

# Consumer Perspective on Open Dating

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**Since consumers are the ultimate users of open dating, an integral part of this assessment is consumer interest in and perspective on open dates for food. The background for this section comes from an Office of Technology Assessment nationwide survey of consumers in 1978 to determine their attitude about open-date information, usefulness and understanding of dates, and preference among dates. The survey itself consisted of a questionnaire sent to a statistically selected sample of 3,000 consumers. \***

## ATTITUDES TOWARD OPEN DATING

According to the survey, almost all shoppers (96 percent) were concerned about getting the freshest food products possible. About 1 in 10 (11 percent) felt that a lot of food they buy from grocery stores is spoiled.

Although the consumers were concerned about food freshness, their awareness of open dates varied considerably. The dates themselves—their presence and form—varied by both product and by store.

Nearly all the shoppers (96 percent) were aware of dates on milk. At least half noticed dates on other perishable products such as bread, eggs, ground beef, and round steak.

On a few semiperishable items such as cheese, luncheon meats, and cereal, a majority of shoppers also noticed dates. However,

for most other semiperishable items, only a few noticed the date.

Only about 12 to 14 percent of the shoppers said they were aware of dates on nonperishable or long shelf-life food items such as canned soup and canned vegetables, but this is not too surprising since a smaller proportion of these products are open dated, compared with perishable products.

Eighty percent of the consumers surveyed considered open dates to be useful. This figure compares with 67 percent in a 1973 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study on open dating and 90 percent in a similar study by USDA in 1976. Thus, open dates are considered by many to be useful in food shopping.

The OTA survey found that 62 percent of the consumers sort through items with an open date to find the freshest product. This compares with a 61-percent response to a similar question in the 1976 USDA study. Therefore, retailers selling foods with open

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\*OTA commissioned this survey, recognizing that other surveys have been completed on this subject. The OTA survey provides more detailed information on consumer preference and is more recent than the other surveys. This survey is available on request.

dates have an incentive to keep tight control over their inventory if they want to avoid consumer culling.

Shoppers in the OTA survey were asked to rank the following four different types of information that may be found on food labels: 1) open date, 2) recipes and cooking instructions, 3) list of ingredients, and 4) nutritional information (table 2). They were asked to do

this for several perishable and long shelf-life food items.

The survey found that the open date is the most important piece of information on the package label for fresh meat and frozen vegetables and is second in importance to the list of ingredients on a canned soup label. Thus, among the various types of information on a label, open dates are considered useful for both perishable and long shelf-life foods.

**Table 2.—Consumer Usefulness of Information on Food Packages  
(percentage of respondents)**

	Most useful			Least useful		
	Frozen vegetables	Canned soup	<b>Fresh meat</b>	Frozen vegetables	Canned soup	<b>Fresh meat</b>
Freshness date . . . . .	50	<b>24</b>	<b>91</b>	7	29	(a)
Recipes and cooking instructions . . . . .	22	19	2	47	45	54
List of ingredients . . . . .	19	43	<b>4</b>	22	10	30
Nutritional information . . . . .	10	16	<b>3</b>	22	15	14

(a) Less than 5 percent

## UNDERSTANDING OPEN DATES

Since different types of open dates with different meanings appear on various food products, consumer understanding is a key factor. Therefore, the survey asked the consumers to identify the correct type of date on milk, breakfast cereal, and ground beef (table 3).

The results were mixed. Nearly three-fourths of the shoppers knew that the date on milk is a sell-by date. However, only one in four identified the date on breakfast cereal

as a use-by date; over one-third thought it was a sell-by date. For ground beef, only one-third knew the date was a pack date, while almost another third thought it was a sell-by date.

Therefore, aside from milk, it seems there is considerable confusion over the meaning of specific open dates. The illustrations of various products on pages 16 & 17, with dating highlighted, give visual evidence to the confusion of consumer understanding.

