

You're So **Very** Special!

Food producers and marketers are increasingly exploring the link between demographics and food choice, proving that we're not as unique as we thought we were • By Doug Burn

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Maple Leaf Consumer Foods recognized an emerging category opportunity two years ago, leading to the launch this March of 20 refrigerated ready meal solutions in supermarkets across Canada. The Simply Fresh lineup of single-serve entrées, meal kits and soups met the demand for nutritious, great-tasting food, as well as the often-conflicting need for quick and convenient meal preparation.

The product introduction was guided by demographic and psychographic research and marketing. Kathy Whidden, vice-president of Innovation and Brand Development for Maple Leaf Consumer Foods, explains: "We did not choose a demographic group so much as a psychographic group – the quick fixers – that are time pressed and who want convenience but don't want to sacrifice the nutrition, tastes and textures of fresh foods."

In marketing the new product line, Whidden bought national coverage for television advertising, but concentrated her radio spots on four of Canada's six largest urban regions, areas where dual-income households are most prevalent and thus where couples and families have the least time to prepare meals. The radio ads played during the morning and evening rush hour periods, precisely when time-stressed consumers are racking their brains for meal options. The couponing and in-store sampling similarly targeted supermarkets and mass merchandisers in neighbourhoods where dual-income households are most common.

After the four-week media launch in April, Whidden and her marketing team are continuing to participate in women's, health and wellness trade shows. Psychographic research finds that consumers who seek out information on new products are the sort of people that attend these shows, and are the most influential and trusted sources of information for their peers.

Jennifer Bylok, in a presentation to the third annual Marketing To Women Conference in April, introduced a new model for identifying these one-in-10 consumers who are so influential in making or breaking a new product introduction. Bylok, who is research director of Toronto-based TNS Canadian Facts, distinguishes these "future shapers" from the more familiar "early adopters" by noting

that the latter are often simply seeking and discarding one novelty after another. In contrast, future shapers are noted for seeking out and sharing information about new products, and as a result are considered the go-to person among their peers for recommendations within their category of expertise. Future shapers, she says, "value authenticity and originality. They're driving the demand for refrigerated meals rather than frozen because they want their meals to be more homemade."

Future shapers are found in every age, income and ethnic demographic but they have enough characteristics in common to be reached on a modest budget. Bylok's research finds that they are significantly more likely to shop at specialty food stores than other female consumers (40 per cent vs. 23 per cent); are twice as likely to seek out new and exotic products (28 per cent vs. 13 per cent); and are significantly more likely to purchase better-for-you products (68 per cent vs. 58 per cent) and to read labels before buying (61 per cent vs. 50 per cent).

Because of this, small and prospective marketers can bypass the often-fruitless quest to land initial orders with major chains, and instead pitch their goods in person to owners and managers of specialty stores where future shapers shop.

Demographic data from the census can identify those cheese shops, gourmet stores, fish markets, bakeries and health food stores located in just the right trading areas. Lactose-free milk, for example, sells best among populations from regions such as Asia, where lactose intolerance is common. High-fibre breads and cereals are popular with every demographic group, but particularly with older consumers who tend to suffer more from irregularity.

Age is no longer as relevant as it once was in marketing, meaning that marketers now focus on life stages as predictors of consumer behaviour. Life stages figured prominently in the "MasterIndex of Canadian Women Consumers" prepared late last year by Environics for MasterCard Worldwide. The survey of 2,000 Canadian women found that consumer behaviour changes most when women begin having children. Up to that point they are enthusiastic consumers, valuing novelty and aesthetics, and, explains David MacDonald, are "very responsive to new and innovative foods that are easy to prepare and offer something to brag



about.” MacDonald, group vice-president of Environics Communications, adds, “But suddenly, when they become moms, affordability, nutrition and speed of preparation overwhelm all other variables in purchase decisions.”

Woman between the ages of 35 and 54 without children under the age of 18 at home have much the same consumer behaviour, whether they have never had children, or if their kids have passed their 18th birthday. This group, which accounts for one quarter of women consumers, is “the most overlooked by marketers,” says MacDonald, despite the fact that while they may buy less food because their households are smaller, they are prepared to pay a premium. These consumers, he says, were leaders in the adoption of fair-trade coffee and organic foods.

In Quebec, the most promising consumer prospects for Maple Leaf’s Simply Fresh ready foods would probably appreciate a free jar of Dijon mustard, a donation to Greenpeace and a free ballot for a Whistler ski vacation with every purchase. That’s because it is the affluent, aging, health-conscious Quebecers who buy a third more frozen dinners, buy 50 per cent more Dijon mustard, own more than twice as much ski equipment, and are 60 per cent more concerned about the environment than their peers. Canada-wide, older, health-conscious consumers would prefer a free jar of horseradish, Worcestershire or cranberry sauce, a donation to a civil liberties organization and a ballot for a set of golf clubs.

Again, we know that because “birds of a feather flock together,” or more specifically, because food and condiment preferences correlate very highly with certain leisure activities, media usage and social values when these and income and age variables are compared across Canada’s 55,000 census neighbourhoods.

Rupen Seoni, vice-president of Client Services for Environics Analytics, utilized the company’s PRIZM CE consumer segmentation system to provide an analysis of possible target groups for refrigerated meals. While other

market researchers have followed on PRIZM’s pioneering work of the 1970s in geodemography, Environics Analytics was the first in Canada to integrate car ownership, media viewership, income, age, consumer purchases and other hard data with social values research gained from 60,000 interviews via its Social Values PRIZM CE Link. This combination

enables marketers to understand the why as well as the what of consumer behaviour.

Whether basic or sophisticated, demographics and psychographics are simply an extension of the age-old marketing adage “know your customer.” ^{FC}



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