

*Final report #1-c*

**Title:** Perceptions and Preferences of Elderly Consumers and School Foodservice Directors concerning Peanuts and Peanut Products

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**Purpose:**

The purpose of this project was to determine through qualitative focus group discussions the perceptions, attitudes, and preferences of elderly consumers and school foodservice directors concerning peanuts and peanut products.

Objectives included:

- 1) To conduct focus group discussions with elderly independent-living adult consumers focusing on peanut products they are most likely to purchase
- 2) To conduct focus group discussions with school foodservice directors concerning purchase, preparation, and service of peanut products in school lunch programs
- 3) To analyze data from focus group discussions and summarize key messages that can be used to give direction to peanut product development and marketing promotions

**Methodology:**

The study was conducted in two phases. Focus groups with elderly consumers were conducted during spring and summer 2002 and focus groups with school foodservice directors during fall 2002.

Elderly consumers were recruited by flyers distributed at the university, a city senior center, a retirement center, and a community center. Participants were screened so that only individuals who consumed peanuts were included in the study. Questions and a script were prepared by the researchers prior to beginning the focus groups. The questions focused on what type of peanuts or peanut products were typically consumed, perceptions of what influenced quality of snack peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut butter cookies, opinions on whether peanuts were healthy, and ideas for new peanut products. For senior focus groups, samples of peanuts and food items containing peanuts such as peanut butter cookies, peanut butter sandwiches, and peanut candy were made available at the beginning of the session in order to stimulate thinking about peanuts.

School foodservice directors and managers were recruited by telephone calls to area school foodservice directors. Some schools districts were not eligible to participate because they did not serve any menu items containing peanut butter on a regular basis. Questions and a script were developed. Questions focused on peanut ingredients purchased for use in school foodservice, typical peanut menu items, quality of peanuts and peanut butter, health effects of peanuts, ways to deal with student food allergies, and ideas of new peanut products. Focus groups were scheduled before or after regularly scheduled manager meetings to minimize time off the job. In an effort to keep time spent to a minimum, sample peanut products were not provided at these sessions.

Focus group discussions typically required 45 minutes for the elderly consumer groups

and 30 minutes for school foodservice directors. Each participant in the focus groups was rewarded with a \$15 gift certificate to a local supermarket chain. A trained researcher conducted each focus group session using a script. All discussions were audiotaped using a tape recorder. A graduate assistant observer also took notes. Tapes were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed to determine frequency of key words and phrases.

## **Results:**

### **Elderly consumers:**

Five focus groups were conducted with elderly consumers, but the audiotape for one of the sessions was faulty, so that only four focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed. The four focus groups ranged in size from 9 to 13 participants. Participants in three of the focus groups were caucasian, and one of the focus groups had all African American participants. Approximately ½ of the elderly consumers were in the 65 to 74 age category and ½ in the 75-84 category. Only three individuals were 85 or older. The university focus group had a majority of participants with advanced degrees while the African American group had a majority with a high school education. The African American group also had a majority of people living alone, while the other groups had a majority of individuals living with spouse or other family members. One of the groups was made up entirely of people living in a retirement apartment complex.

When asked what peanut product was regularly consumed, older consumers mentioned peanut butter most frequently. About half preferred crunchy peanut butter and half preferred smooth peanut butter. Other items mentioned by several participants included dry roasted peanuts (salted and unsalted), peanut butter cookies, and peanut brittle.

Perceptions of quality in snack peanuts were most often influenced by brand, freshness, and flavor. Elderly consumers felt that quality of peanut butter was influenced by brand, whether the peanut butter was natural, oiliness, sweetness, texture, and additives such as salt or chocolate.

Homemade peanut butter cookies were perceived as being high quality, but brand and flavor were also mentioned as influencing quality in peanut butter cookies.

A majority of these elderly consumers felt that peanuts were healthy. Fat and protein content were most often mentioned as influencing whether peanuts were healthy. A small number of seniors mentioned reasons that peanuts were unhealthy; these included allergies, chewing problems, the effect of salty peanuts on high blood pressure, and unpleasant physical reactions such as acne or flatulence.

Seniors suggested a number of ideas for new peanut products. Most of these ideas were in the dessert category such as peanut pie, crust, cake, ice cream, ice cream topping, cheesecake, and peanut cookies with additional flavors. Peanut drink beverages were also suggested. A packaging idea was peanut butter in a squeeze bottle. Non-sticky peanut butter was another suggestion.

### **School foodservice directors/managers:**

Five focus groups ranging in size from 7 to 11 participants were conducted with school foodservice staff that included directors and managers. The majority (36 of 46) were employed in elementary schools with 7 employed at middle schools and 3 at high schools. Thirty-two participants has a high school education, while eight had a degree from a 2-year college, and three had a degree from a 4-year university. The majority were age 41 years or older.

Peanut butter was the peanut ingredient most frequently purchased at all of the schools represented in this study. Peanut butter granola bars and peanut candy items were purchased at some schools. Peanut items most frequently served were peanut butter sandwiches, peanut butter/jelly sandwiches and peanut butter cookies. All of the schools served one or both of these type sandwiches, but only three schools served peanut butter cookies. Peanut butter cookies and peanut butter/jelly sandwiches were thought to be the most popular menu items with students.

Quality in peanuts was thought to be related to freshness, roasting, packaging, additives such as sugar, salt and fat, and storage temperatures. Quality in peanut butter was perceived to be related to oiliness, brand name, additives such as sugar, salt, and fat, and a smooth texture.

School foodservice directors/managers generally felt that peanuts were healthy. Protein, cholesterol, and fat content were mentioned as influencing the health effects of peanuts, and allergies were mentioned as an unhealthy effect. Some ways that school foodservice staff protect students with food allergies are by recording information from a doctor or school nurse, individually wrapping sandwiches, using signs and labels, and carefully cleaning utensils after preparing peanut products.

School foodservice staff volunteered ideas for new peanut products that include peanut soda beverages, bananas and peanut butter, peanut trail mix, and peanut butter in cookies, crackers, chips, cake, and cereal. A packaging idea was squirt peanut butter in packets.

### **Conclusions and Implications:**

Elderly consumers generally had favorable opinions about consumption of peanuts and peanut products. Their perceptions of quality were similar to that of adult consumers in that brand was an important indicator of quality for snack peanuts and peanut butter. They also preferred homemade peanut butter cookies. However, cost of products appeared to be of less importance to elderly consumers than adult consumers.

School foodservice staff had favorable opinions about peanuts, but little experience with preparing peanut menu items since most schools were limited to only serving peanut butter sandwiches or peanut butter/jelly sandwiches. Although school foodservice staff thought that peanut butter cookies were popular with children, two of the five school districts did not include peanut butter cookies on menus. If better methods for protecting individual students with peanut allergies were developed, schools would be likely to expand the number of peanut products and peanut menu items offered to students.