Focus Group Report on Purchased Meat Purchases by Older Consumers

A Report by
Jordan Lin
Robert L. Degner

Florida Agricultural Market Research Center
Food and Resource Economics Department
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-0240
Focus Group Report on Processed Meat Purchases by Older Consumers

Jordan Lin and Robert L. Degner*

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to obtain insights into the factors that affect older consumers' consumption behavior regarding processed meat items. The main interest of the study was in the health concerns and attitudes of this market segment and the impact that health considerations have on consumers' purchase and use patterns toward processed meat items. A secondary interest was to identify innovative marketing approaches to increase sales of processed meat items to these consumers.

METHODOLOGY

Four focus groups were conducted in three cities: Tampa (2 groups, group I on May 20, 1991 and group II on May 21, 1991), Orlando (May 28, 1991), and Miami (June 4, 1991). The participants selected were between 55 and 70 years of age, female, main grocery shoppers in the household who bought at least one of the five processed meat items: luncheon meats (salami/bologna), frankfurters, sausage, ham, and bacon. Participants were also selected to exclude those that were working full-time or whose spouses were employed full-time. A total of 41 women participated in the discussions: 10 in Tampa I group (9 white and 1 black), 11 in Tampa II group (9 white, 1 black, 1 oriental), 10 in Orlando (all white), and 10 in Miami (all white).

The sessions took about two hours each to conduct. Both audio- and videotapes were made to preserve the language and facial expressions of the participants and serve as the basis of this report. One moderator experienced in a wide range of food products and focus group interviews conducted all of the sessions.

A discussion guide was developed to insure that all topics of interest were explored, yet flexible enough to permit discussion of issues as they spontaneously arose. Each session began with a general discussion of participants' food consumption behavior and recent changes in consumption patterns. Next, consumption patterns, perceptions, and concerns associated with each of the five processed meat item categories were discussed item by item. After a short break, the discussions touched on sources and credibility of health and nutrition information. Finally, existing and potential marketing tools were explored and participants were asked to identify brands which portrayed various product attributes.

The intent of these interviews was to uncover a range of behavior and attitudes and to generate research hypotheses. By definition, results from focus groups are usually not projectable to the population in general due to the non-random manner in which participants are selected, the small numbers of respondents, and the nature of the questioning and discussion process.

*Dr. Lin and Degner are Postdoctoral Research Associate and Professor, respectively, of the Florida Agricultural Market Research Center, Food and Resource Economics Department, IFAS, University of Florida in Gainesville.
FINDINGS

Behavior and Attitudes Toward Food Shopping, Consumption, and Preparation

Participants commonly purchase food items from supermarkets. Produce and deli departments are most appealing for fresh, healthy, and convenient foods. Health concerns and promotional activities are the major factors that determine product and brand choices. Participants generally hold positive attitudes toward cooking but some have tired of it. Yet, they are still interested in new recipes. Health concerns have led to reduced purchases of red meats in favor of poultry, fish, and vegetables. However, participants do not always adhere to strict diets.

Generally speaking, the participants patronize all kinds of retail food outlets, but the supermarket is the source of most food purchases. Discount clubs such as SAMS or PACE are also popular. A few participants buy foods at commissaries and specialty stores. Apparently, supermarket promotional activity is an important choice factor. As one participant put it, "I buy wherever there is a good buy."

Food shopping is not necessarily a satisfying experience for all participants. Some of them enjoy the opportunity to be out of the house, to compare stores, or to explore new merchandise. But others, particularly those employed part-time or doing volunteer work, find shopping a chore and time-consuming. Typically participants do the shopping alone, but some go with husbands, friends or neighbors.

The produce department seems to be the favorite supermarket department largely because of broad selections of fresh "healthy" items. Associating some processed meats with produce items may be an effective promotional strategy. For example, "real" bacon bits, ham, salami, or bologna could be used as salad ingredients to provide flavor and additional nutrition. A few participants find the deli section interesting because the foods there can be served conveniently. Delis also offer the flexibility of smaller quantities, especially important for single individuals. Many participants also perceived deli meats as being fresher than prepackaged:

"I can get a small quantity from the deli."

"I go to deli when I am in a hurry."

