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Test Marketing of Seedless Watermelons in Ukrop's Supermarkets, August 10-22, 1998

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Introduction

In May of 1998, Research Scientists and Extension Specialists, within the Division of Agriculture at Virginia State University, established fields of seedless watermelons on six farms to conduct production, marketing and economic research studies. The fields were 1/4 acre to 1 acre in size. At each of these watermelon research and demonstration sites, two-thirds of the plants were a female seedless variety and one-third of the plants were a male pollinator variety. The two seedless varieties used were Tri-X 313 from American Sunmelon Seed Company and Summer Sweet 5544 from Abbott & Cobb Seed Company. The male pollinator varieties used were Mardi Gras and Summer Flavor 500. In order to test consumer acceptance of seedless watermelons, a test marketing program was developed with Ukrop's Supermarkets, Inc. in Richmond, Virginia. During the weeks of August 9th and of August 16th, 800 of the seedless watermelons, grown by the cooperating farmers, were offered for sale at four different Ukrop's stores. In-store demonstrations, with taste samples, were conducted at each location, during both weeks. Customers were asked to fill out a simple questionnaire to gauge their reactions to the seedless watermelons. All of the results of the study will be discussed in this report.

Planning

The following questions had to be answered before the test marketing of seedless watermelons to Ukrop's could proceed:

Question: What quality standards would be used?
Answer: Minimum size - 12 lbs. Stage of maturity - ripe, not over ripe. No physical blemishes on the rind. No Hollow Heart. Each delivered melon must have a PLU sticker.

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- Question: What kind of container would be used for delivery?
Answer: Heavy cardboard bulk bin on a wooden pallet. This bin holds 100 - 12 lb. melons. Each bulk bin cost \$8.00. Each pallet cost \$6.00.
- Question: What would be the wholesale and the retail price?
Answer: The growers received \$.16 per pound or \$1.92 for each 12 lb. melon. The customers were charged \$2.99 for each seedless melon in this test.
- Question: Which of the 21 Ukrop's supermarkets would participate in the test?
Answer: The sale of the seedless watermelons was tested at the store on Laburnum Avenue, the ones in Mechanicsville and Carytown, as well as the one on Brook Road.
- Question: How many melons would be delivered each week, to each store, for the test?
Answer: 100 to each store for the first week and 100 to each store for the second week.
- Question: Who would conduct the in-store taste demonstrations and customer surveys?
Answer: Professional demonstrators with Sierra Pacific Marketing Northwest, Inc. The Ukrop's supermarket chain uses this company to conduct all of their in-store promotions.
- Question: What would be the best period of time, during each week, to conduct the in-store taste demonstrations and customer surveys?
Answer: Friday, August 14 from 1:00 p. m. to 6:30 p. m. and Saturday, August 22 from 11:00 a. m. to 5:00 p. m.
- Question: Is liability insurance coverage required?
Answer: Yes. The test marketing project was conducted by the Virginia Cooperative Extension program at Virginia State University so their existing liability insurance policy covered this activity.

Sales Results

During both weeks of the test marketing program, in each of the four Ukrop's stores, 100 seedless watermelons were delivered to accompany the taste sampling demonstrations. The customers received a free slice of seedless watermelon as a taste sample and then had the opportunity to buy a whole 12 lb. seedless watermelon for \$2.99. In each Ukrop's location, in both weeks of the test, the seedless watermelons sold out very quickly at that price. The taste sampling demonstrations were supposed to last for six hours but the watermelons usually sold out in four hours. Market demand exceeded supply.

Consumer Survey

During both weeks of the test marketing program, in each of the four Ukrop's stores, the professional servers gave interested consumers a free taste of seedless watermelon and a survey

form with the following questions:

1. In one year, how many times do you and/or your family buy and consume watermelon?
2. How many persons live in your home?
3. On a scale of from 1-10, with 10 being the best, how do you rate the flavor of the seedless watermelon you tasted today?
4. How would you rate the size of this watermelon? (Check one)
Too Small_____ Just Right_____ Too Large_____
5. If the seedless melons cost twice as much as the seeded melons, which would you buy?
Seedless_____ Seeded_____
6. Additional comments

Customer Survey Results

During the two week period, 328 persons filled out survey forms. Forty six of the forms were discarded as a result of improper completion of the survey. All of the following analysis is taken from survey forms filled out by 282 consumers in four different neighborhoods in Richmond, Virginia.

Of the consumers surveyed, 70% purchase watermelons between zero and ten times a year. Sixteen percent of the consumers purchase watermelon between eleven and twenty times a year. Fourteen percent of the consumers purchase watermelon twenty-one or more times per year.

