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ETHICAL ISSUES AND CONSUMER PERCEPTION ABOUT BRANDED AND UNBRANDED MILK PRODUCTS: THE EMERGING SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The fast changing trends in lifestyles, food and eating habits of consumers has resulted in an exponential growth of branded milk products in India. This sector is still predominantly dominated by the traditional low cost loose or unbranded milk in the most rural and semi-urban agglomerations in our country. With rising incomes and health consciousness, demand for branded and quality milk has witnessed phenomenal a sharp rise which in turn has started posing a major challenge to the unbranded milk market. In the changing scenario, the importance of hygiene and ethical considerations in the marketing of milk has acquired paramount importance. This poses a challenge to the sellers of unbranded milk for broadening customer base and retention of their loyalty thus unleashing a fierce competition. The study therefore examines the perception of customers about ethical practices followed in the marketing of branded and unbranded milk. This study is based upon research data collected from capital city of Jammu in J&K State. The findings from the study reveal that host of factors impact customer's sensitivity to ethical practices followed by marketers besides quality and price emerging as significant factors followed by commitment and trust for making purchase decision.

KEYWORDS

Branded Milk, Customer Perception, Ethical Practices, Price and Quality.

PROLOGUE

The marketing of milk and milk products has been undergoing a paradigm shift in India and the emergence of integrated food supply chains is one of the fast growing and most visible market phenomena. About 80 per cent of marketed milk still passes through the traditional channels of handling raw milk and traditionally produced milk products (Kumar and Staal, 2010). These traditional and informal milk marketing chains are the major source of fresh milk for consumers. But the emergence of branded milk marketing chains is posing stiff competition for the survival of traditional milk marketers. The traditional milk marketing still controls the major share of the milk supply in Jammu. The changing lifestyle, eating habits and perception about unbranded milk has helped the marketers of branded milk and milk products to strengthen their presence in the market. In Jammu division, local players namely JK Dairy Processing Cooperative Ltd., (JKMPCL) Satwari and Vaid Milk Products, Gangyal have their strong presence in the market with brands namely Snow Cap and Surya respectively. Although Punjab State Cooperative Milk Producers Cooperative and Gujarat Co-operative also have their presence in Jammu with the brands namely Verka and Amul. Branded milk and milk products are posing a challenge for the survival of traditional chains. Consumers over time have evolved in their perception about the marketing practices followed by the marketers and are reactive to various ethical and social factors in the marketplace. Thus marketing manager must have a thorough understanding of any ethical differences between marketers and consumers as well as the determinants of these differences. This research is designed to study the perception of customers about ethical practices followed by the marketers in the marketing of branded and unbranded milk.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a certain paucity of empirical research on customer perception and ethical values that affects the marketing of milk and milk products. A few studies are available which contribute certain insights, to the present article. Anjani Kumar (2010) in "Milk Marketing Chains in Bihar: Implications for Dairy Farmers and Traders" carried out a study which identifies the issues associated with the alternative milk market chains and their implications on dairy farmers and traders in Bihar where modern milk market chains especially the milk co-operatives have grown significantly. The study has shown that in spite of growing presence of modern milk supply chains, the traditional milk supply chain is still dominant and seems to offer good opportunities for the small and resource-poor milk producers and traders to enhance their income. The traditional milk sector should be addressed in a constructive manner and the policies should be evolved which would allow informal players improve their performance including quality control and their integration with the emerging modern milk supply chains. Prasad, M.V.Rama (2006) in "Dairy Products: Consumer Preferences" reveals that quality is the major factor that influences the choice of the brand and 91.33% of the consumers knew that more than one variety of milk is available in the market. He further found that adulteration and easy availability are other major factors that influence the consumer's inclination for the product. Miller, G.D. (2000) in "Benefits of Dairy Product Consumption on Blood Pressure in Humans" has found that there is consensus among experts that low fat dairy products, namely milk, cheese and yogurt, may reduce the risk of high blood pressure decreasing heart diseases by approximately 15 percent and stroke by approximately 27 percent and recommends three to four servings of low fat dairy products daily for optimal blood pressure regulation. D. Babu and Verma N.K., (2010) in "Value Chains of Milk and Milk Products in Organised Sector of Tamil Nadu — A Comparative Analysis" has examined the value chains of milk and milk products in the co-operative and private dairy plants in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu based on the data collected from one co-operative plant, one private plant, five milk transportation routes, ten co-operative societies, ten private milk collection centre and six chilling centres. The overall average procurement cost per litre of milk has been found higher for the co-operative dairy plant than the private plant due to increased cost on milk transportation, chilling and reception. The co-operative plant has been revealed more efficient in the manufacture of toned milk, standardized milk, full cream milk and ghee whereas the private plant has an edge over co-operative dairy plant in the manufacture of butter and SMP (skimmed milk powder). The marketing cost of toned milk, standardized milk, full cream milk and SMP has been found lower for private dairy plant and of butter and ghee for the co-operative dairy plant. The marketing margins and marketing efficiency have been found higher in toned milk, standardized milk and butter for the private plant and in full cream milk, ghee and SMP for the co-operative plant.