**Table 3.—Consumer Understanding of Freshness Dates  
(percentage of respondents)**

	Milk	Breakfast cereal	Ground beef
When it was packaged. . . . .	9	8	34 <sup>a</sup>
Last day it should be sold . . . . .	74	35	31
Last day it should be used or eaten . . . . .	15	26	9
Have never noticed a date on a package of this product. . . . .	2	31	26

NOTE: Percentages in boldface indicate correct answers.

## PREFERENCE AMONG OPEN DATES

With different types of dates now in use, consumer preferences can be useful in determining open-dating policy. The OTA survey, therefore, asked consumers to express their preferences for different types of dates or combinations of dates for various food items. Some consistent patterns appeared, as shown in table 4.

The most preferred form of dating was a combination date rather than a single date. In fact, almost two out of three (64 percent) said they would like to see two dates, either sell-by and use-by or pack and use-by. (Consumer representatives on the OTA panel also preferred combination dates.)

**Table 4.—Consumer Preferences for Open Dates  
(percentage of respondents)**

### Preferences among single dates and combinations

	Most important	Least important <sup>a</sup>
Both sell-by and use-by date . . . . .	37	25
Both pack and use-by date . . . . .	27	37
Only use-by date . . . . .	16	42
Only sell-by date . . . . .	9	60
Only pack date . . . . .	7	75
Both sell-by and pack date . . . . .	5	59

### Preferences among single dates for selected foods

	Last day used	Last day sold	Date packaged	Would not use date	Seldom/never purchase
<b>Perishable products</b>					
Milk . . . . .	43	37	18	(b)	1
Ground beef . . . . .	39	24	33	1	4
Round steak . . . . .	37	23	32	1	7
<b>Semi perishable and nonperishable products</b>					
Cheese . . . . .	44	34	18	2	1
Canned tuna fish . . . . .	43	21	20	8	7
Frozen vegetables . . . . .	43	24	23	4	7
Flour . . . . .	35	26	24	11	3
Cake mix . . . . .	34	25	22	8	11
Jelly . . . . .	30	18	18	17	17

### Preferences among combination dates for selected foods

	Sell-by and use-by	Pack and use-by	Sell-by and pack	Only one date	No date
<b>Perishable products</b>					
Milk . . . . .	46	28	7	19	(b)
Ground beef . . . . .	39	33	8	19	1
Round steak . . . . .	39	33	8	19	2
<b>Semiperishable and nonperishable products</b>					
Cheese . . . . .	40	30	8	21	1
Frozen vegetables . . . . .	35	33	8	21	3
Canned tuna fish . . . . .	31	32	8	22	6
Cake mix . . . . .	27	29	8	29	6
Flour . . . . .	26	30	8	29	6
Jelly . . . . .	23	23	7	31	16

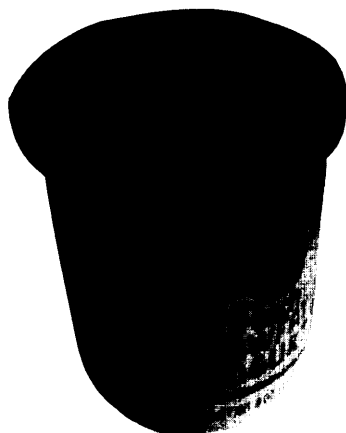
<sup>a</sup>Ranked lower than third most important

<sup>b</sup>Less than 0.5 percent

Dating Techniques of Various Food Products  
What Do They Actually Mean?



