to convey the product’s great taste. Companies are placing nonperishable food products in the refrigerator section of grocery stores to project the image of “freshness” to consumers. Consumers perceive that refrigerated products are perishable and have a limited shelf life. Therefore, refrigerated products must be fresh. This “marketing” strategy successfully portrays the image of “freshness” and plays to consumer preferences for fresh products.



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