

Lesson 1: Factors that Affect Consumer Choice

What do food producers and grocers have in common? They work together to provide the consumer a wholesome product that is a good value. Because the consumer has the right to accept or reject any food item, producers and grocers must work together to influence consumer choice. This lesson focuses on the factors that affect consumer choice.

Factors Affecting Consumer Choice

There are several factors that play a part in helping the consumer decide what food selections to make. The location in which you live may determine your food supply. Small rural grocers are less likely to carry exotic food items, whereas a large supermarket may carry almost everything. The cost of food obviously is a factor. The time of day in which the consumer is shopping helps make some food choice decisions. A ready-to-eat meal is a priority when the shopper is hungry. The shopper who is planning ahead may select the raw ingredients to make the meal.

The consumer's knowledge and skill help determine what is purchased. A more knowledgeable consumer purchases more balanced and nutritious foods. Energy is the fifth consideration. Not only is the energy to prepare the food a concern but also the amount of energy the shopper has while grocery shopping.

Other people play a big part in the quantity of food purchased. A person's emotions will influence what is purchased. When a certain athlete's picture is on a box, admirers are more likely to purchase it. The first items that are encountered in a grocery store also appeal to the emotions. The tools or equipment the consumer has at home also determine what foods will be purchased. Without a microwave oven, why buy microwavable popcorn?

A person's culture also plays a role in his/her diet. Many consumers buy food that fits their culture. Religion determines some people's diets. No red meat on Fridays during lent, no meat at all, and no pork are all dietary restrictions based on different religious views. Advertising influences consumers to purchase foods. The products found in newspaper advertisements are commonly high volume items. A person's lifestyle greatly affects their selection. High energy diets are necessary for active people. Less active people require fewer calories. Finally, a person's values influence selection. The growing segment of the population who avoid alcohol and the shopper who compares different package sizes of the same products are all basing their decisions on their value systems.

Sensory Attributes

Why is parsley used to decorate a steak meal? Because people are drawn to attractive food. The color of a food and/or its packaging helps sell that product. Eyes are also drawn to what they perceive to be ideal sizes and shapes of food, or whose picture is on the package. Processors take advantage of the sense of eyesight.

The second sensory attribute that is used to make sales is the smell or odor of a product. Can you imagine walking past a bakery that is emitting the delicious aroma of fresh baked bread? How would the popular hickory smoke BBQ influence a customer's buying habits?

The third sensory attribute of food is the sense of taste. Different tastes satisfy different taste buds. Foods are made sweet, sour, salty, or bitter to satisfy the specific taste desired.

The texture or feel of a product may also influence purchase decisions. Soft bread, crisp celery, and firm apples are considered desirable texture characteristics by most consumers.

Convenience Affects Selection

Most people do not enjoy washing dishes. This seems to be one of the reasons why people buy convenience foods. Time, energy, clean-up, variety, and equipment all influence consumers to purchase convenience foods. Today, many people are rushed for time. Convenience foods are easy to prepare. It takes energy to plan a meal, shop for it, and prepare it. Convenience foods save most of the energy required to make a meal from scratch. There is little clean-up with convenience food. Variety may induce a consumer to choose convenience. Food leftovers, especially for single-person households, may be the main course too often. Fast food businesses and other restaurants can provide a person with variety. Also, it may take special equipment to prepare foods such as deep-fry or grilled foods. Many convenience-food businesses already have these tools. These five reasons help explain why convenience food is steadily growing.

Not every shopper is a convenience food fan, however. Consumers who believe that slower food preparation or only using fresh or home-grown produce is more nutritious, may be negatively influenced by convenience food advertisements. Another reason why fast foods are not purchased may be because of their high cost relative to a home-cooked meal. If the home-cooked meal is entirely consumed, without spoilage, it is normally cheaper to prepare the meal in the home. Also convenience foods may have more packaging which results in increased disposal costs.

Price's Influence

Price has always been a deciding factor for consumer food selection. Many grocers stock two or more brands of each food type to offer shoppers a variety of brands at a variety of prices. Smart shoppers are careful to examine not only the cost of a food product, but also its nutritional content. Impulse buyers are less likely to be influenced by price.

Packaging's Influence

Food processors have studied consumers' buying habits and realize that packaging definitely affects consumer choice. Labeling claims, "environmentally-friendly," size, and the cost of packaging are four factors that need to be examined.

Current trends reveal that foods low in fat or calories are usually packaged with a label proclaiming in bold letters "fat free" or "just 1 calorie." The Nutrition Facts Panel list is another catchy design, not to mention a star athlete's picture or "free offer inside" approaches. Environmentally-friendly packaging frequently influences consumers. If recyclable paper or biodegradable plastics are used, stewardship-minded consumers will respond positively.

Thirdly, the size of the package can exert an influence. Those family-size packages are great for families, while single-person households shop for smaller packages. Lastly, the cost of packaging plays a part. Current statistics indicate that up to one-third of a food product's cost comes from its packaging. For example, fruits and vegetables sold in bulk with the shopper doing the packaging are cost-savers. On the other hand, resealable lunch meat packages cost more but help maintain freshness. Different packages are beneficial in different situations.

Shelf Life

In general, the longer the shelf life of a product, the more flexibility the grocer and consumer has. Dairy products that spoil within a week are a high risk item to carry. In general, consumers desire fresh foods. Shelf life is extended with frozen, canned, cured, and dried foods.

Safety Concerns

To describe the average consumer's approach to food safety would be a difficult task, for there is a wide spectrum of concern. Most shoppers, when asked, would voice concern over the safety of the food supply. However, when observing consumer's habits, a slightly different picture is painted. More and more people rely on other people to prepare their meals with little knowledge of the cleanliness of the restaurant's kitchen. Safety-conscious shoppers are a growing rank. They can be found carefully

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examining produce for blemishes, canned goods for dents, and packaged foods for broken seals.

Nutritional Concerns

"You are what you eat" is a popular saying. Nutritious, wholesome food is the goal of most consumers and producers. Today's smart consumers are probably more nutrition-minded than ever before. Fat content, calories, additives, minerals, vitamins, fiber, and cholesterol are factors related to food quality. Skilled consumers select foods that combine the necessary elements in the right balance to provide for healthy living.

Summary

Choosing wholesome food that will provide a balanced diet is an important task. Consumers are influenced by a variety of factors in their attempt to reach this goal. Factors such as location, time, energy, cost, skill level, advertising, values, and emotions are just a few of the influences on consumer choice. The sense of sight, smell, and touch play a role in selection also. Convenience foods offer an alternative that, depending on your perspective, is a positive or negative influence. Most consumers are price conscious as well as skilled in package selection. Shelf life is directly proportional to value. Safety concerns are slowly growing and are usually voiced when questioned. Likewise, nutritional concerns are in the forefront and heavily influence the labeling of food items.

Credits

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