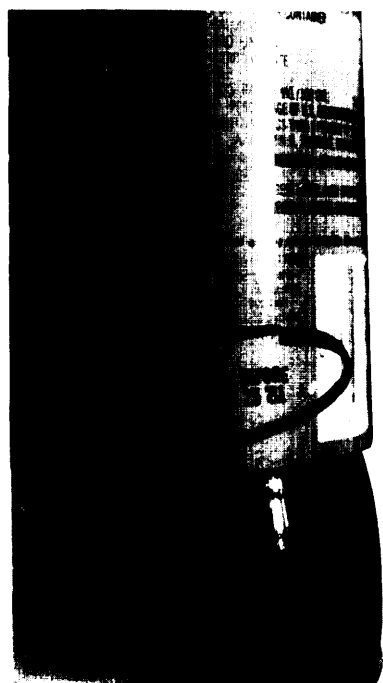
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Remains Fresh 1-Week  
After Date Shown



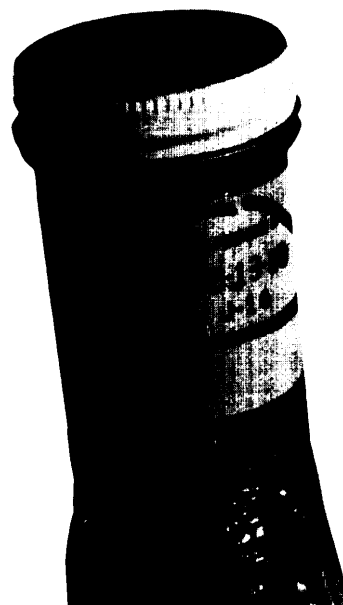
Sell By



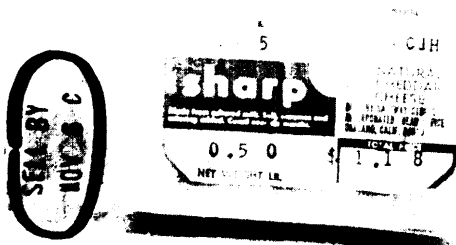
Buy Before



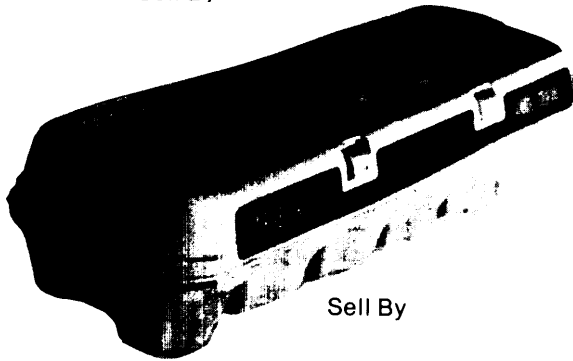
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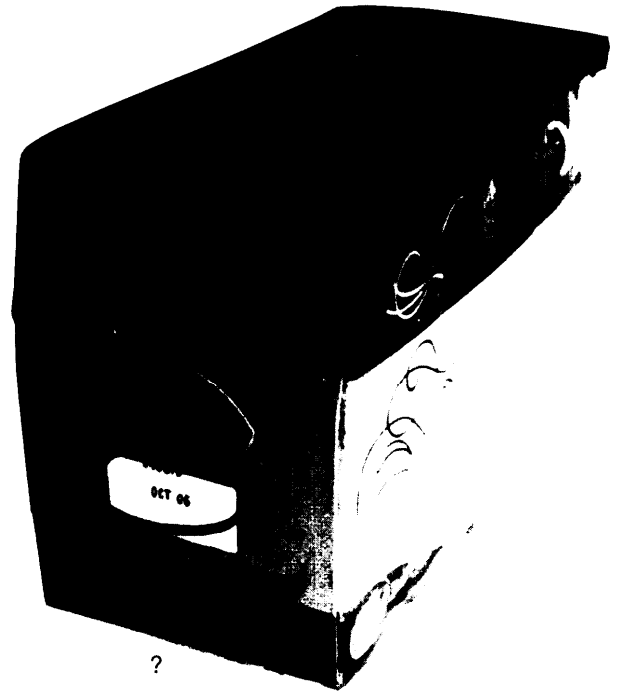
Best When Purchased By