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Most of the literature so far on the subject has focused primarily on the production of milk and its supply chain side. Thus keeping in mind the above studies, the objective of the present paper is to find out the perceptions of consumers about branded and unbranded milk products regarding ethical practices followed by the marketers.

The data for the present study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected using questionnaire. To know the perception of consumers about the ethical practices followed by the marketers, primary data was collected from five hundred and fifteen (515) respondents from Jammu City. Random sampling technique was used to select the consumers.

The data collection schedule was developed after reviewing lot of literature (Thomas White 1993, Rezaque and Howe 2002, M.V.Rama 2006, Sarma 2007, Viridi and Kaur 2007, Sudeep Chatterjee 2007, Bhattacharya and Mazumdar 2009, Sharma and Sharma 2011) and gathering experts' opinion. The schedule has ten items of general information and six dimensions containing fifty four statements relating to product price, quality, quantity, packaging, general honesty, awareness about consumer rights, adulteration, deceptive labeling and legal provisions. Except general information statements, all the statements were based on five points Likert Scale.

TABLE-1: DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL & MARKETING PRACTICES

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Between 20-30	103	20
31-40	165	32
41-50	156	30.3
51- Above	91	17.7
Gender		
Male	388	75.3
Female	127	24.7
Qualification		
10 th	76	14.8
12 th	144	28
Graduation	200	38.8
PG & Above	95	18.4
Marital Status		
Married	439	85.2
Unmarried	76	14.8
Occupation		
Business	174	33.8
Service	162	31.5
HW	59	11.5
Others	120	23.3
Religion		
Hindu	328	63.7
Sikh	48	9.3
Muslims	139	27
Others	-	-
Family Type		
Nuclear	384	74.6
Joint	131	25.4
Family Expenditure (in Rs.)		
Between 5000-10000	122	23.7
10000-15000	107	20.8
15000-20000	144	28
20000-Above	142	27.6
Family Income (in Rs.)		
Between10000-20000	115	22.3
20000-30000	86	16.7
30000-40000	101	19.5
40000-Above	213	41.5
Purchase Decisions		
Individual	239	46.4
Elderly	91	17.7
Family Head	185	35.9

Source: Own Survey-2011

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

The survey was conducted on five hundred and fifteen (115) consumers selecting through random sampling from Jammu city. The proportionate age of respondents was between 20-30 (20%) followed by 31-40 (32%), 41-50 (30%) and above 51 (18%). The proportion of male respondents figured higher (75.3%) than their female counterparts (24.7%). The majority of respondents (64%) were Hindus followed by Muslims (27%) and Sikhs (10%) and three fourth of them have nuclear families. About 39% of the respondents were graduates and 34% were in business sector. The proportionate age of respondents was between 20-30 (20%) followed by 31-40 (32%), 41-50 (30%) and above 51 (18%). Majority of the respondents (75%) were married and 68% had Hindu as their religion. About one third of the total respondents incurred expenditure between 15000- 20000 thousands and (42%) of them earned above Rs 40,000 per month. Finally, about 46% of the total respondents opined that the purchasing decisions were taken by individuals.

