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CONSUMER JUDGEMENT OF BABY FOODS, PARTICULARLY ECOLOGICAL PRODUCTS

All over the world, a growing portion of land is being farmed in an ecologically friendly way and producing ecological foodstuffs for the market. Ecologically produced baby food is carving out an especially large market share; it is therefore important to be informed about the demands, expectations, and preferences of consumers in this market. As research method we used focus group interviews (qualitative data) and face-to-face interviews (quantitative data). According to our results, consumers are satisfied with the taste of baby foods. Their awareness of bio-products, especially of bio-meats, is very low; therefore it is advisable to communicate the quality and domestic origin of meats used in baby food much more effectively. Customers' opinions hold that Hipp and Kecskeméti brands complement each other well. Among the factors influencing customers, the role of the district nurse is the most significant; this was confirmed by the test results of the focus group interviews. The rate of impulsive purchasing is extremely low, so it is advisable to apply instruments in marketing communication that force rational thinking. Based on the study, complex customer models of Hipp, Kecskeméti, and Nestlé brands were created.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, a growing portion of land is being farmed in an ecologically friendly way and producing ecological foodstuffs for the market. This is partly due to the greater environment conscientiousness induced by negative environmental changes, sustainable farming, and the rising demand for healthy food from consumers. The animal production industry does not meet the desired quantity of such production in Hungary. Yet animal origin raw materials are used in considerable quantities in baby food, providing protein and other nutrients for balanced growing.

Despite the fact that the average number of children per household is decreasing, parents want to satisfy children's needs to the highest level possible. Ecologically produced baby food is carving out an especially large market share; it is therefore important to be informed about the demands, expectations, and preferences of consumers in this market if producers want to enlarge their market share with the help of innovative marketing measures.

The basic aim of this study was to give an account of the development of ecological production and processing and consumer tendencies with special regard to animal products, carrying out target group investigations in the field of baby food, analysing consumers' preferences, and making suggestions that can be turned into practice in the following fields:

- preferences towards home-made vs. fabricated baby food
- factors influencing the frequency of purchase and consumption of baby food
- motivations to increase consumption
- ingredients of good quality baby food
- awareness of nutritional advantages of organic raw materials
- the possibilities of sale, packing and packaging
- product development policies

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research work was carried out in the Institute of Economic Sciences at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences of the University of West Hungary.

We used the so called focus group interview as a qualitative method of primary research among several qualitative marketing research methods. As a first step we randomly choose 52 women who were asked to fill in a screening questionnaire. The participants of the focus group were selected from among them based their answers. 15 women met the criteria: mothers between 18–40 (50-50% each) with babies or small children and at least secondary education. The research was based on three big circles of topics with several elements:

- consumer behaviour and shopping habits factors, motivations, and preferences related to the quality of baby food-product structure and range analysis

Among the primary research methods, the quantitative method was based on personal (questionnaire) interviews. In the preliminary sample test, we planned to ask 200 persons in the county of Győr-Moson-Sopron. This large number of persons to be interviewed was necessary in order to have sub-groups with adequate numbers of participants chosen on the basis of different background variables with the aim to achieve statistically reliable results. With the "random walking" method we approached 200 persons. There were only 138 willing to cooperate among them. 105 of the filled-in questionnaires were fully completed, so they could be evaluated.

The prepared questionnaires were based on close questions, which considerably eased the evaluation later on. For some of the questions a semantically differentiated scale was used. The methods of the Likert scale were also applied.

The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate consumers' preferences and involved the following topics:

- analysing the consumers' brand awareness, the function of reference groups, and the differentiation according to Point of Customer
- exploration of product choice preferences
- evaluation of the product's chemical parameters by the consumer
- evaluation of the product's physical properties by consumers
- exploration and classification of informative media
- consumers' awareness of product lines linked to the product and the effectiveness of brand association
- analysing the supported recall level of logo – brand – firm coherence
- measuring the effectiveness of one of the special PR methods applied by the producer
- analysing the free recall level of advertising slogans applied by the producers of the product groups involved in the investigation

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results of focus group interviews

Statements and particular suggestions made in the investigated field of topics can be turned into practice by the producer. Several of them can be regarded as new and novel scientific results.

- Consumers' faith in bio-products, especially in bio-meats, is very low, therefore it is advisable to communicate the quality and domestic origin of meats used in baby food much more effectively.
- Indications regarding the nutritional value and ingredients meet legal regulations but do not satisfy consumers' needs.
- The size of packing, re-sealable packaging, and assembly packing should be optimised according to consumer needs in the process of product development.
- Hungarian consumers reject hard-wall plastic packaging due to security and environmental awareness.
- The enlargement of applied distribution channels and the rationalisation of the applied advertising activities seem to be suitable.
- The applied colour codes do not transfer any information to customers, so its optimisation would be advisable.
- The customers are satisfied with products' taste-range and their combinations, but greater attention should be laid on the composition and consistency; the taste and odour characteristics of meat products should be developed as well.

