

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES TOWARD FUNCTIONAL FOODS

Morna Anamaria*

*University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, 26 Gen. Magheru St., 410048
Oradea, Romania, e-mail: amorna@uoradea.ro

Abstract

This paper investigates the factors which influence Romanian consumers' behaviour towards functional food products and verifies the opportunities for further expansion of these products through a survey with a sample of 300 consumers responsible for family shopping. Findings show that there is a large number of factors that influence consumer purchasing behaviour.

To promote public health and to realize the impact of functional foods on health, understanding consumer behavior is important. In addition, assessment of consumers' attitudes, norms and knowledge regarding functional foods in relation to actual dietary patterns and health risk profiles is necessary.

For this a research was being carried out with the objective of evaluating consumer behavior and attitudes regarding the consumption of functional foods.

Key words: functional foods, consumers behaviour, factors, attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers interest in the relationship between diet and health has increased substantially in Europe in recent decades.

Research has amply shown that the consumer is today more concerned about self-care and personal health and is seemingly demanding more information on how to achieve better health through diet.

Trends in population demographics and socio-economic changes also point to the need for foods with added health benefits (A.M. Brata, 2013).

An increase in life expectancy, resulting in an increase in the number of the elderly and the desire for an improved quality of life, as well as increasing costs of health care, has stimulated governments, researchers, health professionals and the food industry to observe how such changes can be managed more effectively (A.M.Brata, 2012).

As a result, today foods are not intended only to provide necessary nutrients for humans but also to prevent nutrition-related diseases and improve the physical and mental well-being of consumers (Menrad, 2003); (Roberfroid, 2002).

The lay notion that ‘all food affects health’ seems more than relevant when it comes to consumers’ food choices (Saba, 2001).

Healthiness and convenience are the two trends that drive the contemporary food markets and the satisfaction of these trends is facilitated by the rapid technological development, which allows for new and innovative products to be produced (Gray et al., 2003).

Functional foods is a relatively new concept and covers food products that are enriched with different kinds of (naturally occurring) components/substances (e.g. vitamins, minerals or probiotic cultures) or modified in a way so that the product provides an additional physiological benefit that may prevent disease or promote health.

Therefore functional foods is a product category which can be characterized as processed with a relatively high degree of technological manipulation compared to basic food products.

Experience with functional foods introduced so far indicates that some consumers seem to approve of such manipulations whereas other don’t.

One possible explanation is differences in consumers’ values, especially the values pertaining to the relationship between man and nature.

Values are defined as abstract concepts or beliefs which pertain to desirable goals or end-states that transcend specific behavior which therefore have a strong influence on people's cognitive processes (Schwartz, 1992).

In general, values are perceived as the criteria people use as guidelines for evaluating their surroundings,

In this sense values are ultimate determinants of people's attitudes and behavior, and consequently the measurement of values is an important tool for understanding and explaining human behavior (Azzurra A., R. Vecchio, 2010).

Several instruments for measuring values have been proposed, some of which have been demonstrated to have cross-cultural validity (Schwartz 1992).

In general, different cultures emphasize and pursue different values. Therefore consumer attitudes towards a rather controversial product category as functional foods might be expected to differ between cultures due to differences in the importance attached to different values.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The main purposes of this paper are to investigate the factors which influence consumer behavior and attitudes towards functional food products and verify the existence of market segments formed by consumers with similar preferences, in order to subsequently suggest and develop

appropriate consumer communication strategies based on market segmentation.

From the available studies, socio-demographic characteristics, cognitive and attitudinal factors emerged as potential determinants of consumer acceptance of functional foods.

For this purpose, a quantitative survey was conducted to explore Romanian consumers' knowledge and attitudes toward functional foods.

A questionnaire was developed to conduct data and administered to a sample of consumers, living in the three cities: Oradea, Marghita and Alesd, respectively located in the North-West of Romania.

The questionnaire used during the survey consists of 30 questions, mostly multiple-choice, divided into five sections that examine, respectively:

- their views about the current level of available information, their socio-demographic characteristics and lifestyles;
- attitude and willingness to purchase functional foods;
- consumer knowledge of the link between food choices and health issues;
- purchasing habits and consumption of interviewees.

RESULTS AND DISSCUSIONS

Socio-demographic analysis of the interviewees displays the predominant presence of women (51.8%) aged between 35-45 years (15.5%) and 25-35 (20%), married with children under 8 years (22.3%), with an average level of education: most of them hold a high school degree (61.2%), but the sample also includes university graduates (13.9%).

In terms of occupation, the sample mainly comprised housewives and employees.

For the evaluation of dietary habits we asked interviewees to indicate the frequency with which they consume fruits and vegetables, legumes and cereals, fried foods, carbonated drinks, snack between meals, high-fat products, white meat and bio products.

To evaluate the lifestyle of the interviewees we asked how often they watched TV, did physical exercise, had check-ups, if they consulted a nutritionist, or attended health centers, if they had a job that forced them to stay seated for a long time.

The replies were analyzed and summarized on a scale of health ranging from 1 = not at all healthy to 5 = very healthy.

Food consumption style was further analyzed by verifying the existence of any specific needs that may affect purchasing decisions and that potentially lead to a greater propensity towards functional foods.

About 62% of respondents claim to be influenced in their food choices by specific requirements related:

- ✚ 31% overweight,
- ✚ allergies/intolerances 12%,
- ✚ heart problems 2%,
- ✚ diabetes 9%,
- ✚ vegetarian diet 5%,
- ✚ sports 3%.