TABLE -2: SPLIT HALF RELIABILITY AND CRONBACH'S ALPHA OF ETHICAL & MARKETING PRACTICES

	Before Factor Analysis	After Factor Analysis
Group I	3.27	3.22
Group II	3.19	3.17
Cronbach's Alpha	.7100	.7109

RELIABILITY

To check the reliability Cronbach's Alpha and Split half values were calculated. The data found reliable as the mean values of both the groups (Group I = 3.19 and Group II = 3.17) were almost similar. Cronbach's Alpha value also found reliable as its value was 0.71. (Table-2)

FACTOR ANALYSIS

The factor analysis technique was used for data reduction and data purification. The factor analysis was carried out by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 17.0 Version). This was done with Principal Component Analysis along with varimax rotation for summerisation of total data into minimum factors. The statements having factor loading less than 0.5 and Eigen value less than 1 were ignored for subsequent analysis. Accordingly seven factors were emerged (Table-3)

TABLE-3: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL & MARKETING PRACTICES

Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Factor Loading	Comn.	E.V.	% of V. Ex.
F1	2.85	0.46			10.06	22.17
Manipulation of availability for exploitation.	3.23	1.09	0.726	0.65		
Information reg. risk associated with product.	2.37	0.90	0.734	0.82		
Issue bills for every purchase.	2.67	1.06	0.796	0.92		
Meet obligations mentioned in the bills	2.86	0.99	0.769	0.83		
Offer quality products.	3.19	0.98	0.798	0.80		
Offer products in exaggerate packaging	2.89	0.83	0.813	0.82		
Marketers give consideration to your complaints.	2.64	1.23	0.872	0.84		
Maintain hygienic conditions at their place	3.19	0.93	0.764	0.85		
Campaign by the govt. for consumer awareness	3.21	0.96	0.594	0.72		
Legal system is strong enough to create fear.	2.65	1.06	0.808	0.79		
Marketers are always honest in serving consumers	1.66	0.48	0.623	0.73		
Offer deceptive/misleading packaging	3.29	1.14	0.794	0.82		
Offer the same quantity as claimed on the package	3.22	1.07	0.694	0.75		
F2	3.11	1.07			8.60	17.03
Provide accurate information about the products	1.95	0.60	0.644	0.77		
Practice professional code of ethics	2.03	0.64	0.585	0.74		
Always conform to the prescribed standards	2.00	0.56	0.654	0.78		
Deceptive communication to persuade consumers	3.97	0.44	0.803	0.81		
Misleading advertising should be avoided	4.01	0.43	0.911	0.87		
Misleading sales tactics should be avoided	4.02	0.44	0.908	0.89		
Sales promotions using deception must be avoided	4.05	0.47	0.899	0.85		
Marketers treat all the customers equally.	1.95	0.63	0.618	0.75		
Ethical practices develop confidence in consumer	4.06	0.48	0.832	0.77		
F3	4.08	1.33			3.59	15.10
Loyalty to quality brands than others	4.64	0.48	0.809	0.79		
Adherence to all applicable laws and regulations.	1.37	0.54	0.830	0.79		
Selling of adulterated products due to ignorance	4.64	0.48	0.811	0.80		
Ethically produced food is healthier to eat	4.55	0.55	0.867	0.86		
Willing to pay more for ethically produced brands	4.57	0.65	0.898	0.88		
Need for stringent laws to check illegal marketing	4.76	0.43	0.669	0.67		
F4	2.04	0.32			2.15	6.81
Knowledge about Consumer Protection Act.	1.81	1.08	0.696	0.76		
Confront with marketers for unethical practices	2.41	0.94	0.851	0.77		
Complaint with consumer court	1.91	0.76	0.513	0.78		
F5	3.65	0.21			1.85	6.53
Sell products which are well before the expiry date	3.77	0.60	0.634	0.71		
Use of deceptive labeling.	3.78	0.86	0.809	0.83		
Underweight the products.	3.40	0.91	0.756	0.86		
F6	2.9	1.27			1.65	4.97
Provide access to all the varieties of brands	3.80	1.60	0.861	0.80		
Always give priorities to customer needs	2.00	0.61	0.753	0.70		
F7	4.02	0.12			1.25	3.67
Conceal limitations of the products	4.11	0.52	0.599	0.75		
Respect your social and cultural values	3.94	0.64	0.704	0.78		

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis of consumer's perception about the ethical practices followed by the marketers in the marketing of branded and unbranded milk and milk products was carried out by considering various dimensions and is covered under seven factors. Factors are explained as under:

Factor 1: This factor covers thirteen items namely "Manipulating the availability of Products", "Billing for Purchase", "Quality of Products", "Packaging of Products", "Complaints Considerations", "Hygienic conditions at Workplace", " Campaign by Public Organisations", "Fear from Legal System", "Honesty by Marketers while serving Customers", "Deceptive Packaging" and "Product Quantity". About sixty percent of the respondents believe that marketers manipulate the availability of the product for exploitation (M =3.23) and they does not issue bills for purchase (2.67). About 90% of the total respondents believe that marketer's are not honest in serving their customers (1.66).

