THE GROCERY SHOPPING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SINGLES SEGMENT: SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Recently, increased marketing attention has been focused on the growing size and purchasing power of the "singles" market. The research summarized in the paper examines how the attitudes, opinions, and store preferences of 840 single (unmarried) shoppers in the 20-35 year old age group relate to their grocery shopping behavior.

A single is defined as an unmarried person, living alone, with another unmarried person or persons, or with children. Over the past fifteen years, the singles segment has shown rapid growth. In 1979, e.g., singles in the 20-35 year old age group accounted for 25 percent of the U.S. adult population.

The study examined three issues that relate to the grocery shopping behavior of single consumers. These were (1) attitudes toward grocery shopping, (2) the factors important in the store selection process, and (3) the impact of these factors on grocery shopping behavior.

Data were collected from 840 single consumers who were randomly interviewed at 42 supermarkets in the Greater Los Angeles and Orange County areas in April-May, 1981. The stores provided a representative geographical and demographic coverage of the 20-35 year old singles population in this market. The singles responded to 74 questions most of which employed 5 point Likert-type scales.

The results indicated that singles are very time-conscious and are a less price-conscious segment, which is reflected in their lower use of coupons and the lower levels of importance given to price-related factors in the selection of a supermarket. They are a highly mobile group, more likely to change supermarkets frequently. They are also nutrition-conscious, evident from the high priority given to fresh produce in selecting a store.

The results, however, cast doubt on some commonly held perceptions of singles. They are not heavy patrons of the hot food and deli specialty departments found in supermarkets. Singles, also, may not be as innovative as commonly believed. They have not overwhelmingly accepted the new scanner checkout technology and they do not seem to be highly innovative in trying new products.

The study indicated many singles make most of the specific decisions regarding actual products and brand choices in the store. As a result, singles are likely to be impulsive shoppers. In the selection of a store, singles overwhelmingly prefer to shop in one larger store. As supermarkets get larger in response to one-stop shopping strategies, singles are one group likely to be supportive. Singles, however, do not appear to be attracted to many of the service departments (e.g., hot food delis, in-store bakeries, etc.) that these larger supermarkets contain. There also seems to be little interest in purchasing specialty products (e.g., automotive supplies, albums and tapes) in supermarkets. Most singles appear to perceive supermarkets basically as places to purchase more traditional grocery products.

The study suggests that supermarkets need to make changes if they are to more effectively meet the needs of the single shopper as a large percentage of the singles interviewed believe that supermarkets are not presently doing a good job in meeting their needs. Singles will continue to become a more important segment for grocery retailers and manufacturers through the 1980s and 1990s. The results of the study suggest that popular stereotypes of younger singles might need to be reassessed if grocery product marketers are to more effectively meet the needs of this rapidly growing and affluent segment.