

The effectiveness of offering food samples to increase purchase in supermarket settings

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Consumer purchase involvement, food samples, store, retail management

Abstract

This study contributes to researching and strengthening the role of the concept of purchase decision involvement in the management decision processes. The results of the study provide information on how to boost sales innovation in supermarkets and which product categories to choose in order to encourage shopper involvement and improve customer loyalty. Products included in the survey are items usually found in the shopping basket of today's consumers that have been assessed as important items of store promotions in several national retail markets in Europe. It is important to discuss how to accommodate the costs arising from new operations and how this would reflect on other operations and merchandise categories. The study examines consumer attitudes in the context of the Southeast European market. The paper suggests that offering food samples moderately affects the level of consumer purchase involvement. The results for all three categories of food included in the empirical study show that providing grocery store shoppers with an opportunity to taste food while they are shopping is an effective way to change their attitudes. The proposed hypotheses were confirmed.

1. Introduction

There are a number of ways in which retailers can engage consumers and make their in-store shopping experience fun (e.g. by widening the range of new products available or providing them with an opportunity to try out products and taste food). Consumers ask shop assistants for more detailed information about the performance and characteristics of durable goods, whereas convenience goods consumers appreciate light-hearted information and superficial cues about product characteristics and quality. Food products taste tests can be one of those cues.

Involvement can play an important role in purchase decisions, the categorization of merchandise, and communication in marketing as well as consumer research in general. It is a major multidimensional marketing concept that brings together consumer behavior and marketing constructs (Chernev & Hamilton, 2009). When the involvement level is high, customers search for more information, pay full attention to ads, evaluate the information with full concentration, recognize and comprehend advertising, and discuss the information in an advertisement (Petty, et al., 1983). These authors suggest that different features of an advertisement may be more or less effective, depending upon a person's involvement with it.

Lack of research on the effectiveness of offering food samples in the context of involvement was highlighted by Puccinelli et al. (2009). In terms of importance in the consumer decision process in a retail environment, involvement is placed side by side with purchase goals, memory, attitudes and atmospherics. They find that examining involvement will allow a better understanding of the consumer decision process because it is found in three (need recognition, information search and evaluation) out of five stages of the decision process. Although thus far

several types of involvement components have been reported in the literature (Zaichkowsky, 1985; 1994; Jain & Srinivasan, 1990) which Michaelidou & Dibb (2008) sought to categorize, no single construct can satisfactorily describe, explain or predict involvement. Involvement plays a role in attracting consumers' attention towards the relationship marketing tactics (Andrews, et al., 1990). It actually deals with specific situations that stimulate customers' involvement with products or services.

Kinley et al. (2010) argue that one of the most important factors that affect customer behavior is involvement. It can be with any object, such as a product, person, or service. Our central concept is purchase involvement (Slama & Tashchian, 1985; Mittal, 1989; 1990) and the theoretical construct of Mittal was selected for the examination in the present study, primarily for its simplicity and secondarily for its capacity to examine the dimensionality issue across multiple products. Its essence is that shoppers care about what they buy and are motivated to make a better choice.

Mittal (1989) understands involvement more broadly and extends its role in purchase as a fourth stage of the consumer decision process. He defines the purchase-decision involvement concept as the extent of interest and concern that customers bring to bear upon a purchase decision task. It is analogous to the situational involvement of Rothschild (1979). The term suggests it is specific to a situation and thus temporary in nature, i.e. seems to be affected by situational variations. Situational factors have great influence on the evaluation of attributes that are important to the customer's selection (Gehrt & Yan, 2004). This four-item construct takes into account the significance of a person's good or bad brand choice, which can in turn drive marketing actions. Observations by Malär et al. (2011) contribute to an authentic approach to branding and suggest that consumers form a stronger emotional connection with a brand that validates who they are right now (reflection of "my true self") than with a brand that promises help to achieve an ideal self. Everything that can be used by a retailer to generate feelings in a consumer at the moment of purchase warrants examination for potential effects on purchase involvement. Involvement means the attachment of a customer with a specific product or service that leads to customer satisfaction (Mittal, 1989). Customer satisfaction plays an important role in establishing a connection between a customer and a product or brand (Brakus, et al., 2009).

