

Illinois Consumers Talk About...

Buying Produce

Introduction

The information in this series was gathered by The Lab for Community and Economic Development in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. LCED talked to six focus groups in Illinois to ask people about their perception of and concerns about foods, specifically genetically engineered foods. The six focus group locations included three rural areas and three urban areas throughout northern, central, and southern Illinois: Rock Falls, Rockford, Latham, Champaign, Waterloo, and Carbondale.

Buying Criteria

"...I still would not want to go to the product with six people over there. I'm kind of like that with buffets; everybody else is breathing on them, leaning over them, touching them..."

[Rockford participant]

"One thing that always irritates me when I go shopping is that, a lot of times, it's so hard to find good fruit that has not been bruised, dinged-up, or sitting there forever at Wal-Mart or even Schnuck's."

[Waterloo participant]

What consumers look for:

- Ripeness
- Smell (especially fruit)
- Texture
- Firmness
- Color
- Freshness (not moldy)
- Attractiveness
- Cost

While searching for the freshest produce, consumers perform an elaborate inspection process: they smell it, feel for ripeness, and analyze the texture. Despite their meticulous procedures for buying, which they are satisfied with, they are also bothered by produce being handled by multiple previous customers. Focus group participants said they are more likely to pass up produce that other customers are touching and breathing on. Furthermore, consumers feel that finding quality produce is difficult and time-consuming. Consumers also said they judged overall store quality by the quality of the produce section.

Freshness

"The cucumbers—you pick them up, and they slide around in your hand, they're so greased. When I buy a cucumber, I wash them off with soap and water. They're so slimy."

[Carbondale participant]

"I had a friend that brought in some purple cabbages. I thought they were rotten. I didn't understand it, and she said that they dye cabbage white. So I'm thinking to myself, 'What do we know about all our fruits and vegetables?'"

[Carbondale participant]

"...I do a lot of late-night shopping, and produce is out sometimes; that's very frustrating."

[Champaign participant]

"Tomatoes are my pet peeve; it could take me five minutes to pick out one bag of tomatoes."

[Champaign participant]

Focus group participants complained that stores mask the true quality of the produce under grocery store treatments such as wax and artificial coloring.

Some produce problems, however, cannot be disguised with store additives. Several focus group participants commented on the difficulty in finding fresh, ripe, store-bought tomatoes. But As one urban Rockford resident said, "Tomatoes are kind of tasteless from the grocery store," adding that vine-ripened tomatoes, although better, are also more expensive.

Other Illinois residents complained that store-bought produce was bruised, spoiled, and rotten. Consumers also complained of slim produce pickings during the evening hours.



Produce Origin

"Usually, fresh costs more. It's nicer to have fresh produce, but when you're on a budget, it's sometimes just not feasible to get all the fresh fruit that you want..."

[Waterloo participant]

"I have very few problems with allergies as a result of consuming local honey versus non-local honey. My eyelids used to be glued together, there was so much irritation, but that local honey made a difference."

[Carbondale participant]

"As far as picking, if I'm going to buy an onion, it depends on what I'm making. If I'm making a big pot of chili, I'll get a bigger onion. If I'm making something smaller, I'll get a smaller onion."

[Rockford participant]

"I go up and down with produce. Sometimes we eat a lot of lettuce. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes I'll just grab a bag of the pre-shredded kind, like if we're having tacos. It's easier for us to go that way."

[Rockford participant]

Focus group participants are also concerned with produce origins, clearly preferring to know where the fruit and vegetables they bought were grown. A focus group member, for example, said that she made a point to buy local honey. Others said they preferred the taste of fruit from one state over another.



Just as commonly, focus group members expressed that they did not know where their produce was grown. Focus group participants said they tend to shop at stores offering high-quality produce. Several participants even reported changing grocery stores if produce from one was consistently of inferior quality.

Household eating habits influence the amount and type of produce purchased. The majority of customers purchase basic produce that they know they will consume, like lettuce and tomatoes. Consumers' choices depend on the kind of recipe they will make or how large a meal they will cook.

Implications

In this study, Illinois consumers:

- Consider many factors when selecting produce, such as appearance, firmness, texture, smell, freshness, and their household produce consumption habits.
- feel that buying produce is time-consuming and that they have to work harder to find better quality produce.
- are constantly struggling to minimize the tradeoff between quality and affordability.

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