

MARKETING OF SELECT FOOD PRODUCTS: ETHICAL PRACTICES AND CUSTOMER SENSITIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Studies in the field of marketing ethics often revealed that ethical gaps do exist between marketers and consumer. The existence of these gaps could be exceedingly counterproductive for marketers. In order to effectively narrow these gaps, marketer must first have a better understanding of causes of these gaps. To this end, this study reveals how consumers perceive about the practices followed by the marketers and their sensitivity in buying decision making. This paper examines the extent of ethical values and legal norms followed by the marketers in their marketing practices. The study is based on a well defined schedule of five point Likert Scale. The results generally indicate that consumers are sensitive towards ethical marketing practices and prefer those marketers who respect social and ethical values and practice ethical practices and follow legal norms.

KEYWORDS

Marketing Ethics, Food Products, Ethical Practices, Legal Norms.

PROLOGUE

Ethical concerns in business and predominantly in marketing have significantly increased over the past decades. These concerns have instigated more theoretical developments in marketing ethics (e.g., Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986), and have facilitated more empirical studies in the area (e.g., Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993). These studies, however, have focused mainly on the seller side of the buyer or on the ethical decision making process of marketers. Very few studies exist that have observed ethical issues in the marketplace from the consumer's perspective for food products, and most of existing studies focused on very specific and limited situations. Consumers are major participants in the marketing process and ignoring them in ethics research may result in an imperfect understanding of marketing ethics issues. Furthermore, a proper understanding of the consumers' perceptions and beliefs about various ethical issues and problems in the marketplace is essential for effective marketing management. According to Hunt and Vitell (1986), studies in marketing ethics have revealed that it is likely that individuals and groups will differ in their ethical behavior and decisions. The existence of ethical differences between marketers and consumers could be extremely counter productive for marketing management. It can be argued that ethical decisions are made by consumers as well and that these decisions are likely to influence the consumer's acceptance or rejection of the marketers' products. "Consumers over time will normally recognize the marketers that attempt to be responsive to various ethical and social factors in the marketplace." Thus, a marketing manager must have a thorough understanding of any ethical differences between marketers and consumers as well as the determinants of these differences. This research is designed to investigate ethical sensitivity of consumers towards marketers. Knowledge regarding the ethical perceptions and beliefs of marketing professionals relative to those of consumers will not only help us with our understanding of the ethical gaps but will have significant implications for marketing managers in their attempts to narrow these gaps.

AN OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

As noted above, there is a certain scarcity of empirical research on current ethical issues that affect the food sector. A few studies are available which contribute certain insights, mostly indirect ones, to the present article. Mary E. Guy (1990) in **Ethical Decision Making in Everyday Work Situations** carried out a study that presents the ten core values that surround ethical dilemmas, demonstrating the way in that personnel can sensitize themselves to the values involved in a problem and reach a solution which maximizes the corporate values. W. Michael Hoffman and Brown Kamm (1994) in **Emerging Global Ethics** identifies ethical issues faced by transnational corporations, the possibilities for international cooperation after the cold war as well as regional business ethics issues from around the world. Authors explore various transnational codes of business conduct, ethics and international law, business and cultural diversity, ethics and economic development around the world. Miller, G.D. (2000) in **Benefits of Dairy Product Consumption on Blood Pressure in Humans**: have found that there is consensus among experts that low fat dairy products, namely milk, cheese and yogurt, may reduce the risk of high blood pressure decreasing heart diseases by approximately 15 percent and stroke by approximately 27 percent and recommends three to four servings of low fat dairy products daily for optimal blood pressure regulation. Gueguen, L. (2000) in **Dairy is best for Building Strong Bones**: have revealed that strict vegetarian diets containing no milk may increase the risk of osteoporosis. Dr. C. Thilakam and K. Nagarajan (2001) in **Unethical Marketing of Children' Food: Issues and Challenges** have raised the concern against the unethical strategies to promote food products to the customers, particularly children which are the major cause for rise in obesity level among children. The marketing of "junk food" is done in such a way that it makes them attractive to young children although it provides very low nutrient content. Though these food products are claimed to be manufactured using the best technology under most hygienic standards by trained professionals, they generally tend to be High in Fats, Sugars and Salts (HFSS foods) contributing to an environment of more obese people with diet-related non-communicable diseases like the cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, certain forms of cancer and high blood pressure. Brian Wansink (2005) in **Marketing Nutrition: Soy and Functional Foods** attempts to encourage consumers to eat healthier diet. The study discloses five "Drivers of Healthy Food Consumption" and explains core values of convenience, variety, and value in the context of obesity epidemic and how to reverse the drivers of obesity. Dr. Tamulrkar Venkatesh (2007) in **Contemporary Food Marketing- Challenges and Ethical Issues**, argue that it is not only in the hands of the food companies or the Government or the interested groups at large to create a healthy society but a more patronage and sustaining is required from the consumers themselves to make the world a better place to lead a quality life. Dr. C. Thilakam (2008) in **Issues in Ethical Food Marketing** the study reveals that there is an ever increasing demand from the modern day consumers for the contemporary foods, while sellers also resort to unethical practices that could not be clearly identified unless examined with a eagle's eye, thereby creating an ill effect on the society through the use of various media that necessitated the need to create regulations and restrictions on the marketing practices. Sharma &



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HYPOTHESES

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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FINDINGS

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Sharma (2011) in **Legal Provisions and Ethical Values in Retail Sector: Study of Convenience Goods** reveals that ethical values and legal norms being moderately followed by the retailers who deals in convenience goods.

