

The title: CONSUMER AWARENESS OF FUNCTIONAL FOODS IN HUNGARY

Kind of presentation: Paper

Related topic: Value-Added Food Marketing through Consumer Studies

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**Problem statement:**

Over the past few decades the so-called *civilization diseases have spread very fast* in the world and they have been responsible for most of the deaths for a long time. Researches were started into several directions and they soon revealed that it is *the changed lifestyle of man that is responsible for the spread of chronic illnesses*. Several factors lie in the background of these findings: increasing environmental pollution, busy way of life, less exercise, while our nutritional habits have been unchanged for hundreds of years. This short summary points out that there is a close relationship between civilization diseases and our nutritional habits (*Verschuren, 2001*). The outlined make the food industry face new challenges. It is forced to develop new foodstuffs which, due to their health protective effects, slow down the spread of civilization diseases that hit humankind, and at the same time increase the time people are free of chronic illnesses. *These types of foods are called functional foods*.

**Objectives:**

*The main objective of the research was to trace the changing market conditions by analysing the changes of the consumer behaviour of functional foods. In the second step a marketing strategy was elaborated. It helps to spread functional foods on the market in Hungary.*

**Procedures:**

The database of the *primary research* was provided by a representative survey conducted country-wide with 1200 people in Hungary, which targeted the consumers' attitudes towards functional foods. This questionnaire-based survey was carried out in September, 2007. Sampling was representative on the structure of the country's population by gender, age, education, settlement size and regions (*Scipione, 1994; Malhotra, 2001*). *Random walking method* was used to ensure total randomness in order to select people with equal chances. The main point of the method was that the interviewers were given *start points*, so they knew where to start random walking pattern in the selected streets of randomly chosen settlements. During the *personal interview carried out in the home of the interviewed people*, *standard questionnaires* were used, when the respondents were given a card set with the optional answers, and their answer was written on the questionnaire by the interviewer.

The respondents' answers were processed by mathematical-statistical software, SPSS 15.0 version. In case of *scale-type questions mean scores and ratios* were calculated. In case of other questions, the data were presented in *cross-tables* and expressed in ratios. *Chi-square test* was used to test the difference and to define the level of significance of

ratios. The multivariable statistical analysis was based on ANOVA. Factor and cluster analysis of the living variables were used to define the segments of the population (Scipione, 1994; Malhotra, 2001).

**Results:**

It was found that, in general, the consumption frequency of functional foodstuffs is low in almost every category. The share of daily consumers is relatively high (41.5%) in case of foods containing minerals (e.g. calcium) and in case of probiotic products (26.9%). The frequency of consumption is especially low in case of lactose-free dairy products, dietary supplements, effervescent tablets of vitamin and minerals, and of organic foods. Among the background variable groups women, young people and those with higher qualifications and living in the capital consume functional foods more frequently.

In general, the higher prices of the functional foodstuffs set a limit to frequent consumption. According to 84 per cent of the respondents, the prices of functional foods are extremely high and hit the confines of tolerance. Consumption – besides prices – is also influenced by whether consumers are aware of the meaning of the different food components and their effect on health or not (Table 1.).

**Table 1. Consumers’ knowledge on various components of functional foods**

Food component	Share of those who	
	know	do not know
	the component, %	
<i>Vitamins</i>	89.7	10.3
<i>Dietary fibre</i>	85.1	14.9
<i>Minerals</i>	82.0	18.0
<i>Beta-carotene</i>	58.9	41.1
<i>Antioxidants</i>	50.3	49.7
<i>Omega-3 fatty acids</i>	49.4	50.6
<i>Probiotics</i>	20.3	79.8
<i>Plant-derived sterols</i>	15.3	84.7
<i>Flavonoids</i>	14.7	85.3

The results reflect that the consumers do not have adequate information on most food components. Exceptions are only vitamins, dietary fibres and minerals. The ratio of interpretation was around average in case of beta-carotene, antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids, while only 20 per cent of the respondents or fewer of them have information on the rest of the components.

Based on the previously discussed, the questions arise: “What is the effective way of communication with the consumers, and what arguments might convince the customers?” In the survey answers were sought to these questions, therefore the consumers’ interpretations of various communication messages were analysed in case of probiotic products (with active culture). First, only the denomination of the nutrient (component) was given to the consumers: “The product contains probiotics”. In this case, the interpretation of the message was low, only 17.2 per cent. The next three messages denominated the nutritional benefits besides the word “probiotics”. In these cases, higher percentage of the consumers was able to interpret the message (37.7 to 47.0%). Finally, only the nutritional benefit of the product was mentioned without the word “probiotics”,

when some 64 per cent of the consumers were able to interpret the message. Summarising the results of the survey, it was found that *the marketing communications concerning the functional foods should not focus on the characteristics of the product, but on the benefits coming from the product components.*

### **Conclusions:**

Based on the result of the research, the marketing strategy of functional foods can be named as “*healthy life-style*” strategy, with the following most important elements.

The *target group* of functional foodstuffs is *young women* with higher qualifications and living in larger towns and in the capital. They are those people who have more information on the health protective benefits of functional foods than average people. *The main direction of positioning is the high level product differentiation.* The tools of *differentiating strategy* are product quality, brand name, reputation of producer, production technology and distribution system. *The pricing strategy of functional foods is premium pricing*, as higher production costs and the emphasis of novelty require higher product prices. With other words, on the market of functional foodstuffs the *competition takes place at the level of the products increasingly*, and its primary tool is to emphasise the excellent quality and high branding value. *Food retail chains play an outstanding role* in the marketing of functional foods. Among these, the hyper- and supermarkets, large shopping centres and Hungarian buying-in alliances can be mentioned, where there is a broad selection of the functional foods available. Thorough planning of the integrated communication is the key factor of the spread of health protective foods. In these days the biggest challenge is that the consumers *do not have adequate information on the nutritional-biological benefits of the health protective foods.* Dietetic experts may play an important role in convincing the consumers, which can creditably popularise functional foods.

### **References:**

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