Empirical Research
In Selective Communications

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INTRODUCTION

In a preceding paper (Nebenzahl, 1975), the concepts of selective communications were developed and a model of selective communications by means of codes was outlined. To review, selective communications were defined as messages designed to be interpreted differently by members of different market segments. The need for such messages exists when information which is intended to attract members of one market segment may alienate others. Codes are semantic symbols which are hard to interpret without additional information about their meaning and intended use. It was suggested that the desired selectivity of communications can be achieved by means of codes whose definitions are made known to members of the target market segments only. Thus, only targeted consumers should be able to perceive and interpret the information upon exposure to the codes. This paper reports the results of an empirical study intended to assess the validity of the selective communications approach and its applicability in a marketing environment. In addition to providing this empirical evidence, the study also points out certain conditions which are required for successful selective communication. It also surfaced factors which may cause errors in the communication process.
Presently, there are a number of codes which are used in the marketing environment and which attempt to create selectivity between target and non-target audiences. Of these, four symbols, which inform interested consumers that food products which display them are kosher, were selected for close analysis in this study. These symbols were selected because they are addressed to the same market segments, which are accessible for research, and because their meanings are related.

Background Information

The Jewish religion requires its followers to observe the religion’s dietary laws. These laws limit the ingredients which may be consumed and the manner in which food is processed (Helping Hand . . . 1966). Kosher food products are those produced in compliance with these laws. The Jewish dietary laws can be quite complex, especially in modern food processing plants which use pre-processed ingredients. It is, therefore, generally accepted that rabbinical supervision in the plants is required (Schnur, 1971). When a food processor wants to sell his products to observant Jews, he has to inform them which of his products are kosher and that his production lines are under appropriate supervision.

Three alternatives are available for the transmittal of this information. First, the information may be advertised over mass media. This approach is not practical for producers who market both kosher and non-kosher food products under the same brand name, as is generally the case, since the consumer may still have difficulty in identifying which products are kosher. Furthermore, it is feared that such advertisements may alienate non-Jewish consumers. Second, the information may be printed on the labels of kosher products and include the seal of the rabbi who provides the supervision. While this approach may solve the product identification problem, it tends to clutter the package design. As with the first alternative, it may also alienate non-Jewish consumers. These two alternatives are usually taken by companies who specialize in serving the Jewish market. Third, special symbols, whose meanings are made known to observant Jews may be printed on the labels of kosher food products. This alternative is taken by national food marketers who produce both kosher and non-kosher foods and for whom observant Jews represent only a small segment of the total market.