

NUTRITION INFORMATION ACQUISITION AND USE:
A LOOK AT THE AGED CONSUMER

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During the 1980's the over 65 age group will show a twenty percent increase in size when compared to the previous decade. This growth rate is second only to the 35 to 49 year old age group. Despite this dramatic increase in size, the elderly segment of the population has virtually been ignored in academic research. Given this group's size and increased buying power, the aged consumer segment appears to be a desirable target for marketers.

Recently, public policy officials and marketing managers have utilized an information processing framework for analyzing consumer behavior. Within these investigations individual variations have been studied. One variable of recent concern is that of age and its effect on information processing. This study was designed to assess differential sensitivity in prepurchase, specifically nutrition, information processing based on age.

Given that comprehension of nutrition information is a prerequisite for its use, the format of information presentation was also investigated. Recommended Daily Allowance and adjectival descriptions of the nutrient contents were the two levels studied. It was believed that the adjectival descriptions would provide an evaluation of the nutrient contents while the RDA format only provided the numerical percentage of the content.

In order to investigate the effect of age on differential information processing, age was categorized as follows: 40 to 50 years; 60 to 70 years; and 75 years and older. Four dependent variables were investigated: the amount of nutrition information examined, the ability of subjects to identify the nutritionally superior brand, and preference of information format.

Through the use of these dependent variables the following hypotheses were investigated:

- H1: The amount of nutrition information examined will not vary across the three age groups.
- H2: The type of nutrition information examined will not vary across age groups.
- H3: There will be no difference across the three age groups in their ability to identify the nutritionally superior brand based on the information format.
- H4: There will be no difference across the three age groups in their stated preference for format.

Each subject evaluated two product classes and selected one brand from each product class. Four brands of bread and six brands of adult cold breakfast cereal were available for examination on two separate display boards. Two information formats (RDA and adjectival) were randomly incorporated into the vitamins and minerals attribute. Subjects were asked questions regarding the nutritional values of the brands and their format preferences.

The subjects participating in this study represented 114 female volunteers from various organizations located in a large city in Southern California. A behavioral process methodology was utilized in the investigation of prepurchase information acquisition. The experimental task consisted of five stages: introduction to the experiment, a practice session, the two shopping tasks, and completion of the questionnaire.

Hypothesis 1: A one-way analysis of variance was performed to test for differences at the .10 level between the age groups. The results of the bread task were not significant, however, the results of the cereal task did indicate a significant difference. The youngest group viewed the greater number of information items while the oldest group viewed the fewest.

Hypothesis 2: Responses were divided into two groups. One group was comprised of those that had examined an attribute for at least one brand while those subjects not examining that attribute were placed in a second group. The sample was then analyzed on the basis of age and whether or not an attribute was examined. Chi-square values were calculated and at the .10 level of significance no significant difference was found.

Hypothesis 3: Chi-square values were calculated and again at the .10 level, no significant difference was concluded. Thirty eight percent of the sample correctly identified the nutritionally superior brand. However, this figure represents both those that viewed the manipulated attribute and those that did not.

Hypothesis 5: Subjects were presented examples of the two formats incorporated in the study. They were asked to indicate their preference. Again, no significant difference occurred between the age groups. Eighty percent of the sample stated a preference for the current RDA format.

Overall, the age of the subject did not appear to directly affect prepurchase acquisition behavior, except for the amount of cereal nutrition information examined. During the cereal task the older subjects did examine significantly fewer nutrition items.

In conclusion, the active/upscale elderly population should be considered a viable segment by the marketing manager.