"The prepackaged hangs for a long time, while at deli they open it and use it up."

In terms of menu planning, a grocery list is typically relied on, although impulse purchases are not uncommon. Two major factors influence what products and brands are purchased: health and promotional activities. Many participants mentioned that their own or their husbands' health conditions were the predominant considerations. They buy the foods that are in line with controlled diets and avoid foods that would aggravate existing health problems. Promotional activities such as coupons and in-store demonstrations also affect participants' buying decisions. The participants use coupons extensively and admit that coupons remind them to get a product or brand that they need or have not had recently. Several participants agree that another function of coupons is to provide incentives to try something new. But others also say they use coupons only for products they normally purchase and the use depends on how expensive the product is. At the same time, some participants enjoy the opportunities that in-store demonstrations offer to sample a variety of free food products and to have a free meal. The remark by a participant illustrates this interest best: "On Fridays you can have lunch at Publix. They give out free samples at the deli."
Participants' attitudes toward cooking are generally positive. Many like to cook. But, others think "it's a chore" and have tired of it. As one participant put it, "After 35 years of cooking three meals a day, I am tired of it." Routine meals are viewed by many as drudgery, but most participants were willing to give new recipes a try. Therefore, offering new recipes can offer escape from an otherwise boring task.

As to the general consumption trends of food, participants typically have reduced their purchases of beef or pork in favor of more chicken, turkey, fish, and vegetables over the past several years. A common reason is doctors' advice to reduce cholesterol, fat, or salt intake. This seems to be the primary consideration for participants in whose household there is someone with heart-related or hypertension problems. In contrast, a participant commented that "I still buy meat and ham because my husband's cholesterol level is low and he likes it." Also, there was a perception that "manufacturers are now aware that people have become health conscious" so they have substituted vegetable oil for animal oil in many foods.

However, the discussions show people may not stick to strict diets all the time. When asked whether "you fall off the wagon sometime," several participants answered yes. This happens most often when they eat out or on weekends. For one participant who was on a diet program, this also arose from a 'what the heck' response after a period of dieting.
Behavior and Perceptions Toward Processed Meat Items

The interviews covered five major processed meat items in the market: luncheon meats (bologna/salami), frankfurters, sausage, bacon, and ham. On each product, the participants were first asked about their usage patterns. Subsequently, the moderator probed their views about various aspects of the food such as packaging and ingredients. Finally, the interviews proceeded toward specific health concerns toward the processed items. In three of the four sessions, participants had the chance of tasting warmed samples of ham and sausage. Unlabelled packaged samples were also shown to participants to define the products.

Luncheon meats

Among participants who purchase luncheon meats, these items are commonly bought to make lunches for their husbands. Some participants buy salami/bologna at the deli. Others select the prepackaged meats. But both groups welcome resealable packages to keep the product fresh at home. Many participants like turkey or chicken luncheon meats.

Participants usually purchase these meats for their husbands’ lunch sandwiches while their own consumption does not appear heavy. The meats are also served as a meal or hors d’oeuvres. Frequency and quantity of purchase seem to depend largely on usage and vary from occasion to occasion. Those who prefer deli luncheon meats think the products there are fresher and taste better. Versatility is the other benefit offered by deli in that “people can have as many or few slices as they like” and the meats “can be cut the way I like.” One participant also commented that she liked deli because she could see what is in the product. At the same time, prepackaged meats are chosen by participants who believe deli products are not as fresh and cannot last as long.

Leftovers of luncheon meats are typically transferred from original package to a Ziploc bag or freezer bag for storage. However, the idea of a resealable package receives great enthusiasm and one participant immediately mentioned Oscar Meyer’s Ziploc package as “a brilliant idea.” The only complaint is that a lot of resealable packages do not work. (It was not clear though what foods these packages contained.) At the same time, several participants say they always use Ziplocs regardless of the original package.

Thin slices seem to be more preferred than thick ones because the former can accommodate personal preferences better. This is another reason that deli is frequented so that the meats can be cut in the desired thickness. On the other hand, a participant remarked that “some packages are too small” and there should be a ‘family pack’ to save packaging cost. The Tampa I group was asked about their feelings toward the variety pack. Some participants think it is good to have this option. In particular, this is important when these meats are used for entertaining purposes. Ironically, other participants do not appear to be interested in a variety pack as users may not like some of the types included.

