



November 1989

What Will Food Customers Want in the 1990s?

by

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In the 1990s consumers will demand new and different products and services. As new lifestyles evolve and new information on health and nutrition becomes available, successful producers or processors of food products will accurately fulfill these changing needs and wants.

What changes can we expect from consumers during the coming decade?

1. First, consumers will place a greater emphasis on convenience as demands on time become even more critical. Since 1976, there are more two-income than single-income households. The result is that both husband and wife have limited time for household duties such as shopping and cooking. This also means that these households are willing to pay for the convenience of having food prepared by someone else. Processors should consider the form of the final product as consumer preference changes from commodity items such as peas, beans, and chicken to prepared meals such as single-serving stir-fry vegetables and low-calorie chicken entrees that are microwavable.

In 1988, between 75 and 80 percent of all U.S. households had microwave ovens -- up from only 15 percent in 1980. The microwave oven, perhaps more than any other time-saving device in the home, has transformed the consumer's definition of "fast." Mona Doyle, president of Consumer Network, Inc., a consumer research consulting firm in Philadelphia, points out: "It has made even fast food restaurants not seem fast because at home you don't have to wait in line."

2. The second major consumer change is the demand for premium quality in food. This demand spans all consumer age groups. The so-called "baby boom generation" is the largest single segment of our population and therefore important. Of the 77 million baby boomers, an estimated 8 million live in poverty, while 4 million are VERY wealthy. Over the next 10 years this group, who will range in age from 35 to 55, will account for three fourths of the growth in food expenditures. A survey by the Food Marketing Institute in 1986 showed why people aged 40 to 49 may be a select group for "premium quality" in food products. In 1986 they spent more on groceries than any other age group--\$95 per week compared with \$72 for the average household.

The 55 and older age group, often referred to as "empty nesters," at the peak of their earning power and with children off on their own, contribute \$2 out of every \$5 spent in grocery stores. They make up only 35 percent of all households but control an extraordinary 65 percent of the nation's personal financial assets. This age group is made up of experienced shoppers with an interest in quality food and the money to purchase it. Premium quality in food products may no longer be just a marketing advantage, it may become a prerequisite for consumer acceptance.

3. During the next 10 years, consumers will express an even stronger interest in all aspects of wellness and fitness. It was only a few years ago that forward-thinking supermarkets began installing separate health food departments to accommodate such products as low-calorie salad dressings. Today, in the regular salad dressing department, more than half the products make some nutritional claim such as low calorie, low sodium, or low cholesterol. The attitude of wellness and fitness is embraced by all age groups, but may be of greater importance to the 55 and older crowd.

The topic of "safe food" is also an everyday news item. This topic ranges from the use of pesticides and herbicides in food production to the safety of freshly prepared foods sold in supermarkets. In the future, producers of food products will need to be especially sensitive to all aspects of the food safety issue. Many of the consumer demands for the 1990s have been expressed by consumers in the 1980s. How food processors and producers respond to these demands will determine their success during the next decade. Successful marketing of food products must start with the consumer. Producers need to know how consumer wants and needs are changing and how to meet them.