

Eating Our Food Waste: Understanding Trends In Consumer Food Waste

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Literature

- About 20% of food wasted in households is due to misinterpretation of date labels.
- 40% of food is uneaten in the U.S. due to misinterpretation of date labels
- Sell-by dates—which are intended as recommendations to the retailer—tend to be quite conservative, leading to a lot of food being thrown away weeks before it needs to be.
- Nationally, food products make up 63 percent of a supermarket's disposed waste stream
- Businesses needlessly trash billions of pounds of food every year as a result of the U.S.'s dizzying array of expiration date labeling practices, which needs to be standardized and clarified
- When new food comes in to replace the old, it often works better for them to throw the old food away rather than discount it or give it away. This way customers are forced to buy the new items at full price.
- A federal law called the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, enacted in 1996, was created to encourage food donation by minimizing liability

Methodology

- Randomized sample of 700 UW- Stout Juniors and Seniors living off campus
- Snowball sample of community members and family
- Questionnaire of both open-ended & close-ended questions sent via email utilizing Qualtrics software
- Informed consent to participate
- Participants labeled with response ID upon receiving responses to protect confidentiality
- 127 survey participants, ages 20 – 63
- 6 grocery stores interviewed via telephone



Understanding Food Labels

Sell-by Date: date marked on a perishable product indicating the recommended time by which it should be sold

Use-by Date: date marked on a perishable good indicating the time the product should be used for peak quality

Best-by Date: date marked on a product indicating the time by which it should be consumed for optimal quality (not a purchase safety date)

Expiration Date: date marked on a product indicating it should not be sold because of an expected decline in quality or effectiveness

% of individuals indicating YES, they would eat the product past the date mentioned



Why Throw It Away?



Grocery Stores Are Doing Their Part

- 100%** Donate food “waste” to a local organization
Stepping Stones, Feeding America
“We donate far more than we throw away”
- 67%** Have a section of the store dedicated to outdated, damaged, past peak freshness food products available for a discounted price
Outdated shelving, damaged product grab boxes, produce discount
- 100%** Record how much food they are throwing away & change habits accordingly to minimize future waste
- 17%** Allow employees to take home food
“As long as it is not past the expiration date”

Top 5 Ways Consumers Are Minimizing Waste

1. Purchasing foods they know will be consumed before spoiling
2. Purchasing less
3. Making more frequent visits to the grocery store
4. Menu planning prior to shopping
5. Only buying what is needed (not giving into sales and temptation)

Are you aware that one third of the food produced in the United States is thrown away every year?



Implications | Conclusions

- Many consumers have yet to understand food waste is a major issue in the United States
- Consumers are not educated on the meaning of the different food date labels, but this is not the main contributor to consumer food waste
- Consumers are basing spoilage on taste, appearance, and smell before the date listed on the box
- Many consumers expressed eating foods past dates listed on the food product – indicating there are more prominent factors that are leading to the amount of food Americans are wasting
 - Buying too much at once
 - Spontaneous buying
- Frequency of grocery shopping and quantity of foods purchased is directly related to consumer food waste.
- Those shopping for more than themselves, find themselves shopping in larger quantities to last for longer periods of time leading to more food waste
- Grocery Stores will always waste food, it is inevitable, however, they may not get as much credit in literature for their efforts in defeating food waste in their stores as they deserve (they can always do more)
 - Grocery stores starting to compost waste
- Many Groceries have implemented a section of their store for outdated foods, damaged foods, and past peak freshness produce, indicating they are not solely profit driven by forcing consumers to buy the new products at full price

“When in doubt, throw it out!”