

Food Packaging: Industry, Consumer Spokesmen Differ on Rationality in the Supermarket

Spokesmen for several segments of the food industry appeared before the Senate Anti-trust and Monopoly Subcommittee last week to reply to charges that artfully contrived packaging techniques are deceiving the consumer.

The charges, which consumer representatives made before the committee in June, basically are that the supermarket shopper is being duped with techniques borrowed from psychology, the visual arts, and other specialties. As a result of these practices, the consumer representatives said, it has become extremely difficult to make a "rational" choice among competing products.

Specifically, they complained of the obscuring of net content data on labels, slack filling of packages, and the practice of reducing the contents of familiar packages without a corresponding drop in price. In addition, they charged that some manufacturers deliberately fill their packages to fractional weights, such as the 3 pounds 1¼ ounces in a leading laundry detergent, to make cost per ounce computations extremely difficult.

The packaging industry is vast and amorphous, and the replies to the charges vary. But in essence, the principal counterarguments are that (i) any consumer interested in "rational" shopping can find all the necessary information on the label; (ii) practices described as questionable are well within the law and are sanctioned as acceptable competitive techniques; (iii) the few rotten apples that can be in any barrel should be attended to in this case by nongovernmental industry policing; and (iv) the producer who regards the consumer as rational does so at his peril.

The hearings on packaging are directed by Senator Philip A. Hart (D-Mich.), and are part of a long series of inquiries which Senator Kefauver, chairman of the over-all subcommittee, has undertaken into various aspects of the American economy. These inquiries, starting in 1957, have included the auto, steel, drug, bread, and insurance industries. None of these earlier subjects, with the possible exception of drugs, however, had elicited such broad and immediate public interest and approval as the inquiry into packaging. And because of this public response, none afforded the

committee the opportunity for such rapid exploitation of the congressional hearing as a device for public education (or propaganda, depending on one's point of view), political advantage, and spade-work for legislation.

The subject of value in food is one in which most shoppers feel personal interest, knowledgeability, and, because of the cost of living, frustration. A steady flow of commendatory mail indicates that they have responded warmly to the role undertaken by Hart, a first-term senator who was scarcely known outside of Michigan before the hearings and who now has a solid claim to the politically profitable role of champion of the consumer.

Sought After Role

The role, which is a coveted one on Capitol Hill, is also a politically dangerous one, for the championing inevitably must be against some element of the business community, which is alert and capable of vigorous self-defense. By shrewd management of the inquiry, however, Hart has managed to lead the packaging and allied industries to the conclusion that it would be in their own interest to abstain from counterattack. The principal device for obtaining this result has been a policy of masking brand names at the public hearings and insisting that all witnesses appear voluntarily, and not under subpoena. The gift of product anonymity assures that no producer will undertake a public relations campaign to defend practices of which he has not been publicly accused; and the insistence on voluntary appearances has assured a more gentlemanly atmosphere at the hearings, with no substance for a public plea that the industry has been dragged before a hostile congressional committee. With rare exceptions, the industry witnesses sought by the committee have come forward to respond to the charges.

These witnesses have been burdened by the difficult task of explaining away a variety of questioned practices against the background of Hart's simple and reasonable-sounding assertion that "The consumer has a right to be able to find out what he is buying, how much he is buying, and what it is costing on a per unit basis." The industry reply is that any shopper who seeks this goal can find the necessary data on virtually all products carried in supermarkets, and can make his own computations. Hart and the consumer witnesses, in turn, have not

disputed that the data are there—federal and state regulations assure that it is—but insist that many manufacturers have sought to de-emphasize it and have placed a heavy burden on the shopper who seeks to be "rational." To this, a number of packaging specialists have replied that the housewife is not a rational creature, and that the producer who pitches his sales campaign to the needs of rationality will go broke. Soap in a red box, they point out, sells better than the same soap in a brown box; coffee made in the same urn "tastes better" to a test panel when it is poured from a battered, well-used looking percolator than when it is poured from a new percolator; the use of the term "jumbo half-quart" fulfills a psychological need for plentitude without deceiving anyone about the quantity. In fact, argued Louis Cheskin, a motivational researcher with numerous clients and considerable influence in the food industry, "Our entire social structure depends on the mass production of psychologically satisfying products as much as the individual depends on these products in fulfilling his emotional needs." Any attempt, he said, to dictate minimum standards for the location and visibility of net content designations, might "mutilate the psychological appeal of the package."

Cheskin's testimony was similar to that of a more renowned motivational researcher, Ernest Dichter, who claims to have enlisted the insights of modern psychology in behalf of merchandising. Dichter, who appeared at the June hearing, testified that most competing products were similar in quality, and that the competitive edge goes to the company that can create the illusion of a desirable difference. The package, he said, is a crucial element in achieving this goal. Any attempt at dictating package design, he warned, was based on ignorance of what makes the market place work.

