

PROBLEMS IN INFORMING CONSUMERS

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As the title of this presentation suggests - there are some problems in informing consumers. I could interpret my purpose as that of presenting a general critique of the problems and the reasons for their existence. However, I believe there is little to be gained from such an approach. I prefer to look at the task as one of responsibilities and opportunities for those of us who are engaged in informing consumers.

Our basic philosophy is sound. In a democracy, we believe that an informed public will make the right decisions. Our primary responsibility then, is information for decision making. With unbiased and timely information, consumers will make decisions that will lead to increased satisfactions or competencies in fulfilling their physical, social and economic and aesthetic wants and needs.

I believe the area of our responsibilities and opportunities in informing consumers is three-fold. We have the responsibility and opportunity of learning the best technical means of reaching consumers; speaking the language of consumers and making use of the tools which motivate consumers to action.

Let's explore the first of our responsibilities and opportunities - that of learning the technical means of reaching consumers. In a study of consumers in the city of Muskegon, Michigan, we found that the single source of food buying information most used by homemakers was - magazines. Forty-one percent of the homemakers stated that magazines were most often used as a source of food buying information. Newspapers were a close second, with 37% of the homemakers stating that they used newspapers most often as a source of food buying information. Magazines and newspapers are the keys to disseminating food buying information ... other information for consumers probably has other channels that are better. Our task is to find them.

Another facet of our responsibility in learning the technical means of reaching consumers is that of putting information in the place where consumers can easily make use of it. This presents the opportunity of working more closely with the distributive trades. I believe we have only begun to work with people in the distributive trades and we haven't even begun to make the best use of this channel. Our experiences in Michigan have shown that distributive trades people are willing and eager allies in getting consumer information into the hands of consumers. In Michigan each month, we distribute 70,000 printed food buying information bulletins through retail food stores. The bulletins are written by a member of our staff, with the technical and background assistance of people in all phases of the food industry. I have some of these bulletins available if anyone would care to have a close look at them.

So we find the best technical means of reaching consumers - then what? There is an area of our responsibility called - "speaking the language of the consumer" - or - put another way, "starting where the people are". This certainly is not easy. Our audiences and publics vary according to training, experience and ethnic or cultural background.

Informational needs of our audiences vary from the most elementary information to the most sophisticated. When we choose our audience at a given time, we must be sure we speak the language. In this respect, the Muskegon study was a rather be-littling experience. We discovered that some food buying terms, which we had happily assumed were universally understood - weren't.

For example, terms such as "buy foods in season"; "marbling in meat"; "Grade A eggs" were confusing for many homemakers. We learned rather quickly that - with particular audiences and publics - one must speak a particular language. We must give credit for information already received and we must lead our audience on to greater understanding with information they do not have.

This does not end our responsibilities and opportunities in the area of education for decision making. I believe we have yet to make the best use of one of our greatest opportunities - that of making use of the tools which motivate consumers to action. We may find the best way to reach consumers and we may put the information in the right form at the right time and in the right place, but if consumers take no satisfactory action, haven't we wasted time and energy? So what do we do?

I believe we have a real responsibility of stimulating more "why" research and the opportunity of putting this "why" research to work for us. This "why" research is also called motivation research and many people look upon it as gobbledegook, or as strictly a Madison Avenue approach to a problem...or as a rather immoral way of manipulating people. It need not be any of these. The Land Grant colleges and universities are just beginning to delve into "why" research and I think that we have an opportunity to encourage more of it...and a responsibility to make use of the results in our efforts to inform consumers.

Motivation research is a tool that can be used to sell education for decision making just as surely as it can be used to sell automobiles and boats. Motivation research is both time consuming and costly but here is our opportunity to discover if we can make educational information as easy and as much fun to learn...as are other forms of information.

In summary...I believe the problems in informing consumers are no greater than are our responsibilities and opportunities in informing

consumers. Ours is the responsibility and opportunity of reaching consumers with information for decision making. As I see it, the task is three-fold: finding the best technical means of reaching consumers; speaking the language of the consumers and, to tell the truth and to sell the truth - making use of the tools that motivate consumers to action.