

Cold Chain-Management

Speech Pia Gassmann, December 8, 2003, 3.45pm

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank you for inviting me to this event, it was a great pleasure for me to come. I find it truly remarkable that the consumer-part has been considered in the programme. It is important to trace the whole route of a product.

Representing the association, probably the first in Germany to do consumer-oriented work, I would like to say something about chilled and frozen products and their way from the supermarket to our dining table. But first, please allow me to say a few words about my association.

The Deutsche Hausfrauen-Bund (*Association of German Housewives*) was founded in 1915 and counts today around 60.000 members in Germany. Already in 1925, the association has been doing consumer-oriented work on a public scale.

With the implementation of a test-institute, it became the precursor for Stiftung Warentest (*the foundation that currently in Germany tests all kind of consumer goods, for consumer information*). Other main focuses of our work are professional formation on home economics, environmental work and women's and family politics.

During this event, it is shown in an impressive way, with what great effort it is guaranteed that chilled and frozen food is put at the consumer's disposal in perfect conditions. However, all efforts stop as the consumer comes into possession of the goods.

But what happens then?

Frozen food is becoming more and more popular. In this sector, consumptions are still increasing, and the Institute for Frozen Food reports success every year.

Even discount retailers, such as ALDI, were not able to pass by this growing business line. They were forced to install costly freezers and to provide logistics for frozen food.

With chilled food, there has been happening a lot lately, too. New packing techniques enhance the food's durability. Even extremely delicate products, such as for example shrimps from the North Sea, that usually go off in one day, are now available for weeks, in perfect conditions. Their quality is conserved by a special packing and continuous chilling.

Such kind of food does fit well with the consumer's preferences. No need to purchase food on a daily basis anymore, the preparation is time-saving, and, if you look at it from an economic point of view, making use of such food may also save money.

So, fruit and vegetables are available out of harvesting periods, in perfect nutritional-physiological conditions. Complicated dishes come in small portions, they are prepared with no effort and ready to eat after a short time.

But worries about the perfect quality of a product end at the latest at the cash desk of the supermarket. Here, frozen and chilled products lay in the trolley, together with all the other items. Only very few consumers think of quality preservation and use an isolation bag or something similar, just not to completely ignore the for the product necessary storage temperature of minus 18 °C.

Most of the supermarkets are not located in the consumers' immediate neighbourhood. Often, people have to use their cars. And once they go shopping, of course they want to buy everything they need. That's why it often takes a long time until the food reaches home. Another great inconvenience is that the vehicles used for transport may get hot under the sun, or be heated until they reach a for the passengers pleasant temperature. At home, the frozen food that has already begun to defrost, is hastily tossed into to freezer. Due to the temperature raise, there are disadvantageous consequences for the product, which can be more or less serious. But in any case, its durability is reduced.

Another menace for quality is the fact that in most freezers prevails chaos. Food is not sorted according to its durability, which may lead to over-storage. Moreover, if the appliances are not maintained adequately, they may form frost layers and thus, not reach the necessary storage temperature anymore.

As for fridges, the situation is not much better. Hygiene in fridges is a critical matter. The different climatic zones of the appliances are not used the right way. Unpleasant smells affect the quality of newly stored products. Now, one could say, this all happens under the consumers' own responsibility. The problem is that people tend to blame the producer for bad quality, especially for what concerns a product's appearance and taste.

Your products are judged the moment they reach the table. This is the reason why I think that consumers should be brought into the position to recognize and accept their co-responsibility for the product's quality.

We wish for a better communication between producers and consumers regarding proper product handling. Of particular interest in this context I would find hints to recognize under what circumstances and how a product has suffered quality loss. Thus, consumers could understand that the product they just purchased as "good quality", has already suffered a quality loss during transportation. It would then be easier for them to adapt their behaviour, such as, for example, directly cook the slightly defrosted food and, for future purchases of the same sort of food, use a better packaging.

I think it's time to make stronger efforts in order to guarantee that the excellent quality and safety of our today's food should not be affected before it can reach its actual destination, that is consumption. This means communication with the consumers, so to put them in the position to accept their responsibility for the product.

According to our experiences at the Deutsche Hausfrauen-Bund, for this kind of communication, commerce is not the right partner anymore. Here, just like in many other areas, the producers will have to provide.