In response to the other charges, spokesmen argued that when a producer is faced with the need to increase his price to meet higher costs, it has been found that the consumers react more favorably to a drop in the contents, accompanied by maintenance of the original price. These spokesmen have attributed slack filling of containers to unavoidable settling in transit; and in answer to complaints of fractional weights that complicate cost-per-unit calculations, one spokesman, Roy King, editor of the trade journal *Food Field Reporter*, argued that "the consumer

views a given product in terms of volume usage, rather than avoirdupois weight. Although net weight . . . is included on the package because the law so decrees, the consumer views his purchase by so many cupsful, so many servings, or so many teaspoonsful. . . . The housewife," he declared, "is buying performance and service, in terms of usage. Fractional weights are actually of minor significance when compared to product performance."

While spokesmen for the industry have attempted point-by-point refutations of criticisms made at the hearings, various parts of the industry have taken steps which indicate a realization that the resentment expressed by consumers is intense and has now found an open channel for political action. One major chain store recently undertook a survey to make certain that its so-called large economy sizes cost less per ounce than the smaller sizes. A spokesman said it found a few that did not. And several associations of food packers have urged their member firms to reexamine their practices in the light of complaints made at the hearings.

These industry efforts will probably lead to a number of reforms which will be held up to the committee as proof that self-regulation and enlightened policies have removed whatever need there may have been for Federal action. The committee, however, has set forth consumer rationality as the value it wishes to support. The industry, by its own testimony, has come to regard this as an illusion, and whatever efforts it may make at self-control, the dynamics of the highly competitive, \$55 billion a year food business are likely to overwhelm any voluntary effort to encourage consumer rationality in the supermarket.—D.S.G.

A Boost for Educational TV

With few exceptions, educational television has been blocked from the pathways to large audiences. This has come about because the very-high-frequency band, for which most sets are exclusively equipped, is almost fully occupied by commercial stations. Educational television has a standing invitation to set up shop on the ultra-high-frequency band, but generally has been reluctant to do so because the number of UHF-equipped receivers is negligible.

Last week, the Federal Communications Commission acted to open the way for educational television broad-

casts that can be received on standard sets in the New York Metropolitan area. In an action still subject to court review, the FCC approved the sale of WNTA-TV, Channel 13, to Educational Television for the Metropolitan Area, Inc. The purchase price, \$6.2 million, has been subscribed by five commercial stations in the New York area, a number of foundations, and individual contributions. The operating expenses, estimated at \$2 million annually, will be solicited from the public.

The new station is expected to become the anchor of a thriving "fourth network" of some 50 educational television stations now in operation across the nation. These have provided elevated TV fare by pooling their resources for taped productions which they circulate among themselves. The new station's relatively substantial resources, along with the vast audience within its reach, will make this fourth network an increasingly influential force on millions of TV screens, much along the lines of what Walter Lippmann suggested when he wrote that the solution to the ills of television may be establishment of a network "run as a public service with its criterion not what will be most popular but what is good."

West Ford: Outcome Uncertain

The uncertainties of space technology have provided an anticlimax for the first attempt to carry out the controversial Project West Ford. At midweek, it appeared that the 350-million hairlike copper filaments that were carried aloft 21 October by a Midas satellite had failed to form the intended earth-circling belt.

West Ford's goal was to create an artificial ionosphere for experiments in long-range communications. Military planners regard the project as holding promise for a jam-proof communications system.

The announcement of West Ford brought protests from astronomers who contended it might interfere with radio and optical observations. Their fears were discounted by the President's Science Advisory Committee and the Space Science Board of the National Academy of Sciences.

It was reported that the canister containing the filaments apparently had separated from the satellite but had failed to discharge its load. Present plans call for another attempt if the belt fails to develop.

Announcements

A **science resources planning office** has been established by the National Science Foundation to study the nation's future needs and resources for research and education in science. The new office, headed by Richard H. Bolt, NSF's associate director of research, will use information developed in cooperation with educational institutions, industrial firms, and government agencies, and will sponsor relevant studies by other organizations, both public and private.

The American Academy of Allergy is requesting physicians to submit names and addresses of persons who experience severe **allergic reactions to insect stings**. Questionnaires on the subsequent sting history of persons in these various categories (to be completed by the patient) will enable the academy to determine how much treatment should be given, or what happens to the majority of these people if they remain untreated. (Executive Office, American Academy of Allergy, 756 N. Milwaukee St., Milwaukee 2, Wis.)

The Public Health Service's Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta, Georgia, has been designated the inter-American **arthropod-borne virus regional reference laboratory** for the World Health Organization, in recognition of the growing number of viruses carried by insects, spiders, and ticks. The new unit will offer reference diagnostic services to public health laboratories for detailed identification of arboviruses, and limited quantities of reference diagnostic materials to laboratories concerned with these diseases.

Psychologists who have recently completed research studies in **human factors engineering** under government contract are invited to submit manuscripts based on their findings for publication in the *Journal of Engineering Psychology*. (Elias Publications, P.O. Box 662, Washington 4, D.C.)

The American Board of Nutrition will hold the next examinations for **certification in human nutrition** on 8 April 1962 in Atlantic City, N.J. Deadline for receipt of applications: *1 March 1962*. (Robert E. Shank, Department of Preventive Medicine, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis 10, Mo.)