Factor 2: This factor consists of nine factors containing "Information about the Product", "Professional Code of Ethics", "Conform to the prescribed Standards", "Deceptive Communication", "Misleading Sales Tactics", "Marketers consider all the Customers equally" and "Ethical Practices develop confidence in Customers". More than ninety percent of the respondents opine that marketers conceal the information needed to be share with the consumers (1.95) and more than three fourth of the respondents believe that marketers doesn't follow professional code of ethics (2.03). About ninety percent of consumers believe that marketers use deceptive communication to persuade consumers (3.97) but more than ninety percent of respondents believe that ethical practices develop confidence in the consumers.

Factor 3: This factor includes six factors viz. "Loyalty to Quality Brands", "Adherence to applicable Laws", "Selling of Adulterated products due to Customers Ignorance", "Ethically produced food is healthier to Eat", "Willing to pay more for ethically produced Brands" and "Need for stringent laws to check Unethical Practices". About 90 percent of the respondents believe that they are loyal to quality brands (4.64) but they believe that due to consumers ignorance marketers succeed in selling adulterated products (4.64) although three fourth of the consumers believe that ethical produced food is healthier to eat (4.55) and they are willing to pay more for ethical produced milk and milk products (4.57). Almost all the respondents believe that there is a need for more stringent laws to check unethical marketing practices (4.76) as more than three fourth of the respondents believe marketers disobey prevailing laws in the marketing of milk and milk products (1.37).

Factor 4: This factor encompasses "Knowledge about Consumer Protection Act", "Confrontation with Marketers" and "Complaining with Consumer Court". More than three fourth of the respondents feels they doesn't have thorough knowledge about Consumer Protection Act (1.81) and 70 percent of the respondents believe that they avoid to confront with the marketers (2.41) whereas 90 percent of the respondents never registered any complaint with Consumer Court (1.91).

Factor 5: This factor includes "Expiry of the Products", "Deceptive Labeling" and "Underweighting the Products". Here, more than three fourth of the respondents believe that marketers use deceptive labeling (3.87) but 80 percent believe that marketers sell their products well before expiry date (3.77).

Factor 6: This factor covers "Access to all Varieties" and "Priorities to Customer's Needs". About 80 percent of respondents opine that marketers provide access to all varieties of products (3.80) whereas three fourth of respondents replied that always they doesn't give priorities to their needs (2.00).

Factor 7: This factor covers "Concealing Limitations" and "Respect for Social and Cultural Values". About three fourth of the respondents believe that marketers conceal limitations of the products (4.11) but 46% of respondents believe that marketers respect their social and cultural values (3.94).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper has sought to take a fresh look as to how consumers perceive about the practices being in the marketing of branded and unbranded milk and its related by-products. It has been found that there is a strong association between the income and consumption levels of branded milk. With increasing income levels demand for branded and unbranded milk and milk products has also undergone significant change. The study reveals that most of the marketers' indulges in adulteration and conceal limitations of the product. Marketers are succeeding in selling spurious products as most of the buyers were not aware about their legitimate rights as provided under the Consumer Protections Act. Thus there is an urgent need to have a regular and effective vigilance over the marketers' unethical practices and provide for punitive action against those who indulge into it. An appropriate public and legal mechanism need to be instituted creating awareness among the consumers about their rights and how to lodge a complaint and seek compensation in case they suffer on account of unethical practices. State government must evolve a comprehensive public awareness campaign for informing general public about the redressal mechanism and institutions available at district or state level which address to the scourge of unethical practices. Customer goodwill, loyalty and the resultant captive market share coupled ethical practices can be strengthened by developing a code of conduct for sellers which they adhere to religiously. It would help to avoid legal and punitive actions and can create credible public image and enhanced goodwill in the market. This would be in lines with American Marketing Association. Marketers eventually have to be honest and truthful in their transactions as it would institute sense of fair play and restore confidence among the consumers.

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