A lot of participants are suspicious of and concerned with what they eat in terms of the ingredients in luncheon meats such as fillers, extenders, and coloring: “if we had known what went into it, we would not have bought it.” Another participant noted this was the main reason why she preferred buying fresh steak and making her own luncheon meats. Health concerns for themselves and their husbands have led to more purchases of turkey, chicken and kosher products to cut down on fat, cholesterol, and sodium intake. In this regard, Louis Rich was commended by several participants as the first company to introduce turkey products. However, the turkey or chicken variety receives mixed acceptance among participants. Although some participants like it, others simply are not "crazy about it" and believe it has "a different flavor than the regular (beef or pork) variety."
Frankfurters

Frankfurters are widely purchased since they are convenient and appealing to adults and children alike. Hot dogs are frequently served to grandchildren. Participants typically prefer prepackaged product yet are still interested in divisible and resealable packaging for easy storage. Health concerns have led to more use of turkey and chicken hot dogs. However, the former has several inherent weaknesses. Many participants expressed the perception that turkey and chicken products lacked flavor. The turkey-beef combination was well received; some participants felt that turkey made the product more "healthy" and beef added flavor and taste. However, some participants had reservations regarding fat and caloric content of the blended product. In some participants' views, a chicken-beef blend would be comparable to turkey-beef.

Frankfurters appear to have been purchased by most participants. They are commonly served for lunch, although several other types of meal or occasions were mentioned such as dinner, entrees and h'ors d'oeuvres. Convenience is the main attraction or frankfurters. Interestingly, participants in three out of the four groups (except Miami) identified hot dogs as the quick, convenient food of choice "for my grandchildren."

Prepackaged frankfurters are preferred to those from the deli. Participants perceive prepackaged as tastier, less expensive, with a more appealing color. Despite positive images of the prepackaged, the length and number of hot dogs in a pack are two major complaints that surfaced in the discussions. They would like to have bun-length hot dogs. A few of the participants have purchased bun-length hot dogs and now prefer them. Another annoyance is the number of franks in a package. As one participant said, "I always end up having either more hot dogs or more buns." Therefore, the idea of a package that contains the same number of hot dogs as buns is widely welcomed.

Moreover, participants expressed strong interest in divisible and resealable package designs to keep the unused portion fresh. A number of them spoke favorably of an Oscar Mayer's product which contains two individually sealed sections, each with an equal number of hot dogs (4 or 5). Although many participants currently use Ziploc bags or freezer bags, they would still like to see a resealable retail package and say they would buy it if available.

"Oh, boy!" and "do you know what's in them?" are among the first reactions when participants were asked about their concerns of the ingredients in hot dogs. Though participants are typically unsure of what goes in the food, it is apparent that they do not hold favorable impressions toward fillers, preservatives, binders, and coloring agents.

Participants were also generally concerned about cholesterol, fat, and sodium content in hot dogs, but one said she was not concerned since she liked hot dogs anyway. Health consciousness is a primary reason for some of these women to buy more turkey or chicken products. Yet, a participant's observation that "chicken and turkey hot dogs are not as cholesterol-free as the beef ... it was in the paper" somehow amazed others in her group.

Several participants also remarked that:

"Turkey hot dogs don't taste like a hot dog ... something is missing."

"Turkey hot dogs completely turn me off, although I eat other turkey products."
Additionally, a few participants commented that the skin of turkey hot dogs is tough. Price does not appear to be a major consideration. While some participants say their choices of meat constituents depend on their taste preferences, some say they buy "whatever is on sale." Some also alternate the constituents to have a variety in menu. With regard to 'light' hot dogs, a small number of participants remember seeing advertisements of the product but few have tried them.

Given that a number of participants use leaner product such as turkey hot dogs and health concerns are prevalent among these individuals, several product ideas were explored. First of all, "Suppose a well known major meat company were to come out with a hot dog that is a combination of turkey and beef. Would you buy it? What do you think about the new product?" A lot of them note this is probably a good idea and would be willing to try the turkey-beef hot dogs. They think this combination would have less fat, cholesterol, and sodium than all-beef product yet be more appealing than all turkey as

"They (the manufacturers) probably know turkey hot dogs don't taste like hot dogs and they want to pull the beef flavor over."

