

Exploring the impact of recipe cards for seafood at the point of sale

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Abstract

Food consumption and purchase behaviour are highly habituated, with food marketers often attempting to interrupt routine behaviour and thought patterns at the point of sale (POS) through aggressive sales promotion. In the case of food products, recipe cards are a common POS tactic, yet little research has examined the impact of recipe cards at POS. This research explores the impact of recipe cards at POS, specifically in relation to seafood, with data gathered through 11 face to face depth interviews with fishmongers. Results highlight the positive impact of recipe cards as marketing stimuli for seafood through two key roles: (1) risk reduction for consumers who lack knowledge about how to prepare and serve seafood; and (2) facilitating variety seeking for consumers who are looking for something different. Regardless of consumers' motivations for taking recipe cards, fishmongers perceive that recipe cards have a positive impact on seafood sales.

Introduction and background

Food consumption and purchase behaviour are highly habituated, with food marketers often seeking to interrupt routine behaviour and thought patterns at the point of sale (POS) through aggressive sales promotion (Lawley et al. 2012; Thomason 2012). Generally, food is a product where involvement is low and thus decision making tends to be associated with limited, habitual or routine response behaviour (Mahon, Cowan, & McCarthy, 2006). Indeed, several studies support the highly habitual nature of food consumption and purchase decisions (Carrasco, Labeaga, & Lopez-Salido, 2005; van't Riet, Sijtsema, Dagevos, & De Bruijn, 2011). Seafood consumption is no exception with studies supporting the highly habituated nature of seafood consumption (Price & Gislason, 2001; Scholderer & Trondsen, 2008). The high perceived risks associated with making the wrong decision when purchasing seafood makes seafood a higher involvement product than many other food items (Birch & Lawley, 2012; Pieniak, Verbeke, Vermeir, Brunsø, & Olsen, 2007). The more involved the consumer becomes in the decision making process, the more extensive is the search for both personal and non-personal information during evaluation of alternatives (Cho & Lee, 2006; Gurhan-Canli & Batra, 2004). Marketing tactics, such as the provision of recipe cards at POS, may assist consumers in this search for information on how to prepare and serve seafood.

Research has revealed that a lack of familiarity with preparing and serving seafood means that some consumers perceive difficulty in evaluating, selecting, and cooking seafood (Birch & Lawley, 2012; Olsen, 2004; Sogn-Grundvåg & Østli, 2009; Sveinsdóttir et al., 2009). Some of the inherent risk in a product category such as seafood can be mitigated by purchasing from a reputable supplier (Mitchell, 1999), such as a specialist fishmonger who is perceived to be more knowledgeable and stock better quality seafood than alternative sources such as supermarkets (Altintzoglou, *et al.* 2010; Birch, Lawley & Hamblin, 2012). Recipe cards can also assist in mitigating risk by providing consumers with ideas and information on preparing and serving seafood.

POS is a promotional tool designed to influence purchases at the point of purchase using collateral such as displays, signage and banners, brochures, display packaging, in-store

product demonstration, and in the case of food products, recipe cards. POS is a very appealing promotional tool for retailers as research has revealed that consumers make up to 76% of their purchasing decisions in-store (PoPAI Australia and New Zealand, 2012). Australian seafood consumption studies have revealed that 73% of seafood buying decisions for at home consumption are planned (Birch et al., 2012); however, this planning is often only at the generic level, for example intention to purchase fish, with the decision concerning the specific type of fish to be purchased made at the point of sale. Little research has been conducted on POS sales promotion with existing research predominantly focusing on price discounting (Hardesty & Bearden, 2003; Palazón-vidal & Delgado-Ballester, 2009), and limited research focusing on non-price POS such as recipe cards. Moreover, very limited literature on what is effective in breaking through the clutter at POS and disrupt habitual buying behaviour exists.

An experiment conducted on POS engagement (specifically for video displays) found that stores with this type of POS tool had consumers that were overall more satisfied with their shopping experiences (Russell, 2008). It appears that limited research has been conducted comparing POS promotional materials and their individual effectiveness. Research could not be identified specifically addressing recipe cards and seafood. However, a study conducted in the Netherlands on how seafood could be made more accessible to consumers ‘...revealed that easy access to inspiring recipes lowers the barriers to preparing high-quality dishes at home’ (Blank, 2012).

