

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR REGARDING THE STORAGE OF PERISHABLE FOODS

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Consumer behaviorists know that household behaviors through socialization, value transmission, are learned in the home and are difficult to change. Habit is a strong force. To change brands or behaviors the consumer has to believe that the new product or way of acting is better and it has to be affordable. A spokesperson for General Mills, a global U.S. based maker of cereals and yogurt, said that as the economy picks up so does the eating behavior of Americans with more eating out and the buying of pre-prepared food (April 11, 2013, CNBC interview). In other words, the tight strings on the purse or wallet loosen up as consumers feel more confident. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the rise and fall of the economy or consumer confidence (other than to point out they are factors), but rather to explore the impact of social influence on consumer behavior specifically in regard to the storage of perishable food. The author is a behavioral expert interested in household changes over time and most recently in the “who” behind consumption, not what people eat or buy, but rather *who is influencing them to act a certain way* (Goldsmith, forthcoming).

Consumer behavior as a field has been criticized as not being as theoretically strong as it could be. Social influence theory (with roots in the 1940s Social Research Group led by Paul Lazarsfeld of Columbia University, he studied voter behavior and found “word of mouth” to be more powerful than mass campaigns) provides a way of looking at consumer behavior especially with the advent of social media – product reviews, Facebook,, blogs and so on – where strangers with a shared interest or a loose social connection influence others to buy or not buy certain products, to vote, or to act in other ways.

This blend of technology and communication has opened up new frontiers of influence. Sometimes invention or technology is ahead of where people want to be. For example, the light

bulb was invented in 1879 yet by 1907 only eight percent of American homes had electricity. Why was so clearly a useful invention so slow to be adopted? The answers are primarily habit, comfort with pre-existing means of light, heating, and cooling, availability, and cost. E.M. Rogers, author of *Diffusion of Innovations* described a process wherein the individual passes (1) from first knowledge of an innovation, (2) to forming an attitude toward the innovation, (3) to a decision to adopt or reject, (4) to implementation of the new idea, and (5) to confirmation of the decision (1995, p. 161). His brilliant work is cited time and time again. In this paper I would like to posit my own slightly changed version in which:

Invention (leads to)

Introduction

Social Influence (“talk” “buzz”)

Buying/Adopting

Use

Evaluation

Applied to the subject of this conference, in 1900 in U.S. kitchens there was probably an inside sink with cold water only, a stove, washtub or wringer washer, and possibly an *icebox*. Home deliveries of perishables bread and milk were common. Only the rich or city dwellers were likely to have electricity but by the mid-century, the 1950s, the typical kitchen contained a sink with hot and cold water, a stove, a *refrigerator*, washing machine and perhaps a clothes dryer and a dishwasher. Electricity was in 80 percent of homes (Historical Statistics of the U.S., 1975). In our post-modern period we see that typical households are ordering and selling products over the Internet and once again receiving home deliveries but what is being delivered is mostly non-perishables – clothes, books, paper diapers. Twenty first century families rely heavily on stores for food and household cleaning supplies and on restaurants for meals and grocery stores for fresh and frozen foods. Warehouse stores (Costco, Sams) encourage the purchase of large quantities of consumer products and necessitate more storage in the home for perishable and non-perishable foods. To put this phenomenon together with social influence theory we see that shopping is again a family/friend experience and to shop in one of these warehouse stores one

has to become a member of their club usually meaning paying a yearly fee to belong. A shopper is greeted with a cheery “Welcome to Costco.” These kinds of greetings or the phrase “Welcome Home” used at Disney Vacation Clubs or “Welcome to Moe’s,” a restaurant, are all ways of establishing relationships – you are not just anywhere, you are a part of group.

According to Elliot Aronson (1972/2008), we are *The Social Animal*. Much of our behavior is predicated on the attitudes and beliefs of others. Social influence theory has many branches. We are concerned with what others think of us; our behavior often depends on our social reputations so that the possible disapproval of others has a powerful influence on what we do (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2011, p. 119). We observe others’ behavior and imitate. If our neighbors store food a certain way then we will likely imitate. Besides noticing, informal conversation takes place and this research could fall under “opinion leadership,” “word-of-mouth,” or “buzz” (Goldsmith 2006). Lazarsfeld’s group found that certain people were more central and influential than others in their groups and the latest is that they are rising in influence on the Internet (Kozinets et al., 2010). Applied to environmental behavior they may be called e-influentials.

To bring this back to the conference, with the advent of the green revolution and growing public awareness of health one would assume that consumers would be open to learning about safer ways to store perishable food. For example, Ilg, Bruckner and Kreyenschmidt (2011) say that “hygiene is an area of great concern in private households. Especially refrigerator interior surfaces are contaminated with food residue or microorganisms. Refrigerator manufacturers are attempting to improve the hygienic conditions by including antimicrobial refrigerator interior plastic surfaces” (p. 221). There are also global aspects to this subject because with rising household incomes and living standards comes increased ownership of electric appliances in households (Oberascher, Stamminger & Pakula, 2011).

Beyond families of origin, who influences present day in-home behaviors? This paper builds a case that many more people through the Internet are influencing consumer household behavior through verbal and non-verbal communication (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2011). This change in communication has implications for appliance manufacturers (through product reviews), retailers, advertisers (who should be in the ads, for example), food manufacturers and

producers, marketers involved in channels of distribution, consumer, educators, and cleanliness associations and organizations.

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