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Most of the literature so far on the subject has focused primarily on the supply chain side of the marketers or on the ethical decision making process of marketers. Thus keeping in mind the above studies, the objective of the present paper is to explore the sensitivity of consumers in making purchase decisions regarding ethical values and legal norms followed by the marketers in food sector.

The data for the present study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected using questionnaire. To know the perception of consumers about the ethical practices followed by the marketers, primary data was collected from sixty (60) respondents from Jammu City. Random sampling technique was used to select the consumers.

The data collection schedule was developed after reviewing lot of literature (Thomas White 1993, Rezaque and Howe 2002, Sarma 2007, Viridi and Kaur 2007, Sudeep Chatterjee 2007, Bhattacharya and Mazumdar 2009, Sharma and Sharma 2011) and gathering experts' opinion. The schedule has ten items of general information, forty statements relating to product quality, quantity, price, composition, behaviour, legal provisions. Except general information statements, all the statements were based on five points Likert Scale.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

The survey was conducted on sixty (60) consumers selecting through random sampling from Jammu city. The proportion of female respondents figured higher (67%) than their female counterparts (33%). The majority of respondents (72%) were married and 80% of respondents were Hindus followed by Muslims (12%). The proportionate age of respondents was between 20-30 (35%) followed by 31-40 (33%), 41-50 (15%) and above 51 (17%). Sixty percent (60%) of respondents were post graduate & above, about two third of them (67%) were in the service sector and 63% belonging to nuclear families. About one third of the total respondents incurred expenditure between 15000- 20000 thousands and 73% of them earned above Rs 40,000 per month. Finally, about 43% of the total respondents opined that the purchasing decisions were taken by their family head (Table 1).

FACTOR ANALYSIS

The factor analysis technique was used for data reduction and data purification. The factor analysis was carried out by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 17.0 Version). This was done with Principal Component Analysis along with varimax rotation for summerisation of total data into minimum factors. The statements having factor loading less than 0.5 and Eigen value less than 1 were ignored for further analysis. Accordingly nine factors were emerged (Table 2)

RELIABILITY

To check the reliability Cronbach's Alpha and Split half values were calculated. The data found reliable as the mean values of both the groups (Group I = 3.35 and Group II = 3.27) were almost similar. Cronbach's Alpha value also found reliable as its value was 0.70 (Table 3)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis of consumer's perception about the ethical practices followed by the marketers in the food products category was carried out by considering the various dimensions and is covered under nine factors. Factors are explained as underneath:

Factor 1: This factor covers six items namely "Transparent Product Information", "Printed Price", "Legal Issues", "Product Adulteration", "Expiry Date" and "Fresh & Pure Products". About half of the respondents found marketers not providing transparent information (M= 2.70) but charging fair prices (3.28). About 60% of the total respondents believe that marketer's sell their products well before expiry date (3.58) but reluctant to follow legal norms for selling their products (2.78).

Factor 2: This factor take in "Product Quantity", "Product Composition", "Impact on Health" and "Unethical Practices". More than half of the respondents opine that marketers prefer that product composition which yields more profits (3.56) but half of the respondents say that they confront with the marketers if they follow unethical practices (3.28).

Factor 3: This factor includes "Exaggerate Packaging", "Safe Packaging" and "Pressure Selling". Under this factor about 40% of respondents feel that marketer offers normal packing (3.26) while 40% respondents feels neutral about pressure selling.

Factor 4: This factor encompasses "Quality", "Underweight" and "Awareness about Consumer Rights". Almost all the respondents have shown preference for quality of products (4.51) whereas half of the respondents believe that they are aware about their rights as consumer (3.20).

Factor 5: This factor embraces "Prescribed Standards" and "Consumer Complaints". Here, only 37% respondents believe that marketers follow prescribed standards (3.20) whereas 40% respondents believe that marketers do consider consumer complaints (3.06).

Factor 6: This factor covers "Awareness Campaign by Govt. Agencies" and "Need of Stringent Law". Half of the respondents opine that campaigns started by the various govt. agencies play an important role in creating awareness among the consumers (3.15) but 95% respondents feels that there is a need for more stringent laws to curb unethical marketing practices.

