

SETTING STANDARDS BASED ON ATTRIBUTES DESIRED BY CONSUMERS

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Setting standards based on attributes desired by consumers should, in my opinion, be considered a three-pronged problem: First, discovering what people's basic needs are; second, investigating what people say they want, and then interpreting their expressed desires to determine the real meaning behind them.

These three considerations are related, but not identical. From work in nutrition and medicine we have a considerable body of data on what people's basic needs are; enough food and water to keep alive, and some protection from the elements. This is an oversimplification, but when these conditions are satisfied we have provided for minimal life. If in addition you feel people should have longer life cycles then they also "need" sanitation and medical aid to safeguard them from disease, and in a community sense they need freedom to act out their lives as they wish coupled with protection against aggression in both the social and economic sense.

Our knowledge about human needs is incomplete - but in comparison we know considerably more about this area than we do about wants. We are finding out about what people say they want, particularly in terms of "things," e.g. a car, a house, a hi-fi set, a certain describable quality of food. We are working hard to understand wants. That is, what these specific wants (things) really signify for the individual. Except in the psychotic person things are not desired and acquired for the mere physical possession of them. They are coveted to satisfy certain feelings and values which may differ from person-to-person. In many instances these satisfactions may have little or nothing to do with recommendations which are developed by nutritionists or counsellors on budgets and family life. The experts are preoccupied with what they believe people should have or do. People are preoccupied with what gratifies their taste, ego, feeling of accomplishment, sense of security, or status with family, friends, and the community.

I do not mean to suggest that the public completely ignores such matters as good nutrition or feeding and educating their children when they buy a sports car. But I do suggest that people follow these so-called reasonable, sensible lines of behavior only when reasonable, sensible behavior is in harmony with their sets of values. For example, unless their own criteria require that they buy books before they buy a television set, they will not do so. And if people really wanted to have the greatest possible life expectancy, and believed our statements about the importance of a good breakfast and the dangers of smoking and drinking to excess - nutritionists and the National Institute of Health would have an easier job of implementing their findings.

We have made some progress in learning about the human being behind the wants, particularly in the psychological and sociological sense. We are learning more about who is the innovator - the taste maker - the person who tries new things and makes them fashionable. At one time you would find fine and expensive recording sets and photographic equipment only in the home of the rich or those who were sort of off-beat enthusiasts. Pleasure boats were owned by people who also had luxurious summer homes with a waterfront. Trips to Europe were the special privilege of the middle-aged rich and the graduation gifts to their children. Now it's almost embarrassing even for a middle class person not to have traveled abroad and it's considered such a reasonable expenditure we can do it on credit and not be thought irresponsibly extravagant. Years ago even cars were a symbol of affluence. Now they have lost their place as a status symbol to items such as those I've just mentioned.

This preamble was intended to point up my conviction that you can't study "quality" in consumer goods without seeing it in the context of the life of a person in the present. However, since I've been asked to talk about how to set standards for consumers based on attributes they want, I'll concentrate on that aspect now. When we consider specific attributes desired in food and clothing, we find they can't be studied properly as a whole, and the parts are most difficult and elusive because of their great number. Clothes can't be considered a topic. You must look at a particular garment, for a specific age group, e.g., vegetables, fruits, etc., fresh, frozen or canned, to be used in specific ways.

I'd like to report on some of the quality measurement problems USDA has tackled with reasonable success. In foods we study, by means of untrained tasters, the ability of people to differentiate degrees of variation; for example, Brix-acid ratios of citrus, or different grades of frozen peas. After the taste-testing phase of the research we introduce products with discriminable variables to a cross-section sample of homes and leave experimental laboratory controls behind us. Here we ask homemakers to cook and serve the products in their usual manner and tell us what they think of them. They are given just one variation at a time - no side by side comparisons - and of course they are not told what the variation is. We want to know what they perceive and prefer in a situation much like their usual one of purchase and use when one item or quality is bought at a time and either liked well enough to provoke a repurchase or disliked enough to make the homemaker susceptible to something different.

In visual perception we are currently trying to find out what people mean when they say they prefer "red" apples. Retailers pay a premium for nearly 100 percent blackish red. They say it is because their consumers want it. They may really be convinced of this or they may insist on the blackish red because bruises and imperfections are more masked by a deep red than by a mottled or light color. We are

doing some exploratory testing in which untrained people look at and score different colors separately, when they are placed side by side, and when they appear in a mixed display. For another visual and attitude problem, that of color-added oranges, we observed purchases, and then asked buyers why they had chosen the color-add or natural color fruit.

In studying fibers we ask consumers what they look for when they shop and their satisfactions with alternative fibers as these relate to specific household and clothing items. In this kind of research we are looking for reactions to different materials, the qualities and attributes desired, the ones they have found to be satisfactory and those about which they have complaints.

In discussing the qualities consumers talk about I'd like to relate them to the problems introduced when such qualities are incorporated into products, and the educational implications. Consumers say they want easy care, drip-dry garments. Do they know what this processing does, in some cases, to the life expectancy of the garment? Do they really think that easier ironing offsets the need for hand-washing of some items and the problems introduced by having to drip-dry clothes in small urban homes? Do they really wash the home-care suits their husbands buy? If they don't perhaps there's a relatively undiscussed attribute influencing such purchases: resistance to wrinkling. This may really be the appealing factor and not the characteristics of wash-ability which have been so widely promoted.

When consumers say they want comfort and coolness how can we be sure what they mean, since these characteristics are related to both absorbancy of the fiber itself and the weave. Consumers talk about cut and fit as if they were a separate set of attributes and they seem to relate them to general appearance and style. But we know that cut and fit are also related to comfort and coolness.

In foods consumers ask for flavor, variety, food value, and convenience. But what does flavor mean - and what will it mean in the next few years? As the young are brought up on the relative tastelessness of prepared products we must modify our ideas. Good wholesome food is not enough; they want variety in food as in other parts of their life, and they are becoming more experimental as they achieve more education and social as well as geographic mobility. Food value is parroted back to us but we often suspect that this is a relatively meaningless term to them. Most don't suffer from rickets or Beri-Beri (they only know about allergies and pep pills) and they do have a fairly well based confidence that most foods are free from a dangerous level of bacteria, are often fortified with nutrients lost in processing, and move to the markets under reasonable conditions of sanitation and temperature. How do we convince the younger generations that in spite of fortification and inspection and organizations such as the Food and Drug Administration and consumer committees, there is a considerable benefit to be gained from following nutritional recommendations?

When we move into cost considerations we have to switch to a completely new framework from the one in which most of us grew up. People have a new morality about spending and "extravagance." Young girls wouldn't marry so young and start families so soon if they had to spend their youth in the kitchen for hours preparing food and acquiring red hands and split nails. Today's young woman has learned to expect a comfort level unknown to her mother. She is less concerned with saving and knows that she can acquire major possessions on credit rather than wait until her husband has worked for a number of years. She feels secure in her economic future.

When most of us were growing up it was quite reasonable, and informed, to assume that some things were unlikely or impossible to achieve in our lifetime. Now we've learned to assume that anything is possible. In studying quality and in teaching consumers what they should look for, one of the first things I think we must learn is to ignore our own past and look at their present and future. If we don't do this there is no reason for them to listen to what we have to say.