**Older and Fitter:  Raising the older person’s agenda - issues for consideration for supermarkets and food retailers**

**Introduction**

The global ageing population is well reported within the media and academia (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001). An ageing population will bring challenges with ramifications on society, impacting on social and health services through a reduction on mobility and an increase in ill-health (Welsh Consumer Council, 2006; Leventhal 1997). Additionally, older people incur financial changes from moving from salaries obtained through work to retirement living on a reduced and fixed income (Brennan & Ritch 2010; Mathur, Moschis, & Lee, 2006; Szmigin & Carrigan 2001). It is anticipated that the number of older people globally will rise to 2 billion by 2050 (WHO, 2012). It has been recognised that the age structure of the UK population will become older. By 2035 it is projected there will be 4 million more people aged 65+ than under 16s (Rutherford, 2012). Scotland is the region which faces a larger increase in the number of people aged 65 and over. Between 2004 and 2031 the number of people aged 50 and over in Scotland is projected to rise by 28% and the number aged 75 and over is projected to increase by 75% (The Scottish Government, 2008). Therefore, the aim of this study is to gain an understanding about the needs and expectations of older consumers when shopping in supermarkets or food retailers. It is believed that supermarkets have an important role in improving accessibility and availability of products enabling older consumers’ better access to facilities and independence (Welsh Consumer Council, 2006). However, little research has been undertaken to understand older consumers’ shopping experience in supermarkets and food retailers (Lumbers and Raats, 2006; Pei & Yin, 2011). Older people are often excluded from products and services in many sectors through age and physical discrimination (Hare, Kirk, & Lang, 2001). Thus, older consumers are often seen as an unattractive prospect for marketers. However the diversity of older people may include 8.3% of the poorest members of society, as well as 6.4% of the richest (IFS, 2008). Further, this new generation of older people often enjoy improved health and are less impoverished due to better financial planning (Hare, 2003; Oates, Schufeldt, & Vaugth, 1996; Myers & Lumbers 2008; Carrigan, Szmigin, & Wright, 2004; Brennan & Ritch 2010).

**Literature review**

This study uses the lower parameter of 50 to define older consumers because this is the starting point for many age-related services offered to older consumers (Sudbury & Simcock, 2009). It is recognised that the contribution of older people is increasingly important and that older people should remain as independent as possible (Raynes, Clark, & Beecham, 2006). Not only are over 50’s lifestyles’ stable, but on average older consumers spend the longest time in the 50 plus segment, some 30 years (Silvers, 1997). There is evidence that the needs of over 50 consumers remains stable for longer, ensuring longer brand loyalty and customer retention, where as younger consumers lifestyles change through starting families which restricts consumers both financially and physically (Lumbers & Raats, 2006; Mathur et al., 2006; Neilson & Curry 1997). Loyalty is considered to be more beneficial financially than seeking new customers (Meneely, Burns, & Strugnell, 2008) and therefore developing relationships with current customers should be a priority for retailers. Meneely et al. (2008) also found that supermarkets neither trained their staff to support older shoppers nor provided services which would meet ageing customers’ requirements.

***Customer service and the shopping experience***

Myers and Lumbers (2008) believe that supermarkets are unprepared for the ageing population through overlooking ‘needs and wants’ and indicate a positive response to older consumers requirements could result in a share in this lucrative market. Other research has agreed that the service older consumers receive could be improved and that older consumers are more likely to shop at a retailer which offers an enhanced customer service (Pettigrew, Mizerski & Donovan, 2005; Moschis, Curasi, & Bellenger, 2004; Goodwin & McElwee, 1997; Johnson-Hillery, Kang, & Tuan, 1997). Customer service is perceived as having more importance than cost (Davies, Goode, Moutinho, & Ogbonna, 2006). Therefore, older consumers are less likely to shop at discount retailers, especially as older consumers preferred a ‘pleasant shopping environment’ (Hare, 2003, p.247). Another factor for consideration is the social network of older people and whether there are neighbours, family or organisations available to help with required tasks such as food shopping (Kang & Ridgway, 1996; Hare et al., 2001). Previous literature has indicated older people shop for sociability and the purchase of an experience (Oates et al., 1996; Lumbers & Raats, 2006).

