

MARKETING CONSIDERATIONS

PRODUCT

While Belgian consumers have generally had a long-standing traditional preference for fresh fish, in recent years the changing social structure of the population has led to a rise in the importance of frozen fish counters. Nevertheless, a large percentage of consumers still think that frozen fish is not up to the standards of fresh fish. The public is generally uninformed about the quality of the flash freezing under -18°C used in the processing of frozen fish. Therefore, problems occurring with frozen fish up to now mostly have to be attributed to malfunctioning of the freezers at retail outlets rather than to the flash freezing by the exporting companies. Surveys carried out in food chains have shown that temperature limits are often not respected, with temperatures in the freezers ranging up to 6°C instead of the required -2°C .

This general lack of confidence in the quality of frozen fish leaves Canadian exporters with a lot of ground to cover. Canadian products, however, are often regarded as meeting high quality standards and coming from an unpolluted environment, and the majority of Canadian fish imported is frozen fish meeting very rigid quality inspections. It thus seems logical for the Canadians to use this argument to their own advantage by providing better information about the production of the fish on the package.

Packaging fulfils the dual role of protecting/conserving the product and also of positioning and marketing the product. Already having built up an image of rigid quality standards, the packaging should be an essential aspect of the entire product and preserve its "live" aspect. Packaging is definitely a major element in the presentation and marketing of Canadian seafood in Belgium. Cultural differences should be adequately monitored in order not to put a package on the market that resembles, for example, dog food. At the same time, the packaging should also serve to enhance clear recognition of the fact that product is Canadian, thereby facilitating its marketing. Clear labelling and substantial information about food inspection on the package can thus help Canadian fish move ahead of fish originating in other countries.

Health inspection has become an important issue in the seafood promotion debate. It is still argued that fish provides the most healthy nutritional values, but it has been somewhat discredited by the actions taken by Greenpeace and the press coverage on salmonella bacteria, radioactive waste dumping in the North Sea or oil spills. Doubts have risen over the condition of Atlantic fish species, opening market niches for firms deliberately targeting the market for fresh and healthy seafood species originating in other waters.

The European Community published a set of Council Directives in July 1991 concerning the fishing and processing of seafood for consumption in EC member states. However, these directives (Directive 91/492/EEC for mussels and Directive 91/493/EEC for fish products) are only guidelines and not in themselves legally binding for European and non-European producers. Rather, member states must adopt their own regulations according to those set out in the above-mentioned directives. The general policy towards foreign countries is to organize on-site inspections by commissioned officers of that country, and to compare the health procedures of the exporting country with those of the European Community.