Best Before/Consume More - a Consumer Cultural Exploration Into Freshness and Regulations of Contemporary Food Consumption

Carl Yngfalk, Stockholm University, Sweden

Freshness remains a largely unexamined product attribute within consumer research. “Best before dates” printed on products influences food acceptance and has an impact on consumption through subjects’ perceptions of freshness and disposal tendencies thereof. This research analyzes this issue by problematizing the relation between discourse constituting subjects’ perceptions of freshness in perishable products and subjects’ tendencies to dispose these objects. Further, this research should be of interest to both producers and retailers of the food industry as well as regulators.

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Our results show that for the low-price product category conditions, consumers that are less familiar with the product perceived that there was a more significant difference in price reduction when it was presented in percentage terms than presented in dollar terms. Marketers often target their communication efforts to audiences with varying levels of product category familiarity. When forming intentions to purchase, consumers with a high level of product familiarity access and process the different price discount framings. On the other hand, consumers with a low product familiarity rely on fewer but salient price cues to make product judgments and purchase intentions. Hence, marketers must tailor their promotion strategies to affect different familiarity groups.

References

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Introduction and method
Consumer preferences and purchase decisions concerning perishable food products are highly influenced by characteristics concerning price and freshness (International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation 2007; Lennernäs et al. 1997; Nordic Council of Ministers 2001). Whilst being a highly individual and perceived characteristic, a most evident source of information intervening with peoples’ perceptions of freshness is the “best before” date. Within the European Union, the best-before date label (e.g. best before 01-01-09) is by far the most used and vital source of package information concerning freshness and it is required by federal law to be present on all food products on the market. In Sweden, where this research is conducted, this has been the issue since 1972, creating a peculiar and interesting research environment.

The best before date, communicating freshness, remains a largely unexamined product attribute. In the domains of food science there has been much research conducted on the date label’s effects on food quality and nutrition content. In our field—the Journal of Consumer Research community—outside the domains of food science, some scholars, with Brian Wansink as vanguard, have briefly touched upon the psychological and economic impact of freshness dating and expiration dates (Kerley et al. 2008; Wansink and Wright 2006). Shortly put, these scholars have rather briefly illustrated (in controlled environments) that the date label bias human senses by producing stigma and, thus, directly influences consumer perception (Wansink and Wright 2006). In a recent JCR article, also, Sen and Block (2009) problematize the issue concerning the freshness date and describe subjects’ willingness to consume products past their freshness dates and how this willingness changes with ownership; in their study, consumers are more likely to consume products out-of-date when they own the products compared to other situations (Sen and Block 2009). While research of this kind focuses largely on the behavioral aspects of the consumer subject concerning their relation to the product attribute, the understanding of discourse intervening with and shaping our perception of freshness in the first place remains quite unclear.

Besides the article by Sen and Block and the brief efforts by Wansink et al to problematize the date label’s influence on consumer culture there are no efforts made to explore freshness and its impact on food consumption in a larger, social perspective and as powerful control mechanism—organizer of, not only consumption but also production.

Conceptualization and aim
Reasonably, consumers prefer fresh over less fresh food. This research problematizes the relation between discourse constituting subjects’ perceptions of freshness in perishable products and subjects’ tendencies to dispose these objects. Traditionally, consumer research and marketing have focused largely on product acquisition and value creation processes, as contradictory to peoples’ disposal tendencies. It is argued here that by analyzing food product disposal practices among not only consumers, but among different actor groups on the market (such as consumers, producers, retailers), a better understanding is gained of socio-cultural, institutional instruments that
channel and ‘direct’ discourse and which, thus, operate as mechanisms of bringing power relations into being. This should be of interest to both producers and regulators.

Through deep interviews with consumers, executive representatives from leading actors in food production, chief state-regulators of food labeling, and retail merchants, this research seeks to further deepen our understanding of how regulative forces in consumer culture and control mechanisms in the supply chain, reach out and intervene with individual subjects’ food disposal tendencies.

Further, this research takes as a starting point the discursive power model presented by Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006). This model highlights forces which produce discourses and practices and seek to define “normal” consumer behavior in “certain consumption contexts” (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006; see also Thompson 2004). Concerning food freshness one interesting and important question to ask is through which discourses subjects’ perception of freshness is constituted and why.

By exploring different subjects’ perceptions of freshness and the best before dates, and drawing on high level theorization of desire (Baudrillard 1998; Deleuze et al. 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Deleuze 2006), as well as power (e.g. Foucault et al. 1998), the aim is to illuminate the relation between flows of institutional forces (in a constituting, productive sense, seen from the collective level) and the subjects and objects these adhere to. The aim is also to bring other actor groups into consumer research than merely the consumer while conducting consumer research.

References
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Scents and Semantics: Do Fragrance Names Influence Consumer Perceptions of Scented Products?
Lauren Yourshaw, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Take a moment and think about the type of products you use or consume throughout your typical day. Now, think about how many of those products are scented. Scent is an integral attribute of numerous consumer products and is used to differentiate products both across and within product categories. The importance of fragrance attributes in the marketing of consumer products is clearly evident by the ever increasing variety of scents being offered. Take for example the laundry detergent category where Tide®, the market leading detergent brand, offers consumers over 15 different scents just for liquid detergent including Mountain Spring, Tropical Clean, Vanilla & Lavender, Soft Ocean Mist and Glacier just to name a few. With all of these fragrance variants inhabiting the marketplace, how do consumers make their choices?

Very little work in consumer research has focused on how consumers process olfactory attributes that are specific to products. Of the research that has been done with scents in the consumer domain, the main focus has been on how ambient scents (i.e. scents in the environment and do not emanate from a product) influence consumer decision making. Findings from these studies demonstrate that ambient odors can affect both variety seeking and information search (Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko 1995) as well as overall product judgments (Bosmans, 2006). Moreover, ambient scents can also enhance consumers’ ability to recall brands (Morrin and Ratneshwar, 2003). But whether fragrance attributes inherent to a product affect product judgments has received limited attention; therefore, the broad goal of this research is to better understand the factors that shape the perception of olfactory product attributes.

Previous research in consumer behavior has shown that verbal labels are one factor that plays a role in the processing of sensory information and manipulating these labels can influence consumer evaluations. Framing of attribute information in either positive or