***Transport and mobility***

Transport to the store was an important factor when shopping, the availability of car parking, public transport routes or ability to access the store by foot (Goodwin & McElwee, 1997; Welsh Consumer Council, 2006). Research by the Welsh Consumer Council (2006) found 84% of older people use supermarkets and prefer the convenience of having ‘everything under one roof’ with nearby parking. However, problems with mobility extend to carrying home heavy shopping (Welsh Consumer Council, 2006) and 63% struggle to carry their shopping home as when using public transport for food shopping, some older consumers encounter physical problems getting on and off with their shopping (Hare et al., 2001). Overall, research has found only 14% of those aged over 65 cannot physically shop (Appleton, 2002). WHO (1999) recognise only a minority of older people will require help in older age. However, ageing does affect the ability to carry out everyday tasks, for example shopping and preparing meals (Welsh Consumer Council, 2006). There is a growing segment which includes a large percentage of women aged over 80 years, who live on their own and have problems with physically accessing products and services and have the biggest requirement to obtaining help for everyday tasks due to increasing frailty (Dychtwald, 1997; Hare et al., 2001; Hare, 2003; Lumbers & Raats, 2006).

***Product size and price***

As the majority of older consumers live alone, there are needs regarding the portion size and offers regarding quantities (Hare et al., 2001; Lumbers & Raats, 2006). Wastage is often incurred, due to the portion size available and this extends to tins of food, which often target family consumption (Hare et al., 2001) as well as meat packages (Hare, 2003). The Welsh Consumer Council (2006) believe food producers should provide smaller portions for consumers who live alone, without increasing the cost. Older consumers spend 10% more from their income on food products than younger consumers (Moschis et al., 2004), accounting for a large percentage of their income (Goodwin & McElwee, 1997). It is felt that this is an increasing gap in the market. Older consumers want to feel that the price is ‘fair’ (Oates et al., 1996; Hare, 2003; Wilson, Alexander, & Lumbers, 2004; Lumbers & Raats, 2006; Davies et al. 2006). However, older consumers are unable to shop around to find the best offers, due to lack of transport and mobility (Hare et al., 2001). Older consumers often find that labels and packaging are difficult to read, and find this problematic (Johnson-Hillery et al., 1997; Hare et al., 2001; Lumbers & Raats, 2006). Nevertheless, previous research by Pettigrew et al. (2005) did not find this to be significant. Despite this, Hare et al. (2001) found that labels were thought to be unreadable due to size and research by Oates et al. (1996) also found that ability to read labels was an important factor for consumers. Not all older consumers had the confidence to ask for help, further, there were a lack of available staff to answer questions. Pettigrew et al. (2005, p.306) believe there is a ‘growing recognition of the need for senior specific marketing’. However, other research has identified the need for improved products which meet the nutritional guidelines required for health requirements, for example low fat and low sodium (Moschis et al., 2004; Hare et al., 2001).

**Research methods**

This pilot project sought the opinion of older consumers in Scotland and therefore after careful consideration of the existing literature, a questionnaire was developed from pertinent issues as identified in the literature review. The main objective of this study was to obtain an understanding of the needs and expectations of older consumers when shopping in supermarkets or food retailers. The research team took advice from the Centre for The Older Persons Agenda (COPA) to understand potential barriers for older people in completing the questionnaire, as well as obtaining access to members of COPA’s hub through the COPA newsletter to request respondents. Additional respondents were sought through newspapers within the Lothians, which included printed information explaining the research and calls for respondents. This resulted in the response of some very interested respondents, who passed on information of interested groups of older people in West Lothian. Further, previous research had forged links with active older people in Inverness who participated in a walking group and Ace It (Age Concern Information Technology training project) were also keen for involvement. The questionnaire was distributed through the respondent’s choice of access, either an online link to the survey or a paper copy which was posted out and included a prepaid, self-addressed envelope. Respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaires within two weeks (Godwin & McElwee, 1997).

