

Japanese Fruit Consumers

Survey targets produce choices

By Lorraine B. Kingdon

Japan is a leading market for U.S. fresh fruit exporters. Japanese fruit growers currently satisfy only 60 percent of the demand, increasing the opportunity for foreign importers. Yet, importers face a very different market.

Fresh fruit is highly regarded in Japan but not as a necessary, health-increasing part of the daily diet. Fruit is considered a snack or as a luxury item tied to the elaborate gift-giving Japanese culture.

"Despite the fact that Japanese fruit consumption is much different from that of many other cultures, particularly Western cultures, very little research has been conducted to increase our knowledge of the disparities," says Sherry Lotz, assistant professor in the Division of Retailing and Consumer Sciences at the University of Arizona. "Therefore, exporters are left with few tools to penetrate the Japanese market." To help fill this information gap, Lotz conducted a study of Japanese consumer preferences in 1999, in collaboration with Soyeon Shim, professor and director of the School of Family and Consumer Sciences, and Kenneth Gehrt, interim division chair of the Division of Retailing and Consumer Sciences.

Their shopping lifestyle research was designed to define Japanese values and habits. This study is particularly important because the Japanese market is changing. Although work is still a major emphasis, leisure activities are becoming more important, and shopping is one of them.

Today's Japanese consumer is more price conscious and utilitarian, partly because of the recent economic recession. In addition, superstores, discount stores and mail order businesses are successfully competing with the traditional "mom-and-pop" type of markets.

Lotz surveyed housewives, door-to-door, in Tokyo and surrounding areas in Japan. "The Kanto area accounts for more than one-third of all food expenditures in Japan; it also is the headquarters for a majority of leading wholesale operations," Lotz says. A total of 304 usable seven-page questionnaires was included in the analysis.

The respondents were divided into three clusters. Fifty percent belonged to the Creative High Involvement group, the first cluster, which placed most

importance on the majority of the factors they were questioned about. These included how much they enjoyed shopping for fruit, safety consciousness, the desire to get external information about fruits, the importance of appearance and price and their acceptance of imported fruits. They also spent the most money buying fruits.

The second cluster of people comprised 30 percent of those surveyed. They ranked most factors more closely to the first cluster rather than the third group which was less involved. Consumers in the third group did not enjoy shopping or talking about fruits, nor did they eat much fruit. Yet they sought perfect fruit when they did buy.

The first and third clusters were highly concerned about the appearance of fresh fruit, whereas the second cluster was significantly less concerned. This is somewhat surprising with regard to the third cluster because it was less involved with fruit and purchased less fruit than the first and second clusters. The fact that the second cluster was less concerned with appearance was one of the reasons that precipitated its name,



J. Littlefield

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"Practical Moderate Involvement." The consumers in this group are indeed "more practical" fruit consumers and shoppers.

The first two groups worried about additives used for imported fruits and said, "Once I hear about pesticides or wax on fruit from a certain country, I never buy it." They also admitted, "The label saying 'grown in Japan' gives me an easy feeling." Even so, a majority agreed, "It's not a bad idea to import more fruit from other countries so the price becomes lower."

The reputation of particular fruit varieties is important to many Japanese consumers - such as Fuji apples, Florida citrus and Chiquita bananas. Seeing a picture of the growers at the stores helps them decide which fruit to buy.

The research also examined socio-economic factors, Lotz says. Interestingly, 80 percent of the first and second clusters were 36 years and older while only 57 percent of the third group was over 36. The third group tended to be better educated and earn a higher income than the other two segments.

"Yet it's an alarming trend that this third consumer group also held more negative attitudes toward purchasing fruit and did not intend to purchase much fruit in the future, according to the survey," Lotz says. "Therefore, fruit marketers may need to create unique strategies for this segment, to maintain a vital Japanese market in the future."

On the plus side, the Japanese are apparently willing to pay a premium price for fruit, making the market attractive to U.S. exporters, she notes. "As long as exporters remain aware of some of the Japanese consumer's unique orientations, such as safety and aesthetics, the market is open to fruit from abroad.

The decline in Japanese fruit production also bodes well for U.S. exporters, who have secured a portion of the Japanese fresh fruit market, according to Lotz. "We hope the results of our study will enable U.S. fruit exporters to design strategies that will increase their market share." ❖