

Summer Decline in Seafood Sales Studied

Sales of seafood have traditionally been low during the summer months, despite the fact that most seafood is caught in spring and summer. A National Marine Fisheries Service survey of seafood purchased for at-home consumption by 7,500 sampled households quantifies the sales lag of the third quarter (July, August and September) in comparison with the first quarter (January, February and March).

There is a 24.6 percent drop in consumption of fresh fish (whole, headed, gutted, and scaled) from the first to the third quarter, but a 99.1 percent increase in shellfish consumption for that category. For fresh/frozen fish and shellfish (whole, headed, gutted, and scaled) the drop is 34.4 percent, and for fillets, steaks and other cuts the drop is 42.7 percent. In prepared fish and fish dishes, such as coated fillets and sticks, retail sales fall 41.1 percent in the summer months.

A recent study by Z.S. Demirdjian, Professor of Marketing Research at California State University (CSU) attempted to find the reasons for the summer sales slump. Approximately 1,440 households were surveyed for data on the effects of pricing and promotional practices.

Preliminary information suggested four areas affecting consumer sales: recreational fishing, substitutes, consumer education, and seasonal temperatures. Survey questions focused on these areas. For example, respondents were asked if they engaged in recreational fishing, what seasons they fished in and whether or not they ate the fish they caught.

The survey found that more than

half the sample population participated in recreational fishing, and that more than half of these people did so in the summer months. The survey also indicated that more than two-thirds of the respondents eat their catch, a factor that could contribute to a summer sales slump. The CSU study found that beef is the preferred substitute for fish, but that fish shows a strong position as a protein source. Beef was the restaurant entree ordered most frequently during the summer (43.2 percent) with seafood second (35.4 percent) and poultry a distant third (14.3 percent). At home, respondents preferred beef (43.4 percent) and poultry (32.5 percent) over seafood (19.9 percent). Pork had less than 8 percent in both restaurant and home consumption. No specific reason for a preference for beef or poultry over seafood was isolated for any season.

In the area of consumer education, it was found that about half the respondents desired more information. The survey also found that most people have learned fish preparation from friends and relatives. Baking and frying were the most popular methods, with barbecuing running a poor third.

The effect of temperature (hot weather) on summer seafood consumption, according to the study, appears to be minimal. But 47.3 percent of the respondents did find the odor of fish to be more unpleasant during the summer.

Pricing was not found to be a significant factor affecting summer sales. It was discovered, however, that fish is much more price-elastic than meat

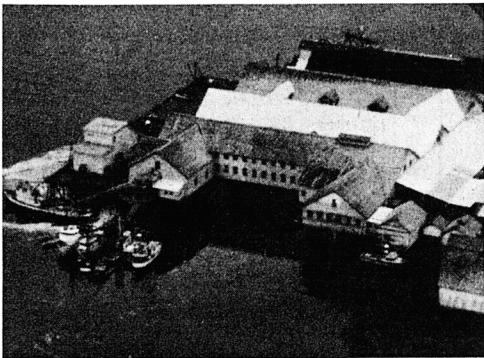
or poultry. In other words, the consumer will not purchase fish when the price increases, but will continue to purchase meat and poultry despite some price increase.

The final area considered by the study was promotional programs. The value of well-planned promotion has been proven time and again as a means to increase sales and change purchase patterns of virtually any product. However, the study showed no evidence of the use of promotional programs to counteract seasonal variations. There is no more use of promotion in the summer to increase seafood sales than there is in any other season, and this lack of strategic scheduling may help to sustain the summer sales decline.

As the results of the study indicate, recreational fishing appears to steal away a good portion of commercial fish sales. A recent study also showed that the average fisherman spends approximately \$10.13 for every fish he catches. Since it is far cheaper to buy a fish than to catch one, this may be a point to cover in advertising. Furthermore, the simplicity and convenience of buying a prepared fish, compared with catching and cleaning one's own, could be brought out in a variety of ways, targeting in particular the people who fish to supplement the family's food.

In the area of promotional planning, special attention might be given to budgeting advertising allowances during the year so that advertising efforts increased as sales began to decline. □

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