The need to break through at POS and disrupt routine behaviour is epitomised in speciality food retailers, for example butchers and bakers, who have transformed their retail presences over the past decades from providing a basic food offering of a very limited range of products, to a more stimulating retail atmosphere with a broader range of value-added, pre-prepared products, as well as, accompaniments and supplementary products. Conversely, over the same period of time, the fishmonger has changed little. Hence, the purpose of the research reported in this paper was to explore the role of recipe cards at POS, specifically in the context of a high value, high risk food - seafood. Three key research issues addressed were:

- Why do fishmongers use recipe cards at POS; that is, what role do fishmongers perceive recipe cards play cards in consumers’ purchasing decisions?
- What makes a good recipe card for seafood?
- What impact do recipe cards for seafood have on customers, staff and sales?

Methodology

In this paper, we investigate the impact of recipe cards at POS in the context of seafood recipe cards at specialist fishmongers. We take an exploratory approach to this investigation, using qualitative methods by conducting eleven face-to-face in-depth interviews, one with a representative of the Master Fish Mongers Association (MFMA) and ten with Sydney-based fishmongers representing 16 retail outlets in Australia. A key function undertaken by the MFMA is the development and distribution of recipe cards for its 60 members who are specialist fishmongers, predominantly within New South Wales. Currently the MFMA have a range of 32 recipe cards and sell approximately 800 000 cards per year to members. The ten fishmongers interviewed were selected based on the judgement of the Executive Officer of the MFMA to reflect a representative cross section of his members.

The interview protocol explored why the fishmongers use recipe cards, how and why they perceive customers use the cards, what comprises a good recipe card for seafood, and finally

what impact recipe cards have on customers, staff and sales (of specific products featured on recipes and sales overall). Respondents were all either owners or managers, selected to represent a range of different backgrounds including different geographic locations in New South Wales, target markets (ethnic groups, locals and tourists), years of business experience (ranging from less than 3 years to over 40 years), store type (shopping centre, strip mall, stand-alone) and store size (from single store family-run operations to multi-store operations). Most stores had either 4 or 8 different recipe cards on display, with one very large store displaying 32 different cards.

Results and discussion

Why do fishmongers use recipe cards at POS; that is, what role do fishmongers perceive recipe cards play in consumers' purchasing decisions?

As all fishmongers selected for the study stock recipe cards at POS, it was unsurprising that all perceive recipe cards have a positive impact in store, in terms of generating sales - '*what's on recipe cards sells*'. In line with previous studies of non-price promotions, a further motivation for the use of recipe cards in store is the desire to deliver added value - (*price discounting doesn't work, much better to give something away*) (Blank, 2012; Hardesty & Bearden, 2003; Palazón-vidal & Delgado-Ballester, 2009). Two key themes were identified when fish mongers were asked why they thought consumers use recipe cards: (1) risk reduction when purchasing a product the consumer is less confident to prepare and serve; and (2) variety seeking when a consumer is looking for something different. A third less prominent theme was the role recipe cards can play in saving time and providing convenience.

All respondents identified risk reduction as a key function of recipe cards. As one respondent stated, '*people are scared of cooking seafood – recipe cards reduce fear -they go home and cook an easy recipe that is not complicated*'. Responses supported previous research which has revealed that Australian consumers lack knowledge and confidence when it comes to seafood (Birch & Lawley, 2012). Interviewees commented, '*people do not know how to cook*', hence recipe cards '*take away the fear of cooking*'. Respondents further stated that most customers were purchasing for cooking and consumption the same day – again supporting previous Australian seafood consumption studies (Danenberg & Mueller, 2010). Of note, two respondents highlighted that it was younger people in particular who were looking for guidance in terms of cooking, while conversely, another respondent specifically suggested it was '*older ladies*' who needed some help in this area.

Turning to variety seeking as a motivation for using recipe cards, a common theme was '*people are always looking for different things to cook and different ways of cooking*'. Previous studies have revealed that fish consumption is associated with the desire for a varied diet (Rortveit & Olsen, 2009). In this study, the percentage of customers who came into the fishmonger not knowing what they were going to buy varied greatly between stores, with 6 respondents suggesting the majority of their customers knew what they wanted when they came into the store and the remaining 4 respondents suggesting the majority of their customers did not know what they wanted to buy.

The third theme to emerge was time saving and convenience, '*they want something quick and easy...people want to save time and money*'. Prior research has revealed that many consumers are convenience orientated with respect to food (Candel, 2001; de Boer, McCarthy, Cowan, & Ryan, 2004), and likewise the fishmongers noted that recipe cards were associated with perceptions of making meal preparation quick, easy and simple. Numerous studies

focusing on seafood consumption have revealed that price is a major barrier (Brunsø, Verbeke, Olsen, & Jeppesen, 2009; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005). In terms of budget, it was perceived that at least 10% of consumers were on a budget, typically looking for seafood under AUD20/kg – and recipe cards delivered ideas for making a cheaper product more appealing. One respondent noted that more customers were taking recipe cards since the advent of the global financial crisis, as *'budgets are tighter, so more people are eating at home rather than going out'*.