Highly satisfied customers are willing to pay more and very dissatisfied customers are definitely not willing to do so (Homburg, et al., 2005). We consider that offering food product samples in a store can be a regular situational context for promotional reference that can enhance shoppers' satisfaction and thus motivate them to make a better choice.

The more involved an individual is with a social activity or setting or the more attached one becomes to a brand, service or product, the more likely it is that the person will share information within their social network and spend more time and money than individuals with low involvement. Food samples provide sensory stimulation of various intensity (Cox, et al., 2005). The possibility to taste the food at the time of purchase reduces the perceived risk of purchase thereby facilitating the decision process. Exploring the phenomenon of involvement has revealed certain patterns that can help retail management devise new ways of engaging customers and making shopping fun.

2. Hypothesis development and research design

High and low involvement can play different roles for consumers on different shopping occasions. An important attribute of food that should satisfy a consumer is its taste. Taste is

hard to describe with words (by making comparisons, recommendations, etc.). Hence, the main research question in this study is whether tasting food samples in a store can be used to support the purchase process. Can it reduce the perceived risk of not making the right choice?

To design the measurement scale, we adopted the dimensions of purchase-decision involvement proposed by Mittal (1989) that showed how four components load successfully as a single coherent measurement: 1) degree of caring, 2) perceived brand differences, 3) importance of right brand selection and 4) concern with the outcome or perceived risk. In the case of beverage (beer) the factor loadings in Mittal's study were fairly the same. Shoppers' attitudes were examined in two situational variations: a) a traditional shopping context without food samples and b) a context in which shoppers were provided with an opportunity to taste food samples while shopping. This scale was also successfully tested by Beharrell & Denison (1995), who use the terms: Care, Variety, Importance, and Concern. The scale helps us to assess the degree to which the availability and tasting of food samples while shopping increases purchase involvement and affects the purchase decision as per the theory. The following merchandise categories were included: flavored dairy, cured meat and packaged biscuits (Figure 1). These foods were selected because they are the main objects of promotional activities in some transition retail markets in Southeast Europe. Retailers often include products from these categories in their advertising campaigns.

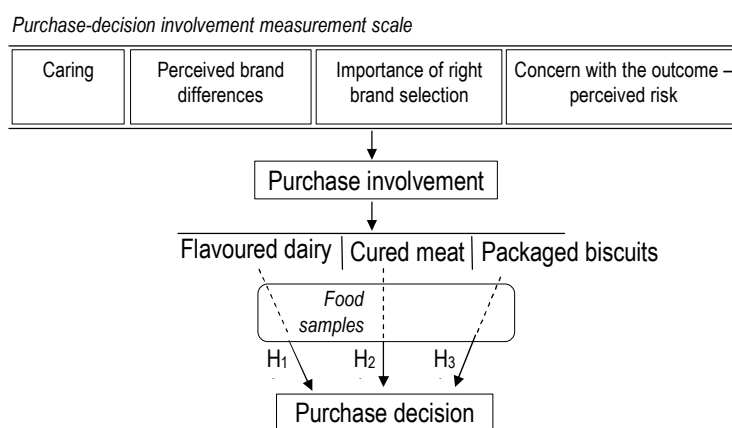


Figure 1: Measurement scale and model framework.

The assumption is that the availability of samples from these three food categories can enhance the effect for every item on the scale. Hence, the following three hypotheses are proposed:

H₁: Food samples of the flavored dairy assortment increase purchase-decision involvement.

H₂: Food samples of the cured meat assortment increase purchase-decision involvement.

H₃: Food samples of the packaged biscuits assortment increase purchase-decision involvement.

