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Americans Prefer Grocery Stores, But Favor Friendly Atmosphere from Local Markets

Our study investigated the factors guiding the choice of marketplace for fresh fruit purchases. We also investigated what demographic characteristics and purchasing behavior influence consumers to purchase fresh fruits at different market outlets.

Americans are consuming more fresh fruits than ever; but before a consumer chooses what and how much fruit to buy, she/he first decides where to buy it.

To respond to the rising demand for fresh fruits, food retailers have increased their product mix, product form (e.g., ready-to-eat), as well as adopted marketing strategies to differentiate themselves from other retailers. Differentiation strategies include using food labels that convey food attributes, delivery options, pre-packaged fresh products, and other “out-of-the-box” foods aimed to increase market share and consumer experience for fresh produce.

Yet, markets are rarely homogenous, and the proliferation of food labels seems to be generating skepticism and changing demands among consumers. Gaining a better understanding of what consumers want, how their preferences change, and how to immediately address these changes, is not only a success factor for farmers and food retailers but a survival one when abrupt market changes occur.

Our study took a step back from the product attribute literature to understand how marketplace attributes and consumers’ attitudinal factors influence the choice of primary market for fresh fruit purchases. While consumer preferences for fresh fruits are well documented in the literature, what guides them to choose among a wide variety of marketplaces is not well detailed.

We proposed the selection of an outlet as the first step on the consumer’s purchasing decision-making for fresh fruits. In other words, fresh fruit purchases follow a hierarchical process, in which the selection of the marketplace is the first decision that then determines purchasing behavior. We also expect that distinct marketplace characteristics and consumer attitudes may differently drive the decision to choose a primary marketplace for fresh fruits.

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Our Study

Data from this study came from a web-based survey of a representative sample of fresh fruit purchasers in the U.S. Respondents were at least 18 years old and purchased fresh fruits at least once in the 12 weeks before data collection, a timeline that overlaps with the highest consumption and availability of fresh fruits.

The sample of this study was composed of 1,658 respondents, after eliminating respondents for a variety of reasons (i.e., failure to pass attention checks, identical responses in a section, and incomplete responses).

To better understand the market attributes guiding consumers choices, we categorized respondents based on their primary market for fresh fruits based on four main groups of outlets: those purchasing fresh fruits mostly at chain stores [66% (N = 1095)], club/warehouse stores [5% (N = 85)], independent grocery stores [18% (N = 304)], and DTC markets [(11% (N = 174)].

Chain stores included large traditional grocery stores such as Walmart (Bentonville, AR), Meijer (Grand Rapids, MI), etc. Club stores included wholesale warehouses selling products in bulk quantities, such as Costco (Issaquah, WA), Sam's Club (Bentonville, AR), etc. Independent grocery stores included independent, ethnic, and natural grocery stores. Lastly, DTC markets included farmers markets, roadside stands, at the farm, and CSA. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study using attitudinal scales and marketplace attributes to understand what drives consumers to choose their primary marketplace for fresh fruits.



We asked respondents the importance they placed on the following market attributes when purchasing fresh fruits at their selected primary marketplace: market availability, availability of desirable fresh fruits, prices, market proximity, fresh fruits selection, friendliness of market, convenience, supply of locally grown fruits, supply of organic fruits, fruits sourced from family-owned farms, access of seasonal fruits, and variety of fresh fruits.

Why Most Americans Prefer Grocery Stores?

Convenience and prices of fresh fruits are the main drivers of choosing large chain stores, while marketplace atmosphere and offering of local fruits deter consumers from choosing these market channels for fresh fruits. Our findings highlight the importance of providing a friendly atmosphere and outstanding customer service to positively influence purchasing behavior. Our results are consistent with the literature reporting consumer preferences for local produce, which suggests that buying local foods provides a sense of community involvement and may influence the presence of price premiums.

The fact that market convenience and prices were market attributes deterring customers from buying fresh fruits at independent/ethnic stores has important implications. These results suggest that managers of independent/ethnic stores should not focus their advertisement campaigns on prices, but rather emphasize the diversity, freshness, and selection of fresh fruits. As long as managers of these stores provide consumers with access to specialty, nutritional-dense, and ethnic fresh fruits, customers may be willing to pay a premium price for them. The fact that independent stores play an important role in the U.S. economy helping consumers to access healthy and ethnic food raises the need for more research on ethnic and independent food stores offering a diversity of fresh produce.

Why Americans Purchase Fresh Fruits at Local Markets?

The supply of local fruits, marketplace atmosphere, and access to desirable fresh fruits positively influenced customers to purchase fruits at local markets. Interestingly, the same marketplace attributes influencing customers to purchase fruits at local markets are those deterring them to purchase at chain stores. Initiatives like “Know your farmer, know your food”, efforts to support local farmland and local economy, and local food programs at the states and community level seem to be encouraging the demand for local foods.

Our findings suggest local buyers are not considering price as a determinant factor when selecting their main market outlet for fresh fruits. Our results showed that fresh fruit selection and diversity are a major barrier for consumers buying at local markets. Increasing the offering of local foods through vendor recruitment, supporting the supply of value-added agricultural products, and extending the length of market season for fresh fruits may help managers of local markets overcome these barriers. Overall, customers at local markets seem to place more value on knowing more about their food, where it comes from, and what are the health, nutritional, and safety aspects when buying fresh fruits.

Literature cited

Marques, J.M.R., Torres, A.P., Behe, B.K., Langenhoven, P. and Boas, L.H.D.B.V., 2021. Exploring Consumers’ Preferred Purchase Location for Fresh Fruits. *HortTechnology*, 31(5), pp.595-606.

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