Factor 7: This factor covers "Relation between Brand Value and Quality", "Access to all Varieties" and "Concealing Limitations". About three fourth of the respondents believe that the quality and brand value are interrelated (3.85) but 42% of respondents believe that marketers doesn't allow access to all the varieties of product (2.81).

Factor 8: This factor considers "Deceptive Advertising" and "Hygienic Conditions". About 90% of respondent deems that marketers indulge in deceptive advertising (4.05) and about half of the respondent experiences that marketers doesn't maintain hygienic conditions at their workplace.(2.71)

Factor 9: This factor covers "Authenticity of Quantity" and "Quantity Available". About 33% of the respondents believe that marketers provide authentic product quantity (3.20) and 38% respondents think that marketers possess sufficient product quantity (3.33).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper has sought to take a fresh look as to how consumers perceive about the practices followed by the marketers in food product category. The study reveals that most of the marketers' follow deceptive marketing practices and conceal the limitations of products which are marketed making consumers very sensitive in making buying choices for food products. Thus there is a need to have a regular and effective vigilance over the marketers' practices to check the unethical marketing practices and those who indulge into it should be prosecuted under the existing laws of the land. The appropriate public and legal authorities need to play their role by creating awareness among the consumers about their rights and how to lodge a complaint and seek compensation in case they become victims of unethical practices. State government must evolve a comprehensive public awareness campaign for informing general public about the redressal mechanism and institutions available at district or state level which address to the unethical trade practices.

To uphold consumer goodwill, loyalty and the resultant captive market share, marketing practices have to conform to the ethical norms and standards operative in local and global environment. However, the moral and ethical sensitivity can be developed among the marketers by developing the code of conduct for them so that they can avoid legal and punitive action and can create credible public image and goodwill in the market.

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TABLES

TABLE -1: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Between 20-30	21	35
31-40	20	33
41-50	09	15
51- Above	10	17
Gender		
Male	20	33
Female	40	67
Qualification		
10 th	01	02
12 th	02	03
Graduation	21	35
PG & Above	36	60
Marital Status		
Married	43	72
Unmarried	17	28
Religion		
Hindu	48	80
Sikh	05	08
Muslims	07	12
Others	-	-
Occupation		
Business	12	20
Service	40	67
HW	03	05
Others	05	08
Family Type		
Nuclear	38	63
Joint	22	37
Family Expenditure (in Rs.)		
Between 5000-10000	15	25
10000-15000	12	20
15000-20000	20	33
20000-Above	13	22
Family Income		
Between 10000-20000	-	-
20000-30000	04	07
30000-40000	12	20
40000-Above	44	73
Purchase Decisions		
Individual	18	30
Elderly	15	25
Family Head	27	45

Source: Self Survey Data-2011

TABLE 2: FACTOR ANALYSIS

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Factor Loading	% of Variance Explained
F1	3.16			13.33
Transparent Product information	2.70	1.07	.524	
Pure Product	3.03	1.08	.719	
Charge printed price	3.28	.92	.683	
Marketers sell products well before expiry	3.53	1.03	.799	
Legal norms followed by marketers	2.78	1.00	.666	
Sells adulterated products due to consumers ignorance	3.66	.93	.663	
F2	3.13			10.81
Offer same quantity as claimed	2.70	1.09	.614	
Product composition which yield profits	3.03	1.16	.769	
Offers products which are good for health	3.28	1.14	.571	
Confront marketers for unethical practices	3.53	.99	.790	
F3	3.16			8.04
Exaggerate packaging	3.26	.88	.741	
Pressurize to make purchase	3.10	1.00	.716	
Proper & safe packing	3.13	.83	.843	
F4	3.68			7.65
Preference to quality products	4.51	.67	.600	
Underweight products	3.33	.91	.686	
Knowledge about consumer protection act	3.20	1.13	.799	
F5	3.06			7.45
Conforms to the prescribed standards	3.20	1.08	.807	
Consider complaints	2.93	1.02	.736	
F6	3.87			7.25
Awareness campaign by govt. agencies	3.15	1.14	.589	
Need for more stringent laws	4.60	.58	.785	
F7	3.29			7.11
Quality and brand value are interrelated	3.85	.65	.801	
Provide access to all varieties	2.81	.96	.554	
Conceal limitations of products	3.21	.84	.606	
F8	3.38			6.75
Deceptive advertising	4.05	.59	.671	
Hygienic conditions	2.71	1.09	.630	
F9	3.26			5.47
Quantity available with marketers	3.20	.70	.529	
Authenticity of product quantity	3.33	.68	.791	

TABLE -3: SPLIT HALF RELIABILITY AND CRONBACH'S ALPHA

	Before Factor Analysis	After Factor Analysis
Group I	3.35	3.35
Group II	3.27	3.29
Cronbach's Alpha	.7011	.7001

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