The purchase involvement questionnaire consisted of 16 statements categorized in four measures that are theoretical antecedents of consumer involvement according to the purchase-decision involvement concept. Each measure was presented with four statements. Two of them provoke a conventional attitude toward the merchandise category (one statement reads: "How important is it to me to choose the desired ____"), while the remaining two elicit their attitude towards availability of the food sample (one statement reads: "Tasting ____ sample before purchasing it reinforces my desire to buy ____"). Answers were scored on a 5-point scale, with 5

being “fully agree”, “very important” etc., and 1 being “not agree at all”, “not important at all”, etc. Data were collected by face-to-face structured interviews conducted in December 2015. Respondents were asked to answer the questions to the best of their knowledge and ability. A total of 362 questionnaires were acceptable for further analysis. The survey was conducted on a random sample of shoppers in the stores of six different supermarkets in and around Zagreb. Each store provided a tasting of food products within the product category examined. The survey was pilot tested on a sample of graduate students studying business (n=11). The pilot test results indicated that the instrument was sound. The study included 55% female respondents (Table 1), and the majority of respondents came from households with three or more members.

Sex	Age		Household size		
Female	201	<21 years	58	1	60
Male	161	21-30	106	2	113
		31-40	77	3+	178
		41-50	60	n/a	11
		51+ years	61		
Total	362				

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation using SPSS 20.0 was applied as a variable reduction technique. The results of the analysis show that four factors account for 63.2% of variance and each item has adequate loadings (>.54). We used AMOS 23.0 to model structural relationship posited by our conceptual framework. To demonstrate that the proposed model is fit to the data, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used. As a result of construct reliability and convergent validity tests, 12 statements were kept in order to achieve the most acceptable fit (CMIN/DF 3.288, $p = 0.106$; GFI 0.925; CFI 0,891; RMSEA 0,072). In the developed model, each latent measure points to three observed variables (statements). Using the paired samples T-test method, the differences in shopper attitudes, i.e. means and significance of those differences depending on the context, were established. Next, we estimated the standardized regression weights of each measured variable in order to predict the factor.

3. Research results

3.1. Results

Findings indicate that in all product categories there is a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) in attitudes depending on the situational context (Table 2). It follows that consumer attitudes would be inclined towards a higher level of purchase involvement if given a chance to taste food samples while shopping. This would reduce their hesitancy and the purchase risk. The largest range in the means by situational context was observed in the ‘perceived risk’ item in the category of packaged biscuits. Consumers are likely to feel concerned about the outcome because they perceive the purchase to be riskier as they are not familiar enough with brand differences in this category. Tasting increases their involvement in the brand decision.

Product category	Situational context	Carin g	Perceive d brand differences	Importance of right brand selection	Perceive d risk	Mean (SD)	t	p
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Flavored dairy	no sample	3,58	3,10	3,02	3,20	-.50	-3.20	.049
	food sample	3,96	3,21	3,77	3,94	(.31)		
Cured meat	no sample	3,32	3,05	3,06	3,62	-.65	-5.98	.009
	food sample	4,01	3,73	3,93	3,97	(.22)		
Packaged biscuits	no sample	3,20	2,61	2,90	3,08	-.69	-5.13	.014
	food sample	3,98	2,92	3,62	4,02	(.27)		

(1=min, 5=max)

Table 2: Means across product categories, factors and situational contexts

The second objective of our study was to determine whether an individual measure carries weight in the purchase involvement construct variable and what that weight is.

Measure		Construct variable	Estimate
S1	<---	<i>Caring</i>	0.395***
S2_sam	<---		0.716***
S4_sam	<---		0.501***
S5	<---	<i>Importance</i>	0.282**
S6_sam	<---		0.630**
S7_sam	<---		0.518***
S8	<---	<i>Brand differences</i>	0.620***
S9_sam	<---		0.557***
S10_sam	<---		0.814***
S13	<---	<i>Perceived risk</i>	0.191
S14_sam	<---		0.471***
S16_sam	<---		0.865

Level of significance ***: $P \leq .001$, **: $p \leq .01$, *: $p \leq .05$.