What makes a good recipe card?

Building on the key utility of risk reduction, simplicity is a key feature of a good recipe card. Previous studies on stimulating seafood consumption have highlighted the need for easy step by step instructions for preparing seafood, recipes and serving suggestions (Vanhonacker, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2010). The MFMA representative highlighted consistent feedback that recipes on the cards should be simple, not take too much time to prepare and cook and be able to be made with ingredients most consumers would already have on hand. He further emphasised that a realistic photograph of the final cooked meal was critical to gain attention and interest. Fishmongers supported these principles of good design emphasising the importance of a colour photo, the need *'not to be too busy'* and *'not take more than 20 minutes to prepare'*.

The MFMA recipe cards are designed for versatility and often do not specify a particular fish species but rather identify three or four species that would be suitable for the recipe. This appreciation for flexibility and versatility was supported by the fishmongers who noted that while about half of their customers appear to stick to the recipe, many adapt the recipe or ask what products could be substituted. Those lacking in knowledge may stick to the recipe while variety seekers may look to adapt or change. Some consumers wanting to substitute the main seafood ingredient are also looking for a cheaper substitute. Fishmongers also look for variety in their selection of recipe cards with most replenishing stocks of cards three to four times a year. The MFMA aim to produce eight new recipe cards each year, while exiting eight existing cards. However, a few classic recipes such as spaghetti marinara are always available.

All respondents noted that seafood sales were highly seasonal with peak sales in summer and much lower sales in winter. They suggested that recipe cards need to reflect seasonal appeal and a greater range of winter recipes need to be available to encourage greater consumption of seafood in colder weather. Respondents suggested that most consumers prefer recipe cards over recipe books, as cards are easier to store and allow customers to only select the cards they will try (rather than a book where many recipes may not have appeal). Recipe cards were also cheaper and easier to store in retail outlets.

What impact do recipe cards for seafood have on customers, staff and sales?

While the majority of respondents agreed that recipe cards assisted sales, the ways in which recipe cards were used varied considerably across stores. In almost half of the stores, staff are encouraged to take recipe cards home and try the recipes themselves (with one store even giving staff free product samples to use). In these stores, it was felt that improving the knowledge, confidence and familiarity of staff with the recipes and cooking methods allowed them to be more effective salespeople as they could relate their personal experience - *'yes its really easy – I tried the recipe last week and even my children loved it'*. One very large, busy store stocking a full range of recipe cards uses a 'concierge' to assist people to select the right cards, as well as, provide advice on fish cooking methods. One fishmonger reported using the recipe cards for a letterbox drop (with shop details on the back). Some respondents were also

seeking high-tech innovative alternatives to standard recipe cards, such as an in-store computer where customers could search for a recipe and then email it to themselves.

Finally, respondents noted that, while recipe cards were useful for a variety of reasons (even just having cards there for customers who liked to collect them), they were only one of many forms of POS promotion, and POS worked best when multiple tools were used. In particular, in-store demonstrations and sampling '*create buzz and excitement*'. Other respondents suggested in-store televisions showing recipes being prepared, with two stores actually having screens in-store, while another respondent reported that they always have a chef in store to assist consumers with seafood cooking advice.

Conclusions and future research directions

This research has provided a first step in understanding the role of non-price sales promotion at the point of sale for food products, specifically the use of recipe cards at POS for seafood. Results confirm two key roles recipe cards play in consumers' decision making for seafood: (1) reducing risk in selecting, preparing and serving seafood; and (2) providing meal variety. The key features of a good recipe card were identified as a clear colour photo of the final product, simple instructions using ingredients commonly on hand, and a preparation time of less than 20 minutes. While recipe cards were thought to contribute to improved sales, a combination of different non-price POS strategies including in-store demonstrations and sampling was considered to be more effective in encouraging sales.

This research used a small judgement sample of fishmongers within one state of Australia, hence future research would benefit from a larger probability-based sample of fishmongers across the various states of Australia. Moreover, future research could involve an investigation of consumers' perceptions of recipe cards in terms of reducing perceived risk, facilitating meal variety, and delivering time savings and greater convenience. Focusing on the consumer would allow for a triangulation of findings. Further research should also focus on the broader context of combinations of different POS collateral to explore synergistic effects and identify which combinations are most effective in increasing seafood sales.

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