Consumer Research at the FDA

Yuanting Zhang, Ph.D.
Linda Verrill, Ph.D.
Consumer Studies Team
Office of Analytics and Outreach
Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
Food and Drug Administration
Activity

- Which kind of fat is higher in calories:
  1) Saturated fat
  2) Polyunsaturated fat
  3) Both the same
  4) Not sure
Results

• “both the same” is the correct answer

Consumer Studies at CFSAN

- Since 1975
- Staff of 8 social scientists
- Graduate degrees in psychology, sociology, agricultural economics, and public policy
- Use scientific methods to learn about and understand human behavior to help the Center fulfill its mission
Consumer Studies at CFSAN

• Informs policy
  – Supports rule-making

• Offers evidence for litigation

• Informs communication efforts
  – Labeling
  – Advisories
  – Public information and education
Recent Consumer Studies Publications


Consumer Research Methods

• Focus Groups (or other qualitative research)
  – Explore and generate ideas

• Surveys
  – Generate information about prevalence

• Experimental Studies
  – Generate information about cause-effect relationships
Focus Groups and Interviews

- Qualitative research
- Why’s and how’s behind consumers’ attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and feelings
- Convenience samples
- Findings cannot be generalized
- Report actual words, phrases, behavior
Focus Group Examples

• What attitudes, beliefs, and feelings do consumers have in response to options for:
  – Menu labeling in restaurants
  – Natural or whole grain claims on the food label
Natural Focus Groups

- Fall, 2013, 7 groups (Washington, DC; Greenbelt, MD; and Philadelphia, PA)
- Two groups were conducted with purchasers of organic food
- Segmented by gender and education (high and low)
- Consumers were shown examples of ice-cream labels with and without “natural” claims.
Natural Focus Group Study
Label example
Claim: All natural
“Natural” Focus Group Findings

Quotes:

“‘Natural’ has real ingredients that you can identify. When you see ‘natural’, you don’t expect it to have a lot of preservatives or synthetic ingredients. Synthetic to me means created in a laboratory, ‘not natural’.”

Woman, Lower Education

“My mother always tells me you don’t need food coloring in your food. That is what fruits are for. Color comes naturally; there is no need to add color to food.”

Man, Higher Education, Organic
Surveys

• Quantitative research
• Structured questionnaires
• Measure consumers’ knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and self-reported behaviors
• Randomly drawn samples can produce population estimates
Survey Examples

• Food Safety Survey
  – Risk perceptions
  – Food preparation practices
  – Knowledge of food advisories and food recalls
  – Food allergies

• Health and Diet Survey
  – Using the Nutrition Facts label
  – Diet/disease relationships
  – Dietary supplement usage
How often do you use serving size information on a food label when deciding to buy a food product?

NHANES 2005-08

- Female
- Male

HDS 2008

- Female
- Male

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>NHANES 2005-08</th>
<th>HDS 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely/Never</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Serving Size 1 Cup (28g) Serving Per Container about 3
What is the meaning of Serving Size on a food label?

NHANES 2007-08

- Female
- Male

2011 NFLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount people usually eat or Makes it easier to compare foods</th>
<th>Amount people should eat</th>
<th>Refused or Don’t Know</th>
<th>Amount people usually eat or Makes it easier to compare foods</th>
<th>Amount people should eat</th>
<th>Refused or Don’t Know or Other**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experimental Studies

- Quantitative research
- Show cause-effect relationships
- Random assignment to conditions
- Statistically compare responses for different research conditions (i.e., label formats)
- Web-based consumer panels
Experimental Study Examples

• Fortification claims on snack foods
• Nutrition Facts label formats
• Front of package nutrition information
• Claims and statements (e.g., gluten-free, health claims)
Fortified Snack Foods
Experimental Study

• Do consumers think that foods such as cookies, chips, and candy, that have been fortified with vitamins and minerals are healthy?
Summary

- Consumer Studies uses social science research methods to study issues pertinent to the Center
Questions and Comments

• Yuanting.Zhang@fda.hhs.gov
• Linda.Verrill@fda.hhs.gov