Table 3: Standardized regression of weights to predict factor variables.

Table 3 compares attitudes in a conventional situational context against a context where a food sample is present by comparing the weight of items by measures such as *S1* and *S2* against the weight of items by measures *S2_sam* and *S4_sam*. The findings show that by generalizing in all cases (with the exception of *S9_sam*) the variables in the food samples context carry greater weight by construct variable, supported also by high significance. It should be noted that in the 'perceived risk' item, there is insufficient significance in two variables; however, there too the significant variable '*S14_sam*' carries greater weight than '*S13*'.

Statistically significant differences were found in consumer attitudes when making purchase decisions in two different contexts. This shows that the availability of food samples in all three proposed merchandise categories increases purchase-decision involvement, thus confirming the hypotheses H_1 , H_2 and H_3 .

3.2. Discussion and implications

The study examines the effect of food samples on purchase involvement by means of a measurement scale, a relatively quick and simple methodology that has proven to be adequate in marketing empirical research (Bearden, et al., 2011). Displaying food samples can be regarded as a type of presentation format. Shoppers are drawn to experiences when they encounter vivid information because it produces more images in their minds, causing them to feel more involved and present (Roggeveen, et al., 2015). The sensory-rich environment enhances the product consumption experience. When consumer concerns regarding product and brand attributes are alleviated, the level of their satisfaction increases. Each of the selected food categories in the study has a different level of importance in the human diet, which was the basis for creating the value proposition. Therefore, the reaction of consumers to the samples

within a particular category was somewhat different. It is evident that the introduction of this marketing activity, i.e. providing food samples for tasting, would improve the purchase-decision process and thus increase the level of consumer satisfaction. The strongest effect would be achieved in the packaged biscuits category (H_3), followed by cured meat (H_2) and flavored dairy (H_1). Perceived brand differences are considered to be the most important context in the concept (Mittal, 1989); however, this study has shown that the availability of food samples increases the effect in that context as well. If we look at the concept, food samples would affect the importance of right brand selection the most because samples evidently help shoppers to choose brands that offer a more pleasurable taste sensation as an antecedent of purchase-decision involvement.

How can retail management provide the necessary conditions for these additional services in the store and bear their costs? They must be prepared for the fact that this would change the store image and possibly the format formula. One should also not forget that the higher the level of purchase involvement, the more likely the shopper will decide to shop elsewhere for a brand that is not available in the store at the time of shopping, rather than accept a substitute readily or under duress (Hong & Sternthal, 2010). Moreover, if the retailers decide to adopt this sales approach we suggest they should communicate that offer by emphasizing additional value provided to customers.

3.3. Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations. Although it was conducted in a real-world setting on an appropriate convenience sample to test the hypothesized intensity, its results cannot be generalized to the population and specific time of the year when the survey was conducted. In addition, the shoppers' perception on different markets with different dietary habits will probably have different attitudes to brands of merchandise categories examined. The study shows that the theoretical construct was selected well; however, in future research it would be prudent to use other measurement scales for testing involvement extending the range of merchandise included. It would also be useful to investigate the effect of food sampling on purchase-decision involvement using other merchandise categories or retail formats. Future studies should explore other effects on the management when using this type of sales approach.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to gather information about consumer attitudes by means of an in-store survey and fit the consumer statements into the model framework using the theoretical measurement scale of the purchase-decision involvement concept. The data collected through survey were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and paired sample T-test. In all three merchandise categories included in the survey, the shoppers showed that food samples created a different and, above all, stronger effect on each of the four items of the scale. In the second phase of the research using standardized regression weights analysis, a significant difference accounted for food samples versus conventional shopping environment per construct item. The current study is significant because it provides an insight into consumer attitudes towards a less common approach to retail sales of flavored dairy, cured meat and packaged biscuits. The results should encourage supermarket retail management to develop an environment that will stimulate customer involvement and create an enjoyable and fun shopping experience for them.

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