One participant also felt that beef would make the hot dog less "dry." On the other hand, the proposed blend received negative evaluations in that "you are deceiving yourself by buying turkey and beef if you really want to stay away from red meats."

Following the general discussion of a turkey-beef hot dog, the moderator presented the groups with a more specific blend – a "85% fat-free turkey-beef hot dog" – and elicited participants' responses. Many participants expressed interest and willingness to try the product because "it may be more flavored and at the same time making me not guilty about eating beef." Nevertheless, several participants, especially those on a 'calorie-watch' diet, were uncertain about the 'fat-free' claim. The major concern appears to be whether the claim is based on weight or calories and the kind of fat reduced. They are apparently knowledgeable of the recent publicity about Food and Drug Administration's actions against misleading or deceptive health claims (e.g., 'No cholesterol' cooking oils). Hence, these participants want to know "85% free of what," unsaturated and saturated fat contents, and the total calorie counts in the 85% fat-free beef-turkey hot dog, before they decide to try the new variety. Nevertheless, there appears to be an appalling lack of knowledge among consumers with respect to nutritional content of meats.

Another product concept explored was chicken-beef hot dogs and was discussed in the Tampa I session. Participants generally think this combination is either as nutritional or not as lean as turkey-beef hot dog. Some thought the chicken-beef variety might be tastier; yet "beef has a predominant flavor, so there is probably not much taste difference from turkey beef." One participant also commented "that does not turn me on... chicken has its own flavor." When it comes to which combination of the two is more desirable, participants typically think an individual's preferences toward chicken versus turkey will carry over and determine his/her choice of turkey-beef or chicken-beef hot dogs.

Finally, the Miami group was asked about the product concept of a turkey and pork combination. One participant, who had tried a combination turkey and pork sausage and enjoyed it, welcomed the idea despite her feeling that such a product would still be high in cholesterol because of the pork.
Sausage

Sausage is commonly purchased as prepackaged since it "tastes better, costs less and has longer shelf life" than that from delis. Participants commonly purchase this item for breakfast and dinner meals. It is also used by many as an ingredient in other dishes and for hors d'oeuvres. Prepackaged sausage is preferred and the current package size is satisfactory for most participants. However, some would prefer smaller, resealable packages. Participants like sausage's texture yet find its casing sometimes tough to chew. The degree of concern about sausage ingredients is not as high as other processed meats discussed above probably because the consumption is lower.

Participants generally feel satisfied with the size and packaging of the item (as shown with the sample). Some also prefer to see the two pieces weighed individually, because they do not eat this item as much as they used to. Ziploc bags are widely used to keep unused portion fresh; yet participants would welcome resealable retail packaging. At this junction, the Oscar Meyer brand was mentioned again as an example.

With regard to product characteristics, sausage's texture was generally considered favorable. But there were complaints about its casing being tough to chew and some commented on the coarsely ground pieces of fat that were evident in the sample. As mentioned in the case of other processed meats, cholesterol, preservatives, binders and sodium are the top-of-mind concerns among participants. Yet the common feelings toward these ingredients can perhaps be summarized in a participant's comment:

"We probably should (be concerned). But they (the manufacturers) are going to put it in everything. So what can you do? You've no choice."

In addition, some participants realize it is these ingredients that "make it (the sausage) taste good," and that they probably need not be concerned since they do not eat sausage that much anyway. The respondents think turkey sausage would be delicious. But a few participants also commented that "if I am eating turkey, I want turkey."
Bacon

Bacon is generally served for breakfast, but is also used on BLT's and as a flavoring ingredient. Participants favor the prepackaged variety and desire to have bacon contained in resealable packaging. Although they are concerned with fat and cholesterol in bacon, the concern is handled through cooking method.