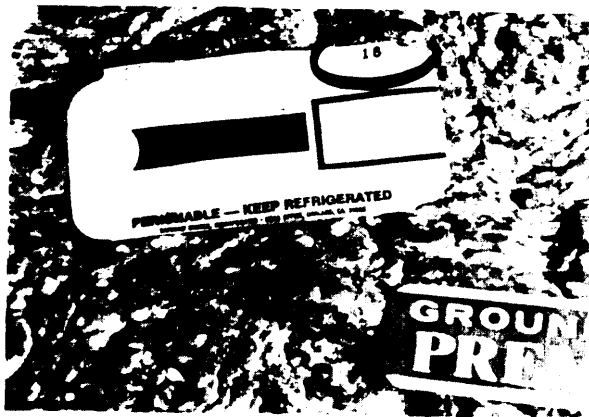
Sell By



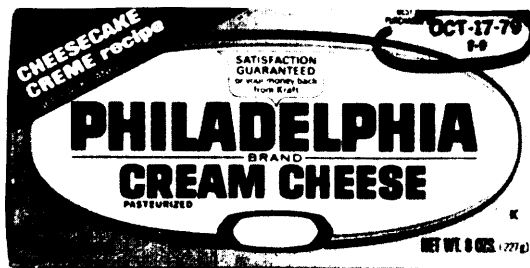
Sell By



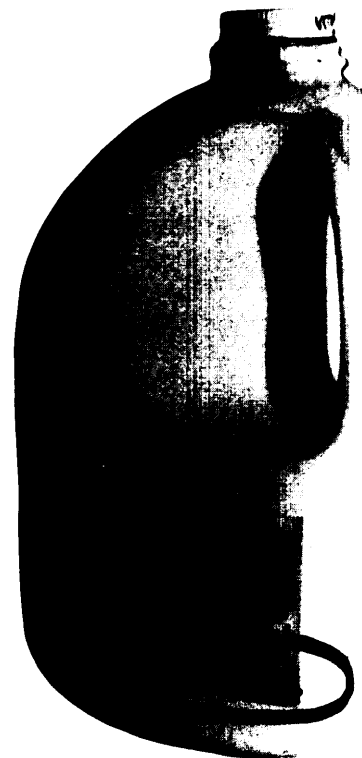
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Best When Purchased By



Sell By

This leaning towards more than one date indicates that consumers want as much information as possible on product freshness. However, a significant minority (19 to 31 percent, depending on the specific food product) desired only one date.

If just one date were to appear on food packages, the use-by or best-if-used-by date was the most preferred. This was true regardless of the perishability or shelf stability of the product.

Second choice to the use-by/best-if-used-by date is the date currently placed on specific products. For example, most respondents preferred the sell-by date to the pack date for milk, but just the opposite for ground beef and round steak.

Among combination dates, a sell-by/use-by date was preferred for the three perishable

products and for two out of six semiperishable and nonperishable products. The pack/use-by combination was the second most preferred, and very few respondents preferred the sell-by/pack combination.

Preliminary results of nationwide hearings in 1978 by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), USDA, and the Federal Trade Commission shed further light on the issue of consumer preference in open dating. For those consumers requesting a combination of dates, a pack/use-by date was favored for long shelf-life foods and a pack/sell-by or pack/use-by date for perishables.

In conjunction with the above hearings, FDA commissioned a food-labeling survey in late-1978. Summary results of that survey on open dating are very consistent with the findings of the OTA survey.

## DIFFERENCES AMONG SUBGROUPS OF SHOPPERS

A number of demographic variables were examined to determine if certain subgroups within a population might show different attitudes and behaviors with respect to open dating of foods. Race/nationality, education, age, income, family size, and religion were explored.

Not surprisingly, in a large number of comparisons across many items, some differ-

ences appeared. For example, in high-income, high-education, and large households, slightly more respondents felt open dates were useful. Generally, though, demographic differences were not impressive. At any rate, such differences do not seem crucial for establishing an open shelf-life dating policy because in all groups the majority of respondents indicated that open dates were useful.