The Carrot Top Experience - Practical Lessons in Marketing Irradiated Foods

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Carrot Top is a market in Northbrook, Illinois which sells produce, meat, deli products, and a few grocery items. It is a family-owned and operated small business in an upscale suburb of Chicago. For the past seven years, it has offered a variety of irradiated produce and, for a time, irradiated chicken. During this time, the owner, James Corrigan, has acquired a body of practical experience which provides a number of lessons learned from the human factors standpoint. This paper will examine the experiences of the Carrot Top in selling irradiated foods and the lessons which may be extracted.

Customer Education. Because the Carrot Top is a local market, rather than a large chain store, the Corrigan family is well-acquainted with many of their customers. In the early 1990's, when Mr. Corrigan first began to learn about food irradiation, he shared the information with his customers, both by talking directly with individuals and by articles he wrote for a newsletter that the store distributed at that time to about 6000 customers. Therefore, when the store began selling irradiated fruits in 1993, Mr. Corrigan had been educating his customer base about the benefits of food irradiation for about a year. He therefore had little customer resistance once he began selling irradiated produce. The personal nature of the relationship between the store and its customers gives the store management credibility with the customers, which made the efforts to gradually educate people about food irradiation very effective.

Employee Education. Because much of the customer education was done by speaking directly with customers, the staff at Carrot Top had to be knowledgeable about food irradiation. Since Carrot Top is a family business and most of the staff are family members, the staff were
motivated to be well-informed about this subject and no formal training was required. It is interesting to note that Mr. Corrigan is familiar with stores elsewhere in the Midwest which began selling irradiated foods with no formal training for their staff, yet reported positive customer response. His observations would seem to indicate that, while employee education in food irradiation is desirable, it is not a critical factor in introducing irradiated foods into a market.

**Product Display.** The Carrot Top display signs for irradiated foods always clearly indicate that the items is an irradiated product and give a justification for the irradiation (e.g., to meet Dept. of Agriculture quarantine requirements, or to extend the time the product stays fresh). The products are sometimes in an isolated display, sometimes incorporated into an area with unirradiated items. The main significance of the display layout seems to be that it allows customers who are specifically looking for an irradiated product to easily identify it.

**Customer Involvement.** Carrot Top has made an effort to get customers actively involved in evaluating irradiated foods. When Mr. Corrigan initially sold irradiated strawberries, he conducted a taste test in the store in which customers sampled both berries which had been irradiated and those which had not and asked the customers if there was any difference in taste between the two and, if they felt there was, which tasted better. The results of the test (1/3 of the customers preferred the irradiated berries, 1/3 preferred those not irradiated, and 1/3 could tell no difference) were not important; what was important was getting the customers to try the irradiated product and increase their comfort level with it. Mr. Corrigan found that, initially, the irradiated berries outsold those not irradiated nine to one. Within a short time, that ratio increased to twenty to one as customers recognized that the irradiated berries stayed fresh longer, allowing them the convenience of buying several packages at a time, knowing that the berries would not spoil over the time it took for them to use them up.
Key Features of Irradiated Foods. When food irradiation experts promote the virtues of
food irradiation, they frequently emphasize the improved safety of irradiated foods. What Mr.
Corrigan has found in his business, however, is that the safety aspect is not what sells his
customers on irradiated foods; what most impresses them is the longer period that the foods stay
fresh. Moreover, retailers who are considering selling irradiated foods are usually not willing to
emphasize the greater safety of irradiated foods in their advertising, since they feel it implies to
the public that the products they have been selling for years were unsafe. Thus food staying
fresh longer, rather than improved food safety, appears to be the aspect of irradiated foods which
is most likely to favorably impress both consumers and retailers.

In conclusion, the Carrot Top experience indicates that the most important aspect of
marketing irradiated foods to the public is an emphasis on the length of time that the foods stay
fresh. Promotions which encourage customers to sample the product appear to be helpful, as
does low-key customer education over a period of time. Having a distinctive display layout does
not appear to be very important, and education of the store staff, although desirable, is not
critical. Further work in this area should research the experiences of other stores selling similar
products and should consider the impact of geographic location in the willingness of customers
to accept irradiated foods.