Bacon is commonly served for breakfast or put in other dishes as an ingredient to add flavor. Participants also report using the item for other meals and h'ors d'oeuvres. Prepackaged bacon is widely preferred because of favorable price, lower sodium, and its contents are shown on the label. Nonetheless, one participant liked deli bacon better because she could specify the thickness of the slices. Resealable packaging would suit storage needs well. As to desired thickness, it is largely dependent on usage but "paper-thin" size does not receive good remarks in that it is "too fatty," hard to handle, and wasteful. Some participants have tried artificial bacon, but thought it was "leathery" and not tasteful.

Fat and cholesterol are the primary concerns with bacon. However, some participants feel that dietary dangers can be reduced by letting microwaved bacon sit on paper towels to drain excessive fat. There are also the feelings that "If you like it, you are going to eat it."

"At this age, we tend to think we've had our lifetime, we might as well enjoy it."
Ham

Ham is used for entrees and as an ingredient. Both the ham steaks and the nuggets or party-style ham products were appealing and considered nutritionally comparable. Some participants believe ‘pork is a white meat’ without fat, while others rather consider the statement as a marketing gimmick by the pork industry. Cholesterol and sodium are the major health concerns although some participants are more attentive to the quality of life.

Participants cook ham for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and frequently for holidays and entertaining. It is also widely used as a seasoning ingredient. The participants were shown two kinds of prepackaged ham: ham steak and a ham nugget. The former appeals to some participants because of its tenderness and versatility as an entree or an ingredient. The latter is liked by other participants on the belief that it contains less fat and is easy to store. Participants are generally satisfied with the size of the sample shown but a few felt a smaller ham steak would be more suitable for households in this age group. They were receptive to the idea of a ham steak the diameter of the nugget, with multiple, individually shrink-wrapped pieces in one master package.

Participants believed there was no difference in terms of nutrition between the ham steak and the ham nugget. But they were uncertain of ham’s nutritional value as compared to other processed meats. While a number of participants think ham has less sodium and does not have fillers, "I don’t know" is a more common response. The two Tampa groups were asked about the claim that ‘pork is a white meat.’ While some participants think this statement is true "as long as you get the fat out" or "after you cook it," others dispute it and view the claim as a marketing gimmick by the pork industry "because we all say it’s bad and don’t eat it."

Some participants commented they and their husbands have cut down ham consumption over the years due to health concerns. Cholesterol and sodium content is the major health consideration some participants have about ham. In contrast, some other participants were not convinced of the concern,

"What quality of life would you have if you push away from everything you enjoy?"

"I am gonna do it anyway ... because two months from now they’ll come up with some new tests that everything you gave up is not bad for you.”
Sources and Credibility of Nutrition Information

Participants receive nutrition information from various sources, among which physicians are most trustworthy and commercials least. Participants also read product labels though they are not certain about the truthfulness of label information.

Participants obtain nutrition/health information from newspapers, television news and commercials, magazines (e.g., Good Housekeeping), physicians, dieticians, extension agents (home-economists), food labels, and newsletters published by organizations such as AARP and American Association of University Women (AAUW). However, participants do not view all sources as equally credible, with the information provided by medical professionals being most reliable and that in television commercials least believable. Nevertheless, health/nutrition television programs featuring physicians and extension agents were applauded by the Orlando and Tampa groups.

Food labels are an important source of information. Participants typically claim they read food labels and are aware of the major nutritional items listed in the label (calories, fat, cholesterol, sodium). Yet they cannot recall specific details. While some participants feel the print size of nutrition contents is adequate, others think the print is hardly readable. Generally speaking, the level of attention to label information depends on the participant's (and/or her husband's) health status. When asked about the credibility of label information, the common views are suspicion and uncertainty.

"Aren't they (label contents) controlled by FDA?"

"They'd better be (true)."

"I don't know."

Responses and Attitudes Toward Existing Marketing Activities

Collection and use of coupons are widespread and dependent on consumption of the product and its retail price. Many participants agree that coupons have reminding effect but their validity is frequently too short. A 'tear-off' type of coupon which could be redeemed instantly was suggested for processed meat items. Participants take advantage of premiums only when the offer is substantial, for something complimentary to the purchased product, or for worthwhile causes. They prefer 'cents-off for next purchase' to premiums. Tie-ins are welcome when the offered product is purchased regularly or the purchased product is relatively storable. But unavailability of tie-in products is viewed as a common problem. Participants are interested in collecting and trying new recipes. There is a desire for a flexible health diet and recipes attached to packaging. As to in-store demonstrations, participants welcome free samples. Finally, discount club membership is not common and participants tend to patronize this outlet for consumer goods other than perishable foods.

