

How Resourceful Consumers Identify New Uses for Old Products

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Resourceful consumers often identify alternative uses for products to save money, to save time, or to decrease waste. A study involving a national sample of 410 U.S. consumers showed who these consumers are, how they identify safe new uses, and why they do so. In general, resourceful consumers tended to be educated, health-conscious, convenience-oriented, and not necessarily budget-constrained. The need for convenience frequently motivated these consumers to focus more on the abstract benefits of a product instead of focusing on the traditional situation in which it is used. Indeed, unlike Depression-era parents or grandparents who identified alternative product uses to save money, today's resourceful consumers identify them to save time.

Consumers identify new and inventive ways to use products for a variety of reasons. During the Great Depression and the rationing years of World War II, people were forced to come up with substitutes involving more economical or plentiful alternatives (Mead, 1943). Today, many people face less severe economic pressure and more time-related or environment-related pressure (Kanner, 1992). Although these pressures may be different, they still encourage resourcefulness and imagination (Wansink, Brasel, & Amjad, 2000).

For instance, although baking soda was originally intended for cooking, resourceful consumers in the 1930s and 1940s also used it as a toothpaste and deodorizer. Manufacturers of baking soda

began promoting new uses, and it is now widely used for many purposes beyond baking. Nearly all new uses of products were originally developed by resourceful consumers, who viewed them as customized means to solve problems (see Table 1). The ability to use products to solve problems is important to family and consumer science (FCS) professionals because of the implications it has for conservation, budgeting, convenience, label analysis, and product safety. The ability to solve problems with existing resources makes one a better consumer and steward of family and environmental resources.

This study used a national sample of adults to examine three questions: (a) Why do people search for new uses for old products? (b) How do they do so? and (c) Who are they?

Method

One thousand U.S. consumers were randomly selected from cross-referenced phone records and census data. Each was sent a questionnaire asking about a nontraditional use of a product. Each was given \$6.00 and offered copies of the results in exchange for participation. The questionnaire and all phases of the research design were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

The questionnaire asked each person to select a commercially available product they used in a manner other than which it was originally intended. They were asked to describe the product and how they used it, and then to indicate what advantages this alternative product had over the more conventional product that might typically be used in that situation (if any). They were



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Table 1. Resourceful New Uses for Old Products

PRODUCT	INNOVATIVE USE
Pancake Syrup	Sweeten coffee or tea, or use to revive an ailing houseplant
Coffee filters	Polish windows and shoes and stop dirt from leaking out of plant pots
Salt	Use in the wash to soften jeans and to prevent colors from fading
Cola	Remove car rust and battery corrosion; loosen a rusted bolt
Soup	Used as sauce or flavor enhancer to add life to old recipes
Yogurt	Substitute for high-fat eggs and oil in muffins, dips and brownies
Lemon juice	Add to poultry recipes for added flavor; remove berry stains; clean a cutting board
Coffee	Use grounds to flavor spaghetti sauce, fertilize indoor plants, or transport worms for fishing

then asked how they identified or generated this alternative use. Following this, each rated his or her personality on a number of 9-point semantic differential scales (1 = unadventurous; 9 = adventurous). This information was subsequently used to characterize these individuals, and all data was analyzed using ANOVA and Chi-square tests (SPSS, Version 10.2).

Follow-up phone calls were made to 32 individuals to help clarify their responses and explore additional issues. A focus group was conducted with educators to help determine how these findings could be used effectively in the classroom.

Results and Discussion

Of the 1,000 persons who received questionnaires, 410 responded within 6 weeks and were included in the analysis. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 77 years (average age—37.4 years) and 72% were female. Of the 410 persons, 402 (97%) claimed to use products in situations other than in which they were originally intended.