In total 263 questionnaires were distributed both by post and online. The questionnaire was designed to be easy to answer and limited to eight pages long so it would not appear daunting and included a mixture of rated scale and open-ended questions (Sorce, Perotti, & Widrick 2005). General behaviour questions were asked (Pickett-Baker & Ozaki 2008), such as how do you access the supermarket, which would enable an insight into what resources older people use currently to access the products and services offered by supermarkets. The questionnaire sought to understand if older consumers were satisfied with the accessibility of the supermarkets and whether the products and services encouraged loyalty (Hare, 2003), through determining the importance and understanding of the requirements of the population sample (Oates et al., 1996). At the end of the questionnaire, the following demographic questions were asked allowing the characteristics of the respondents to enable a better understanding of the requirements of the sample (Hare 2003; Oates et al., 1996): age group; gender; household size; and income. Once the responses were completed and returned, the data was transferred into SPSS version 16 for analysis. In total 142 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 53.9%. As this research is exploratory, the data sought consumer perceptions of the issues dictated within existing literature, therefore the analysis includes percentages which will determine the extent of experiences as encountered by older consumers and cross tabulation to identify pertinent areas for further research. The respondents to this questionnaire were predominately female, 88.9% and 9.7% were male. The age groups ranged from aged 50 years to over 85 years with the largest percentages in the age ranges of 60 – 64 (22.2%) and 65 – 69 (24.3%). Most of the respondents were no longer working (59.7%), whilst 9.7 % still worked full time and 10.4% part time. Some 22.8% volunteered and 6.2% looked after their grandchildren. The majority of the respondents lived in singular households (47.8%), while 44.4% lived in a two-person household and this accounts for 92.2% of the sample. Less common was the four-person household, 2.1%, and 5 plus household, 0.7%. The respondents were also asked how they obtained their income and could tick all that were applicable. Most respondents claimed the state pension (78.5%) and 57.6% also claimed a work pension while 4.2% receive pension credit. Indicative of the age range, 21.5% still received a salary from employment. Additionally, 1.4 % increased their monthly income through equity release, indicating the breadth of other product and service sectors developed to facilitate older peoples changing requirements (Brennan & Ritch, 2010).

**Key findings and discussion**

The assumption that older people are impoverished is changing as noted by improved lifestyles and work pensions (Sorce et al., 1989; Oates et al., 1996; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001; Hare, 2003; Carrigan et al., 2004; Myers & Lumbers, 2008) and the findings from this research support this change. However, some of the respondents noted they did not receive a full pension due to time off work through looking after children.

***Frequency and location of accessing food retailers***

This research found that most respondents accessed the supermarket through their own means of private transport. Access was considered the most import aspect for choosing a supermarket with parking facilities the second most important. The respondents mainly shopped through use of a car, or relied upon a lift from family or friends. Parking at supermarkets was considered adequate. The main issues with parking facilities were the size of the spaces along with the number of facilities for parents and those with a disability. Public transport is not always easily accessible (Goodwin & McElwee, 1997) and often costly (Hare et al., 2001). Only 10.4% chose a supermarket for this reason, probably a reflection on the increase in car access. However, 22.9% used public transport, reducing the ability to make large purchase, buy in bulk and increasing the frequency of shopping. Additionally, 20.8% still accessed the supermarket on foot, again reducing the opportunity to buy everything required (Hare et al., 2001; Welsh Consumer Council, 2006). Perhaps this is the reason respondents shopped two or three times weekly. This research found 25.7% preferred to and 23.6% still shopped locally from the fishmonger, butcher and a smaller but significant 4.0% reported no local shops were available, perhaps a reflection on the growth of out of town retail outlets.