3.2. Results of personal interviews

The distribution of baby food according to trademarks reflected the market share of the producers concerning the purchased products involved in the investigations.

Table 1

The order of factors influencing the decision to buy baby food (%)

	Friend, nurse		*Advertisement*		*Randomly*		*Price*		*Other*	
	rank	*%*	*rank*	*%*	*rank*	*%*	*rank*	*%*	*rank*	*%*
Based on the chosen product										
Total	1.	47	3.	15	4.	7	2.	25	5.	6
Hipp	1.	47	3.	17	4.	7	2.	22	5.	6
Kecskeméti	1.	41	3.	11	4.	6	2.	36	4.	6
Nestlé	1.	42	3.	18	5.	6	2.	24	4.	9
Holle Bio	1.	60	-	-	-	-	2.	20	2.	20
Based not on the chosen product										
Hipp	1.	45	3.	10	4.	8	2.	33	5.	5
Kecskeméti	1.	39	3.	17	4.	14	2.	28	5.	3
Hipp and Kecskeméti	1.	62	2.	15	3.	8	2.	15	-	-

Table 2

Places of purchase of baby food (%)

	Hyper-market	*Super-market*	*Drug-shop*	*Chemists-shop*	*Bio-shop*	*Other*
Based on the chosen product						
Total	29	29	28	5	8	2
Hipp	28	26	32	5	7	3
Kecskeméti	34	27	30	-	8	-
Nestlé	30	28	30	5	5	3
Holle Bio	33	17	17	-	33	-
Based not on the chosen product						
Hipp	31	36	18	4	11	-
Kecskeméti	30	23	30	5	8	5
Hipp and Kecskeméti	19	38	13	13	19	-

Analysing the preferred brands we can see that about one third of the Hipp customers (32%) regard Kecskeméti baby food as an alternative choice, although those products are not produced from bio-raw materials and therefore represent a lower price category. About half of the interviewed persons (46%) also buy Kecskeméti products. The opinion of customers holds that Hipp and Kecskeméti brands complement each other well. Though high quality Hipp products are made from bio-raw materials and are in a high price category, they can be well combined with baby food of the Kecskeméti brand, which has a favourable price and is produced from "only" strictly controlled raw materials. Producing both trademarks, Hipp covers different segments of customers and has thereby secures a leading market position.

In one of our questions we asked about factors influencing purchasing decisions (*Table 1*).

Among the influential factors, the role of the district nurse is the strongest, which was confirmed by the test results of the focus group interviews. The rate of impulsive purchasing is extremely low, so it is advisable to apply instruments in marketing communication that force rational thinking. The questioned persons found advertisements and press articles informative despite the results of the focus group interviews where mothers said that they were only slightly influenced in their decisions by newspaper advertisements addressed to the target group. The price was the definite factor for one quarter of respondents. Although Hungarian customers are very price-sensitive, in the case of baby food this factor is not as prominent and the suggestions of the reference group should be considered.

In the following question we examined the possible purchase places of baby foods (*Table 2*).

Hyper- and supermarkets were the most common places of purchase, in second place were, with a negligible difference (1%), drug shops, in third place were bio-shops (8%), followed by chemists' shops with a share of 5%.

In the next question responders chose from 6 parameters referring to product quality in the form of 6 close questions and then in the form of open questions. Thus we could create 13 groups of measures on the basis of the evaluation's parameters. We could observe that, compared to the answers to the close questions, priorities considerably altered (Figure 1).

Based on our research work we elaborated the complex customer models of those choosing the products of Hipp, Kecskeméti and Nestlé companies with reference to the different demographic and marketing specific and non-demographic characteristics (*Figures 2, 3* and *4*).

Based on the research results, typical Hipp customers can be defined as follows: They are mainly women between 25–30. They predominantly live in towns. Their total family income per month is between net 100 and 300 thousand HUF. They prefer shopping in drug-shops, but they regularly visit hyper- and supermarkets as well. Friends and nurses influence their decision-making. Their information channels are extensive: they regularly collect information from district nurses, the Internet and the printed press, but TV commercials can also influence their decision-making in buying baby food. None of these information channels can be regarded as especially significant. Therefore the application of a complex marketing communication system is the most efficient way to reach this market segment.

Based on the research results, typical Kecskeméti baby food customers can be defined as follows: They are women in the age group of 20–30 living in small towns. Their total family income is between net 100 and 200 thousand HUF per month. They prefer hypermarkets to bio-shops, but they shop as frequently in supermarkets as in drug-shops. Beside friends and districts nurses, price is the greatest influencing factor when making their decisions. They regularly collect information from the district nurse, and from the Internet and printed press, the influences of which are the greatest.