The majority of the safe alternative uses were within the same general domain in which the product was originally intended or promoted. For example, 78% of the food products were still eaten as foods, but in a nontraditional manner

(eating breakfast cereal as an after-work snack); 15% were used for health or beauty purposes (shampooing with milk); and 7% for cleaning purposes (polishing a wood table with mayonnaise). Most health and beauty products (73%) continued to be used in that same domain; however, 27% were used for cleaning purposes (removing paint with nail polish remover). Most cleaning products (91%) were simply used in other cleaning contexts, and only 9% were for other home-related purposes such as plugging mouse holes with steel wool.

Why Do People Use Old Products in New Ways?

In all cases, products were used because they offered important benefits that are not immediately available from other products (Wansink & Gilmore, 1999). (See Table 2.) It was somewhat surprising that today, in contrast to 75 years ago, the leading motivation for identifying an alternative use for a product was convenience, not cost (Wansink, 2002). The motivation was to save time, not money.

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This general shift over the years from cost-savings to convenience is partially made possible by the much wider availability of products than was the case in the Great Depression and rationing years of the past (Wansink, 2002). The findings are consistent with an earlier study (Desai, 1992) which showed that consumers use products in different ways for three practical reasons: (a) convenience—the product is handy and solves an immediate need, (b) effectiveness—the product works well in its alternative use and no reasonable substitute exists, and (c) stock vs. use costs—the usage rate is so low that it is not cost effective to stock the product typically used in this situation.

Table 2. Advantages New Uses Have Over Other Products

PRODUCT	MORE CONVENIENT (%)	MORE ECONOMICAL (%)	MORE HEALTHY (%)	MORE EFFECTIVE (%)	MORE ECOLOGICAL (%)	OTHER (%)
Food products (<i>n</i> = 218)	22.0	19.3	25.7	10.1	11.0	11.9
Health & beauty products (<i>n</i> = 101)	18.8	23.8	17.8	23.8	2.0	13.8
Cleaning products (<i>n</i> = 83)	30.1	18.1	--	16.9	13.2	21.7
Total (<i>n</i> = 402)	22.9	20.2	18.4	14.9	9.2	14.4

How Do People Identify Alternative Uses for Products?

Necessity is the basis of invention, and consumers often developed new uses for products when they found themselves in need of a product that was not conveniently available. This typically involved a problem-solving approach in which they viewed products in terms of the basic benefits instead of seeing them in the typical context. For instance, when one tried to find a healthy breakfast substitute for hot cereal, he or she might consider the fact that canned soup is a nutritious, convenient, and inexpensive alternative. Had the person instead thought that soup can only be eaten for lunch or for dinner, it would not have been considered for breakfast. Thinking about the basic benefits a product offers (independent of its typical usage situation) expands the flexibility of these products.

Some resourceful persons were directly responsible for generating their own ideas for products, others learned indirectly about new ideas through the media or through referrals. Table 3 shows that many new uses, particularly those involving new usage situations for food, are the result of referrals from friends, relatives, or a spouse; this is consistent with how people learned of new uses during the Great Depression (Radke & Caso, 1948). In other cases, an author or an employee in a company learned about the various ways in which people use a product and passed this information along to others (Pinkham & Higginbotham, 1979; Rinzler, 1987; Green, 1995, 1996, 1997).

It is notable that labels and packages were influential in suggesting new uses. Consumers who are curious and creative enough to read a label or package or to scan the environment for new ideas are resourceful in another way.

Who is the Resourceful Consumer?

There are similarities between resourceful consumers. The resourceful consumers studied tended to be relatively young (37.2 years), well-educated (1.7 years of college education), and they tended to have an above average household income (\$63,000). In addition, they rated themselves as curious, health conscious, not price sensitive, product loyal, and creative in the kitchen. One profile of resourceful consumers would be that of an educated, media-savvy mother with at-home children who views successful homemaking as a priority at that stage of her life. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 32 resourceful consumers who were asked to describe themselves. These individuals frequently described themselves as health conscious, thrifty, imaginative, seeking natural products, adventurous, investigative, creative, and time-conscious.