To explore participants' reactions toward various promotional tools, they were asked about their behavior and feelings toward coupons, premiums, tie-ins, recipes, and in-store demonstrations. Almost all participants agree that coupons are important and useful, and they collect coupons received from manufacturers, retailers, and other sources such as American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Several factors affect the use of coupons which in turn influences what are put into the shopping carts. Participants redeem a coupon "only if it's something I would buy anyway, even it's a dollar off." Others admit that "they (manufacturers) got to advertise, otherwise that certain brand won't come to your
mind." Also, coupon with or without a recipe or a new product can create incentives to try the product: "that's the only way I'd try something (new)."

As to what minimum value of a coupon is acceptable, there was no consensus. But the discussions indicate their views are largely dependent on whether the product is regularly purchased ("ten cents is ten cents, if it's something I buy.") and retail price of the product. Participants commonly have complaints about coupon's length of validity. Most prefer coupons with no expiration date.

With regard to coupons for processed meat items, some participants would collect and use the coupons. Several participants suggest that the 'tear-off' type coupon on 'Eagle' brand condensed milk could be used for processed meats with the coupon stuck to the plastic packaging. There were also some participants who said they would not use coupons for processed meats.

Participants were also asked about their views toward premiums. Some participants express willingness to collect proofs of purchase for redemption if the product is regularly used. But a prevalent opinion appears to be that this effort is worth the trouble only when the offer is "substantial," the redemption is for something complementary to the purchased product (e.g., hot dogs and grill tools), or the purpose is benevolent (e.g., Publix's cashier receipts for donating computers to schools). Some participants prefer to have 'cents-off for next purchase' rather than premiums.

As for tie-ins, participants welcome this idea if they make routine purchase of the other product, or the product itself is not perishable ("my grandchildren drink a lot of milk and cereals don't go bad.") However, many participants complain that the other product is often unavailable and therefore renders the offer worthless. A few also prefer rebates to tie-ins.

Participants typically collect recipes available in magazines, newspapers, stores and food packages regardless of eventual use or the recipes. There was an interest in a diet/health recipe that can accommodate the different needs of household members. Also, several participants expressed their preferences toward the 'tear-off' type recipe attached on some rice containers in the market.

In-store demonstrations are also appealing to participants. They enjoy the opportunities offered to taste various food samples and are ready to make trial purchases of the sampled items. Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this report, discount clubs are frequented for some shopping needs. However, the discussions suggest the patronage of discount clubs is probably more related to consumer goods other than perishable food items.

Attitudes Toward Innovative Marketing Approaches

Two innovative marketing approaches that aim at reaching consumers of this age group and establishing positive corporate images were explored during the discussions: manufacturer/processor provided health and nutrition information, and manufacturer/processor sponsored clubs for senior citizens.

Some participants viewed manufacturer sponsored information with skepticism because they generally view independent medical professionals as more credible and are uneasy with the commercial motivations behind such information campaigns. On the other hand, there is a feeling that companies would hurt their own interests if they do not supply truthful information. Participants do not agree completely on the need for a company sponsored club. As to a possible name for such a club, the reference to 'senior citizen' receives mixed reactions.
Participants were asked "it a meat company were to provide you with health and nutrition information, would you read it and would you believe it?" The common response is that they would read it but take it "with a grain of salt." While participants claim they are health-conscious and interested in nutrition information, the credibility of this source of information appears to be influenced by two factors. First, doctors and dieticians are widely considered the most trustworthy and knowledgeable source of information. Second, they speculate the motivation of this proposal. "I think they (the company) are trying to make bucks!" In this regard, a participant referred to the cases of 'fresh' orange juice and deceptive claims on cholesterol content as examples.