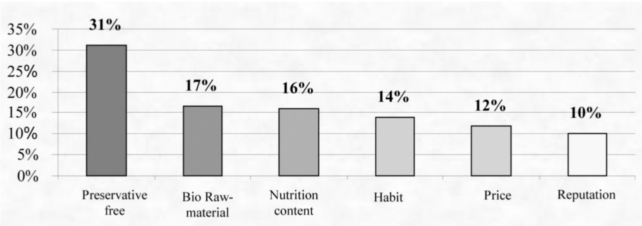

Fig. 1

Close order of the product choice influencing quality parameters

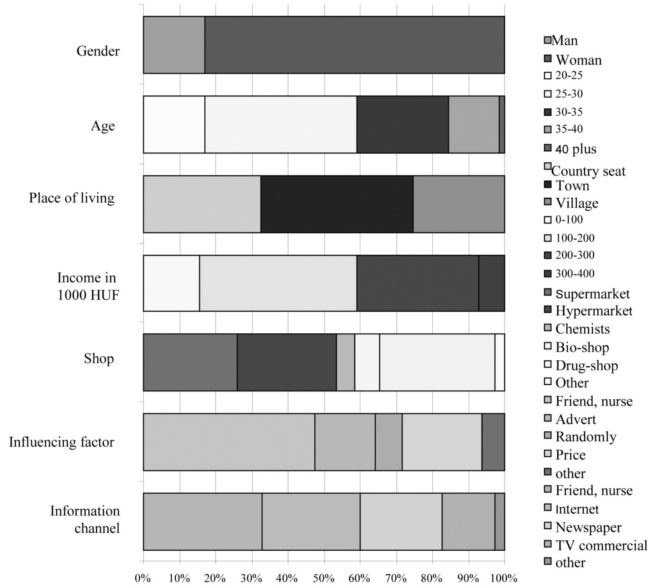

Fig. 2

Complex customer model of Hipp products

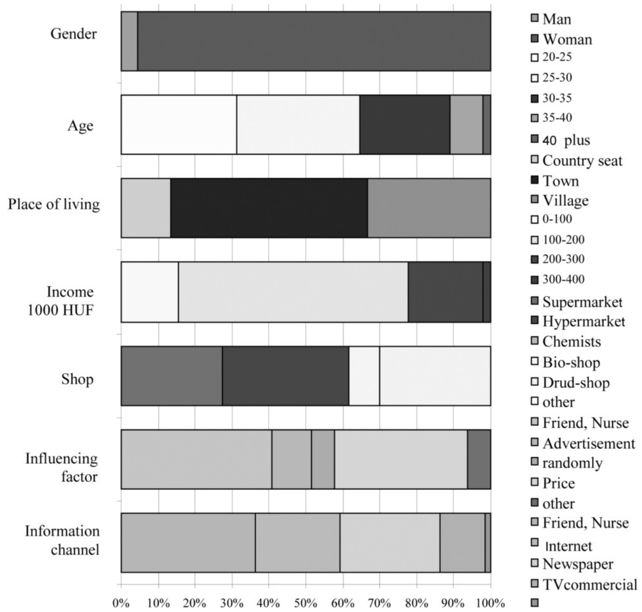

Fig. 3

Complex customer model of Kecskeméti products

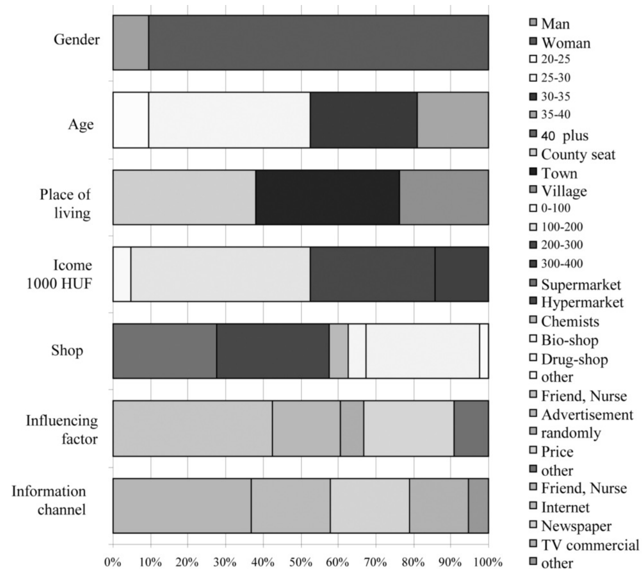

Fig. 4

Complex customer model of Nestlé products

4. CONCLUSIONS

We applied the method of comparative analysis to investigate the three complex customer models and we can conclude the following:

1. A greater proportion of men are Hipp customers.
2. The youngest generation of parents (age group 20 and 25 years) are most frequently Kecskeméti customers. The reason could be that, because of their age, they do not have as a secure an existence as older parents.
3. The age group 30–35 are the greatest Nestlé customers.
4. Those living in villages and small towns mainly buy Kecskeméti baby food.
5. Families with the lowest financial resources also prefer Kecskeméti products.
6. Reference groups of friends and district nurses are the most influential factors for Hipp customers.
7. Price is most often the most influential factor among those who buy Kecskeméti products.
8. Hipp customers show the most balanced use of information channels.

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