

Time's Up: The Importance of Expiration Dates to the Consumer

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CONSUMER BEHAVIORS AND EXPIRATION DATES

Abstract

This study addressed the number of consumers who check the expiration dates of milk and yogurt prior to purchase. I observed 214 individuals of various ages: 95 men and 119 women. I conducted the survey at a large retail superstore located in a rural town in the southwestern United States. I collected data by naturalistic observation for two hour blocks on a Friday evening and a Saturday morning. The results showed that most consumers did not check the expiration dates and women checked more frequently than men. Education concerning expiration dates is implicated.

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Time's Up: The Importance of Expiration Dates to the Consumer

Expiration dates are found on many consumer goods, including milk and yogurt. These dates are designated as “best before”, “use by” and “sell by.” “Best before” specifies the date after which the food’s quality is diminished and is found on cereals, snacks, baked goods and some canned goods. “Use by” indicates the date after which a product should not be consumed and is used for products like eggs, refrigerated dough, and yeast. “Sell by” indicates the last day a product should be sold, though most remain safe to eat or drink up to seven days past the date and is the designation most often found on meat and milk (Tslros & Heilman, 2005).

Consumers are often confused by these designations (Tslros & Heilman, 2005). Whitworth (2001, as cited in Tslros & Heilman, 2005) stated that in a recent Food Standard Agency survey, more than one-fourth of all consumers found labels difficult to understand and one third did not know the meaning of “use by” or “best before” dates. A Consumer Review Report from A.C. Nielson Company found that 91% of United States consumers surveyed indicated they were aware of expiration dates and 88% of them frequently or always looked for these dates, yet most were unable to differentiate between “use by” and “sell by” terminology (Falkman, 2002, as cited in Harcar & Karakaya, 2005).

Perishable food scares during the past fifteen years, including salmonella in milk, have precipitated health concerns among consumers (Tslros & Heilman, 2005). These researchers found that consumers who perceive a high level of risk in perishable products checked the expiration date more frequently than consumers who did not perceive a risk. Some consumers recognized the seriousness of using out-of-date products, but did not always pay careful attention to expiration dates because they lacked information concerning the meaning of the dates (Harcar & Karakaya, 2005).

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Expiration dates are sometimes ignored if they are not readily noticeable. Harcar and Karakaya (2005) found that consumers were most likely to check expiration dates prior to purchasing a product if the expiration dates were easily found and that consumers ceased checking the dates if they had difficulty finding them. They speculated that the size, color, or font, as well as placement on product packages, could contribute to the consumer's difficulty in locating the date.

According to the 1990 Food Marketing Institute's Trends Survey, 72% of people check product expiration dates and women are more inclined to check than men (Mueller, 1991, as cited in Harcar & Karakaya, 2005). Harcar and Karakaya reported that 63% of North American consumers check expiration dates.

My study addressed the question of how many consumers checked the expiration dates prior to purchasing yogurt and milk. I conducted the study to determine if consumers in a rural community in the southwestern United States considered the expiration date to be of value prior to purchase. By checking these dates, consumers demonstrate their awareness of the existence of the dates as well as the importance of purchasing products that would not pose a health risk when consumed. The failure to check the dates could indicate that consumers need education concerning these dates.

Unlike the studies cited above where the researchers collected their information through self-reported measures (i.e. surveys), I investigated the actual behavior through naturalistic observation. It may be that, due to a social desirability effect, the percentage of people who actually check expiration dates will be lower than the percentage of people who claim that they do.

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I predicted, based on previous research, that the majority of consumers would check the expiration date prior to purchase and that a greater number of those consumers would be women. These results would imply that consumers are aware of expiration dates and consider them to be important.

Method

Participants

I unobtrusively and discretely observed 214 adults; 95 men and 119 women. I selected the participants at random from a large retail superstore (Wal-Mart). Since there was no interaction, it was not possible to determine if they were all residents of the rural southwestern Utah town where I conducted the study. The participants appeared to be of various ages and race; however, these demographics were not considered in this study.

Materials

I required no materials for this study.

Procedure

I positioned myself in the dairy section of the Wal-Mart Supercenter. Prior to beginning my observations, I examined the milk and yogurt to determine the expiration dates' location. As consumers randomly approached coolers and selected yogurt or milk, I watched to determine if the consumer looked for the expiration dates on the products prior to placing them in to their grocery carts. The observations occurred on a Friday from 5:00 until 7:00 p.m. and on a Saturday from 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m.

Results

Results indicated that 56% of individuals did not check the expiration dates prior to purchase. Of those observed, 47% of women checked the dates; 53% did not. For men, 41%

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checked the dates and 59% did not.

Discussion

Do the majority of consumers check the expiration dates on yogurt and milk prior to purchase? The results indicated that most do not: 56% of the shoppers observed did not check expiration dates. These results differ from those reported in previous studies and failed to confirm my predictions. Harcar and Karakaya (2005) reported that 63% of consumers check expiration dates. According to Falkman (2002, as cited in Harcar & Karakaya, 2005), a Consumer Review Report from A.C. Nielson Company stated that 88% of consumers surveyed indicated that they frequently or always looked for these dates. Mueller (1991, as cited in Harcar & Karakaya, 2005), reported that in the 1990 Food Marketing Institute's Trends Survey, 72% of people check product expiration dates. The percentages of the present study were considerably lower than these studies.

Previous studies proposed three major reasons to explain why consumers do not check expiration dates. The first was that consumers do not understand the designations of "best before", "use by", and "sell by". The second was that consumers may not perceive any health risks associated with the products, and the third was the lack of visibility of the expiration date. The participants of my naturalistic observation study may not have checked for expiration dates for one or more of these reasons. But what explains the discrepancy between the percentage of consumers who do not check dates in mine versus previous studies? The answer(s) may lie with the methods used to study the behavior and/or the local demographics.

When asked whether or not consumers check expiration dates before purchase, the majority may *claim* that they do, when in reality, they do not. Respondents may deliberately or subconsciously report checking dates because doing so is perceived as responsible and thus,

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socially desirable. Such social desirability cues are not present when participants are unaware that their behavior is being observed. This may account for high percentage of people who do not check dates.

The town where I made my observations is relatively small (less than 50K). It may be that a “small town mentality” may lead to greater trust in the local grocer. That is, these consumers may believe that their grocer will keep track of the dates for them, removing products that are at or near their expiration dates. Alternatively, for whatever reason, individuals residing in smaller towns may not be as concerned with the safety of the products sold at their local grocery store.

The present study found that 47% of women checked expiration dates as compared to 41% of men. This result is consistent with my prediction and the previous findings of the 1990 Food Marketing Institute’s Trends Survey that women are more inclined to check expiration dates than men (Harcar & Karakaya, 2005).

There are several directions for future research. One might focus on self-reported versus actual “date checking” rates in rural versus urban areas. A second is to investigate the apparent gender difference in the behavior. Is it simply that women are more health conscious than men (Girois, Kumanyika, Morabia, & Mauger, 2001)? A third is to investigate ways in date checking behavior might be increased and sustained over time.

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References

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