The attitude is more noticeable when the Orlando group was also asked "if a processed meat company were to provide you with health information by a medical spokesperson/home-economist/dietician, would the information be more tainted than that by someone not affiliated with the company?" Participants generally would evaluate the information with reservation. As one participant remarked, "All those actors (who appear in commercials advocating some product) would not do it if they were not paid to do it."

On the other hand, several participants held more positive perceptions toward company provided information, "they'll ruin themselves by lying because we'll find out." It is also worth noting the comments by one participant. She mentioned that a local supermarket (Goodings in Orlando) had put up labels indicating which food items contained less fat or less sodium. And, "I am inclined to believe this must be an honest effort to help our health." Could a manufacturer/processor offer the same service? She thought they could and "false advertising (regulations) will get them" if the manufacturer/processor made dishonest claims.

Many participants belong to organizations such as AARP and enjoy the benefits of discounts, health/nutrition and insurance information. Hence a specific format of information dissemination was explored: a company sponsored club, exclusively for this age group, that periodically distributes health/nutrition information to its members. The typical response from participants is approval. However, there were also the feelings that this idea was not necessary since AARP already provides such benefits. In addition, one participant did not favor this idea because it would increase advertising costs and raise consumer expenditures.

Participants were asked about their responses regarding the name of such an organization. First, "would you be offended to be called a senior citizen or retiree?" Participants' attitudes toward this proposal are mixed. Some claim they would not be bothered because "as long as I get discounts, they can call me anything they want" or "we are what we are." Others are concerned about the connotations of this reference - "I'm a senior citizen but not old;" "when you reach an age, they think you are senile!" And, there are a few participants who admit they are irritated by being called a senior citizen.

Second, "what would you call this club?" Three names were loosely suggested: "Health and Nutrition," "Nutrition Club," and "Diet (something)." More importantly, some participants in the Tampa I group agree that they are not 'scared' by the word 'health' since they are conscious of their health condition and interested in health-related information. But they would shy away from a magazine such as 'Prevention' which claims, according to a participant, "everything you put in your mouth is bad for you."
Brand Loyalty and Ranking

While they typically stay with a limited number of brands, occasionally brand-switching can occur because competing brands offer a better bargain or when the desired brand is not available.

At the conclusion of discussions, participants were asked about their brand loyalty in terms of processed meat items. In terms of processed meats, the following rankings were reported by participants (in the order of frequency mentioned). Quality-wise, the best brands are Oscar Meyer, Eckerich, Louis Rich, Lykes, store brands, Sinai, and Hebrew National; the worst are Hormel (bacon), Sunnyland, store brands, and Lykes. With respect to overall value, store brands (Publix in particular) enjoy highest recognition. Lykes was also mentioned as a good value. Participants in the Tampa I group think the nutritional value of most brands is comparable. Other groups mentioned Oscar Meyer, Louis Rich (as the innovator of turkey products), and Lykes as offering higher nutritional value.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Habits and attitudes built over years of experience have a controlling
effect on the eating and food purchase patterns of these older consumers. Taste
preferences remain one of the most important factors in determining participants’
food choices. In their views, the usage occasions for the foods discussed are
already defined, and largely influenced by their own eating habits and those of
their husbands. Nevertheless, many of the participants are still interested in
exploring recipes of existing and innovative food products.

Participants are also price-conscious of food products and retail outlets.
Although their food choices as well as brand selections are limited and
constrained by habits, they are exposed to the influences of promotional tools
in the marketplace. The fact that many participants look for ‘better deals’ and
appear to be keen on using coupons suggests the role of economic considerations
in their decision-making. Coupons also serve as a reminder on participants’
shopping list and provide an economic incentive that leads to product trials.

As expected, another prominent determinant of food consumption behavior of
this specific group of consumers is the health considerations for themselves and
their spouses. Many participants have revised their food purchase patterns to
achieve a ‘leaner’ diet. More chicken, turkey, fish, and vegetables are being
consumed with a reduction in red meat intake. Apparently, the change is prompted
by both advice received from their physicians and health/nutrition information
obtained elsewhere. In addition, the discussions suggest personal and spouse’s
health status is directly related to participants’ attention to the nutritional
values of foods as well as the extent of their behavioral change.