As might be expected, persons from small households liked the size of the 12 pound seedless watermelons better than the 20 pound seeded watermelons normally offered for sale. Among the 282 consumers surveyed, the percent from households consisting of one person to greater than five persons was as follows:

One person household - 18%
Two person households - 34%
Three person households - 21%
Four person households - 16%
Five person households - 6%
Greater than five person households - 5%

The consumers were asked to rate the flavor of the seedless watermelons on a scale of from 1-10, with 10 being the best. Seventy-six percent of the individuals surveyed scored the flavor of the seedless watermelon between 8 and 10. Twenty-four percent scored the flavor of the seedless watermelons between 5 and 7. One person rated the flavor as 3.

Eighty-four percent of the consumers surveyed rated the 12 lb. size of the seedless watermelons as being just right. Sixteen percent of the Ukrop's customers felt the size was too small. None of the shoppers rated the melons as being too large.

The consumers were asked if they would be willing to pay twice as much money for a seedless watermelon as they normally pay for a seeded watermelon. Overall, 48% stated on the survey form that they would pay twice as much to buy the seedless melons. The breakdown of price importance was very dependent on size of the household as follows:

In households of one persons, 51% would pay twice as much and 49% would not.
In households of two persons, 52 % would pay twice as much and 48% would not.
In households of three persons, 48% would pay twice as much and 52 % would not.
In households of four persons, 40 % would pay twice as much and 60% would not.
In households of five persons. 37% would pay twice as much and 63% would not.
In households of six or more persons, 12% would pay twice as much and 88% would not.

Additional comments:

Wonderful!

I enjoyed the flavor.

Great melon!

Good sweet taste.

Very tasty - not really a watermelon fan but this is exceptionally good.

The watermelon was very sweet and just right for my taste buds.

Yummy - Thanks!

Can you grow them in the winter with the same taste?

It's extremely tasty and I would spend extra money just because it tastes so good.

Delicious.

Great idea.

Watermelon was great!

Very good.

Excellent.

Watermelon tastes good and the woman serving was very nice and polite.

It was as good as seeded.

The taste is a little more gritty (not as fine textured) and the taste isn't as strong as the seeded watermelon but it is good and would be convenient.

Do they require more use of ag chemicals due to reduced resistance?

Most delicious I've ever eaten.

Very sweet and very good.

Price means a lot! But it is a good melon.

Great taste.

Good flavor.

Tastes good - Nice size - My family doesn't usually eat a whole watermelon!

Seedless is great for small children.

Thank you for the sample.

We don't buy watermelon because of the annoying seeds. Twice the price seems a lot, however.
How about 1 ½ times the price?
Excellent flavor and size is just right for a small family.
Good but would not pay more.
I thought it was very good. I just can't see paying twice as much for seedless.
Hope you are successful.
The watermelon was delicious. We do not eat much watermelon, but would buy the seedless to support the small farmer.
The best sample I've had this year.
The current size is okay but I would like for it to be a little bigger to serve more people.
Very tasty.
Just love seedless melons.
I love the sweet taste and the pretty red color. The flavor is very good.
Very good - the size is great!
It's nice to see a comparable priced watermelon with Walmart.
Very good color, taste, sweetness and price very reasonable.
Sweet, easy to eat but all I have is time.
I like the firmness of the melon.
Good but a little sweet.
Unbelievable!
It truly was a refreshing summer treat as Virginia's finest watermelon.
Better than no watermelon at all, but the regular ones are better tasting - the seeds have never been a problem.
Flavor a bit off.
Need to be more consistent on the size in order to sell them whole.
Not sweet enough.
Prefer seeded watermelon taste.
Please sell smaller portion for my small family.
The taste is missing some "body" - a little too sweet.
Good taste - right size - cost is terrific.
Have bought them before - no waste - eat in haste - great taste.
Not a watermelon buff. But this is very tasty. Thanks.
The watermelon is not seed free - a very dangerous fact for those who suffer from diverticulitis. The seeded watermelon may be safer because I can see the seeds.
Juicy - sweet.
It has a wonderful sweet taste.
Flavor is good; not quite seedless.
Very good taste and I like that it has no seed.
Not strong and sweet enough.
I did not enjoy them that much.
I think nature is just fine the way it is.
Taste is good. Texture is less than optimal.
They was all right.
The watermelon was nice and juicy today.
Different.

Very yummy.

This is very easy to use especially where small children are concerned.

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