Consumer attention to nutrition is also confirmed by the interest shown by respondents in the nutrition information on labels.

34.1% of interviewees state to read always nutritional information on the label; while 25% claims to read it on a regular basis, particularly in relation to specific products.

Differently 21% declares to read it only on the first purchase and 16,7% only occasionally, whereas just 5% never reads it.

Taking into account consumers' propensity towards functional foods, our research tested the level of knowledge of such products displayed by the respondents and their purchase frequency.

Analysis of the data shows (Graph 1), that consumers are not well informed on the concept of functional foods.

As regards the level of knowledge, only 4,2% of interviewees stated they had never heard of this new type of food product, while 44,8% stated they knew it quite well.

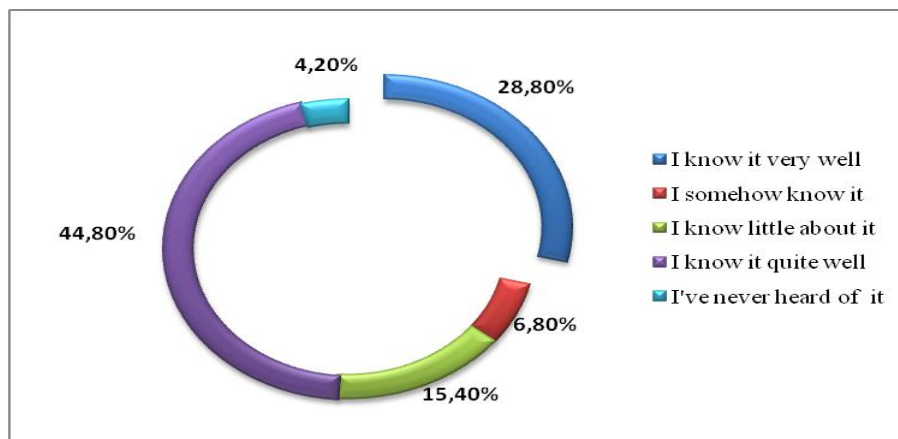


Fig. 1. Knowledge of Functional Food

The term functional foods is still not very common in everyday language, and in many cases generates confusion with the bio products (20%), or functional food is incorrectly associated with food for those who

have health problems (16%). In many cases respondents are unable to give a definition (24%).

The main reasons that lead consumers to purchase such products are:

- ✦ to improve their personal well-being and that of their family members (40%),
- ✦ the need to reinforce their immune system (18%),
- ✦ the need to improve their gastrointestinal functions (17%),
- ✦ consume functional products just out of curiosity (13%),
- ✦ consume functional products without a specific reason (12%).

The results show that the main sources from which consumers obtain information are from:

- ✦ advertising (18%)
- ✦ product labels (31%),
- ✦ doctors/nutritionists (22%),
- ✦ television programs (2%),
- ✦ Internet (3%),
- ✦ specialized press (3%) are ranked at the bottom,
- ✦ while only 1% of the information is acquired through public information campaigns.

CONCLUSIONS

Functional food industry is progressing worldwide.

The study indicates that beliefs about the nutrition and health link, current purchasing and consumption patterns, and positive attitude towards functional foods significantly affected willingness to pay.

Consuming less fat and eating more vegetables and fruits has increasingly become the food habit of the respondents owing to lifestyle changes.

We may conclude that there is more to learn about the consumer. Specifically for the functional food marketer there is need to determine what factors significantly influence the decision to pay.

Overall, this study has contributed to further understanding of the functional food consumer especially concerning health awareness, lifestyle changes and factors encouraging as well as discouraging people to purchase functional foods.

REFERENCES

1. Azzurra Annunziata, Riccardo Vecchio, 2010, Italian Consumer Attitudes Toward Products for Well-being: The Functional Foods Market, *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* Volume 13, Issue 2:19-50.
2. Ares G., Gimenez, A. and Gambaro, A., 2008. Influence of nutritional knowledge on Appetite, perceived healthiness and willingness to try functional foods, 51: 663-668.
3. A. M. Brata, 2013, *Economie Agroalimentara*, Editura Universitatii din Oradea, pag 305-330
4. A. M. Brata, 2012, *Marketing Agroalimentar*, Editura Universitatii din Oradea, pag 40-49
5. British Roberfroid, M. B., 2002, Global view on functional foods: European perspectives. *Journal of Nutrition* 88:S133–S138.
6. Gray, J., Armstrong, G., Farley, H., 2003, Opportunities and constraints in the Nutrition and Food Science functional food market, 33 (5): 213-218.
7. Hailu, G., A. Boecker, S. Henson and J. Cranfield. 2009. Consumer valuation of functional, Appetitefoods and nutraceuticals in Canada. A conjoint study using probiotics 52:257- 65
8. Krystallis, A., Maglaras, G. and Mamalis, S., 2008, Motivation and cognitive Food Quality and structures of consumers in their purchasing of functional foods. *Preference*, 19: 525–538
9. Menrad, K. 2003. Market and marketing of functional food in Europe. *Journal of Food, Engineering* 56:181-188.
10. Saba, A. 2001, Cross-cultural differences in food choice. In L. Frewer, E. Risvik and H. Schifferstein (Eds.), *Food, people and society. A European perspective of consumers' food choices* (p. 233–246). Berlin: Springer.
11. Schwartz, S. H., 1992, Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In: M. P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in experimental , pp. 1-65*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.social psychology.