Joy of living appears to be another influential element in some
participants’ minds when it comes to food selection. The role of this factor is
perhaps more important in this age group than in others. There is a common
feeling that, after all the years of hard work, time has finally arrived for a
reward for oneself - to live for pleasure. These participants are willing to
indulge in the satisfaction of their taste buds even when they are health-
conscious at the same time. Hence, the seemingly contradictory behavior of
hanging on to red meats while avoiding them is a rational decision, from the
decision maker’s point of view.

In regard to health concerns and enjoyment of life, a fundamental factor
that has important bearing on participants’ behavior is the information
environment in which consumers find themselves today. It is evident from the
discussions that participants are in constant exposure to a vast amount of health
and nutrition information. Selection and understanding of the available
information is by itself a difficult task. Worse yet, consumers are bewildered
by the often-inconsistent information disseminated by different sources. The
current blizzard of complex and sometimes conflicting nutritional information has
created much confusion in the minds of many consumers. A program to provide them
with concise and simple nutritional information could help to build brand
recognition and consumer loyalty.

Concerns about health ascend at the same time when confusions about
nutrition intensify. Consumers become frustrated and resort to some simplifying
rules as behavioral guides. One of such rules is to rely only on sources of
information which are deemed most reliable such as a person’s own physician.
Second, independent sources are more trustworthy than others with commercial
affiliation. Third, public regulations are entrusted with the duty and capacity
to ensure provision of truthful nutrition and health information. Fourth, taste
satisfaction becomes a readily-available principle to follow.

Given the macro-setting of these participants’ food, especially meat,
consumption, the appeals of new products that emphasize health and nutrition
value may be quite strong for this market segment. This is evident in
participants' positive responses toward product concepts such as turkey-beef or chicken-beef hot dogs. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to also exploit the opportunities furnished by participants' perceptions of the flavors of beef, turkey, and chicken. An emphasis of beef's flavor in the blended products may entice more interest than a simple nutritional claim.

The findings also give reason for optimism about market interest in innovative packaging concepts as well as improved techniques for existing promotional tools. It is learned that consumers have desires for resealable packaging of processed meat items, divisible packaging for hot dogs and sausage, and possibly ham. They also prefer hot dog packaging in which the number and length of hot dogs match that of hot dog buns. Meanwhile, prepackaged processed meat items face competition imposed by processed meats sold at deli. To better compete, an effort can be made to offer a wider selection of package sizes and product thicknesses, although this may not be economically feasible.

Consumers are not totally satisfied with the promotional tools being employed in the marketplace. The dissatisfaction opens the door that a company who introduces refined marketing formats to meet consumer needs can establish a superior market position. For example, the length of coupon validity probably can be extended to encourage redemption and ultimately use of a brand or product. The use of 'cents-off for next purchase,' 'tear-off' recipes, and coupons distributed in conjunction with recipes can be tested for market responses.

A particularly promising idea derived from these groups is the promotion of some flexible recipes that (1) offer the options to make a dish "regular" or "lean" according to the user's needs and preferences, and (2) balance taste satisfaction and nutrition requirements. Purchases of foods, especially meat items, are influenced by personal and household member's health status, which vary from individual to individual. Yet, many consumers in these focus groups do not appear willing to compromise too much enjoyment for health concerns. Therefore, moderation can very well be the theme of these kinds of recipes. For consumers with no health concerns, it is a wonderful experience to indulge in the "regular" recipes of preferred foods. On the other hand, for those with health problems, "lean" recipes may enable them to enjoy formerly forbidden items in appropriate amounts so as not to deprive them of the "joy of life."

Finally, useful and desirable benefits can be provided to consumers through informational approaches in the recipes. First, the recipe may emphasize a balanced and healthy distribution of foods (meats, vegetables, fruits, etc.) in a total diet. Second, the recipe can reveal its nutritional value in terms of total calories per serving of a "healthy" combination of ingredients comprising of a "lean" recipe rather than emphasizing the caloric content of specific processed meat items. Third, the recipe can introduce convenient cooking methods to reduce intakes of fat and sodium while preserving the foods' flavor. Fourth, names of seasonings and functions of other supplementary ingredients can be listed, which may appeal to significant numbers of consumers in this age group.