

Consumers Rate Food Industry

Consumers are generally satisfied with the food they buy and the stores where they buy it.

They said so in a recent nationwide survey. But when it came to the nitty gritty, the pollsters detected a strong undercurrent of frustration and displeasure with our food system.

The survey, taken in the spring of 1974, asked consumers how satisfied they were with: foods they buy, stores where they usually shop, product or shopping information, seven food product groups, and 31 individual food items.

Two of every three of the survey's 1,831 respondents said they are always or almost always satisfied with food products they buy for

their households. Some 30 percent expressed reservations, but only 4 percent claimed they are rarely or never satisfied.

An even larger share - 70 percent - reported they are just about always satisfied with food stores in general. This high level of consumer approval broke fairly evenly across regions and demographic groups.

But satisfaction with product and shopping information proved a different matter. Consumers were most unhappy with the "reliability and truthfulness" of advertising by food product manufacturers. More than a third said this kind of information seldom or never pleases them. They had fewer gripes about

nutritional labeling and ingredient labeling. Still, only about half found such information to their liking.

In sharp contrast, a majority of shoppers endorsed the reliability and truthfulness of ads sponsored by individual food stores.

To determine average levels of consumer dissatisfaction, survey members developed a five-point scale: 1--always satisfied, 2--almost always satisfied, 3--sometimes satisfied, 4--rarely satisfied, and 5--never satisfied. The higher the score, the greater the dissatisfaction.

For example, consumers strongly doubted the reliability of food

manufacturers' advertising, with over one-third saying they are rarely or never satisfied (average dissatisfaction score, over 3), but expressed general satisfaction with ads sponsored by food stores (score, over 2).

More than half of all survey participants claimed they are highly pleased with all seven major food product groups: meat and poultry, dairy products and eggs, bakery and cereal products, fresh fruits and vegetables, and prepared or convenience foods.

Even so, consumers were least happy with convenience products and most satisfied with dairy products and eggs. Bakery products and processed fruits and

vegetables also rated favorably.

Past Grievances
Despite contentment with food products and marketing services in general, 70 percent of the shoppers said they'd been disappointed with certain foods or food stores during the past year.

But of those who found fault with a specific food item, only 7 percent actually complained to the manufacturer. This surprised pollsters, since an earlier survey revealed that consumers consider writing to manufacturers and talking with store managers the two most effective ways of settling differences.

Too, evidence suggests that most manufacturers are highly responsive to consumer grievances, and in most cases will grant refunds or replacements without requiring proof that a product is faulty.

Even fewer dissatisfied consumers - 3 percent - complained to public officials or consumer protection agencies. They were more likely to protest to food store management (50 percent) or participate in boycotts against manufacturers or food stores (12 percent).

Common outlet
But an overwhelming majority of dissatisfied customers simply complained to friends and relatives. The implication . . . letters on file with food manufacturers and public officials don't begin to measure the extent of consumer unrest, according to the survey report.

Just over 40 percent of all survey participants had actively complained to manufacturers, store officials, and public agencies, or joined boycotts. The survey team arbitrarily termed this group "activists" and tried to determine how representative they are.

Several demographic crossbreaks of consumer "activists" yielded this profile: He or she is likely to: live in the Northeast; be under 55 years old; come from a household of more than two people; have college background; earn more than \$15,000; live in the suburbs.

Other demographic checks showed that satisfaction with food products is significantly related to age, household size, race, community type, consumer activism, and to a lesser extent, occupation.

Age a factor.
The younger the shopper, the greater the discontent.

And contrary to the popular notion that senior citizens complain the most, shoppers 55 and over proved the least vocal of any age group.

Consumers from large households tended to be more critical than those from smaller households. And non-whites were considerably less pleased with food purchased for their homes than were whites.

Dissatisfaction with foods varied with place of residence - rural people didn't complain as much as city dwellers. Also, levels of frustration were higher for activists than non-activists.

Various population groups also differed sharply in their assessments of convenience foods, fresh fruits, and fresh vegetables - the product groups with relatively high dissatisfaction ratings.

Price, of course, proved the chief gripe against all food groups and individual food items. People were most unhappy with the price of beef, pork, tomatoes, potatoes, and milk. At the time of the survey, these prices were near or at record levels and rising rapidly. In contrast, the tab for processed fruits and vegetables drew little criticism.

Except for price, specific sources of dissatisfaction varied from product to product.

Convenient, but
Of all convenience foods, skillet main dishes - packaged products added to meat to make stews, hashes, etc. - got the worst scores.

Frozen TV dinners also came under fire for price, taste, healthfulness, size of portions, and truthfulness of picture and label on the package. Toaster pastries and tarts were singled out for high price and lack of nourishment.

Tomatoes got the highest dissatisfaction rating of the 31 individual products in the survey. Consumers had bad things to say about price, ripeness, taste, and appearance.



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