***Pricing and product sizes***

Due to an indication in previous literature regarding singular households (Silvers, 1997; Hare et al., 2001; Lumbers & Raats, 2006) the questions encompassed important aspects, such as price, quality and portion size. It has also been identified in the literature that often older people live on their own (WHO, 1999). This research identified almost half (47.2%) lived in singular households and were predominantly female. Single person households are not only penalized when making food purchases of tins and ready meals, but also find it problematic to consider offers like ‘three for two’ and larger packs (Hare et al., 2001; Welsh Consumer Council, 2006). Further, 47.9% of the respondents thought the prices of portion sizes to be unfair, as individual portion sizes were more expensive, which is an important aspect for those on a budget, for example a reduced and fixed income such as a pension. It was thought that the supermarkets prioritise supplying value for families and those who live on their own have to pay higher prices. Mainly, (80.6%) of respondents bought the three for two options to take advantage of the saving, but this was dependent on whether the products were perishable or bought normally. Problems of bulk buying also depend on transporting the products home. Due to the problems incurred by older consumers reading labels on packaging (Johnson-Hillery et al., 1997), this research included questions on labels. Size was seen to be a deterrent (Oates et al., 1996; Hare et al., 2001) and this was confirmed by 68.8% of the respondents. In the main this was because labels were too small (60.4%), followed by the print on the label 18.1%). Again, this can be considered problematic and could easily be addressed by manufacturers.

***Loyalty and the shopping experience***

The comments regarding customer service included a dislike for staff who were also students, and appeared disinterested in building a rapport with the customer and tended to chat among themselves. Despite previous research indicating that older consumers prefer an enhanced customer service as offered by luxury supermarkets (Pettigrew et al., 2005; Moschis et al., 2004; Goodwin & McElwee, 1997), almost half of the respondents preferred luxury supermarkets, but did not indicate this to be their main supermarket. Perhaps regular shopping in luxury supermarkets is price prohibitive. Despite this preference, respondents often shopped in discount supermarkets (79.8%), which maybe a reflection of the recession within the UK or simply that older people are cost conscious. Further research regarding the trade off between enhanced customer service and value for money was recommended by Goodwin and McElwee (1997) and this research sought to identify what products and services were appreciated by the respondents.

***Meeting the needs of older consumers***

The respondents (11.8%) also indicated dietary requirements and reported that in the main the supermarkets did not cater for these needs. Although, no problems with access were reported by any respondents, it was noted some appreciated their predicament and recognised this was not the same for other older people. This sums up the problems this research anticipated, the vulnerable consumer describing the barriers to affordable, nutritious and accessible products. However, the results are evident of a diverse population, where older consumers are ageing with improved health in contrast to the previous generation of older people and are more prosperous financially. This indicates a breadth of needs for food retailers to consider and that the food sector could address the barriers to access for older people to ensure retaining customer loyalty. Although none of the respondents stated any problems preparing and cooking food, there were a few comments regarding problems opening the packaging. Despite older people’s reluctance to have different products or services marketed too them (Brennan & Ritch, 2010), age may incur some restrictions in movement. This however could be addressed over a range of products, or an opportunity to provide products aimed to overcome the removal of packaging. The important aspect is determining the problems incurred from usage.

**Conclusion and managerial implications**

It can be seen that the growth in the population of older people has many implications on society, from financial to social care, but will also result in commercial opportunities. This research supported the diversity of the ageing population, indicating that, many older consumers are fitter, have access to a car and are less impoverished and are therefore an attractive segment for marketers and retailers. Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore what products and services could enhance the lives of older people (Szmigin & Carrigan 2001). This research has directed researchers to topics which would benefit from obtaining consumer opinions qualitatively as to why and how supermarkets meet the needs of older people and where improvements can be made. Furthermore, because of the lower age parameter used in this study, this research did not identify a large population who had problems with access, preparation and cooking. However, the population of older people in Scotland, especially those over 75 years, is set to increase (The Scottish Government, 2008). As such, future research should concentrate on the older segment of older consumers, those who are more vulnerable through reduced mobility and finances.

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