An Important Safety Caveat

Safety was a key issue when generating new uses for products, particularly cleaning products. The new uses mentioned in this study were ones in which there was no question of safety. Most companies have public or consumer affair departments that can help a consumer determine if a product is safe to use in a nonconventional manner (perhaps the

Table 3. Origination of New Ideas about Old Products

PRODUCT	SELF-GENERATED	REFERRED BY OTHERS			SEEN IN THE MEDIA			
	(%)	PARENT (%)	FRIEND (%)	SPOUSE (%)	PRODUCT PACKAGES (%)	MAGAZINES (%)	TELEVISION & INTERNET (%)	BOOKS (%)
Food products (<i>n</i> = 218)	26.1	22.5	11.0	4.1	10.6	12.4	6.0	7.3
Health & beauty products (<i>n</i> = 101)	3.9	2.0	38.6	10.9	18.8	9.9	12.9	3.0
Cleaning products (<i>n</i> = 83)	25.3	16.9	19.3	4.8	18.0	8.5	3.6	3.6
Total (<i>n</i> = 402)	20.4	16.2	19.6	6.0	14.2	10.9	7.2	5.5

biggest potential danger is with cleaning products). Warnings and labels should be carefully followed, and it is likely that the misuse of these products will invalidate any warranty or any liability. It is important to never experiment with an alternative use of a product if there is any doubt of its safety.

Conclusion and Implications for Education

Consumers learn about new uses for old products in different ways, yet the most common method of

discovering a new use among respondents was through their own ingenuity. Table 4 illustrates that this is typically accomplished by focusing on the benefits of a product instead of focusing on the situation in which it is traditionally used.

This topic is relevant to a number of areas within the FCS curriculum, for example, recycling, conservation, and cost-cutting. It can help students better analyze labels and understand the safety aspects. Homework or classroom activities

Table 4. Ways Consumers Translate Beneficial Product Attributes into New Uses for Products

PRODUCT	TYPICAL USE	BENEFICIAL PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES	ALTERNATIVE NEW USE
Paper towels	Cleaning spills or drying	--Absorbs moisture --Porous	-- Use as an emergency coffee filter -- Strain fat from broth -- Line refrigerator vegetable bin to soak up moisture -- Write school lunch box notes for children
Shaving cream	Moistening whiskers for a shave	-- Softens --Moistens --Lubricates	-- Clean your hands at the tool bench – needs no water -- Remove spilled latex paint in emergencies -- Clean decorative stones or rocks in yard
Mayonnaise	Cooking ingredient or spread	--Doesn't Stain -- High grease content	-- Helps remove a ring from a finger -- Removes white rings from wood furniture -- Removes crayon marks from furniture
Dental floss	Clean teeth	--Strong --Thin --Barely visible	-- Hang pictures -- Cut cheese -- Use as emergency thread for heavy fabrics
Bar Soap	Wash hands and body	-- Nonabrasive --Contains fat -- Lubricates	-- Lubricate zippers -- Make bubbles for bubble bath -- Soap nails and screws -- Take the sting and itch from insect bites

that emphasize the value of flexible and creative thinking can be developed. The key to generating new uses for products is to view a product from the perspective of what beneficial attributes it has instead of focusing on the situation in which it is typically used. Creative thinking and problem solving skills are developed in exploring new uses for products. Students could be presented with household problems and asked to find alternative ways to solve them. Students might generate a list of the beneficial attributes of various products and then match products with existing problems that need solutions (Table 4 can serve as a guide.).

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Dietary Pattern and the Prevalence of Food Insecurity Among Older Persons

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The purpose of this study was to determine the dietary pattern and prevalence of food insecurity in older adults. A total of 385 older adults were interviewed. Food insecurity without hunger was reported by 6% of 55–69 year olds; 6%

reported food insecurity with moderate hunger. Seventy-nine percent of respondents had a regular meal pattern; 17% had irregular meal patterns. All respondents failed to consume diets that conform to the Food Guide Pyramid. Consumption of fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and meat was low with or without the presence of food insecurity.

Older adults are known to be at increased risk

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