

# Price in the choice of fresh fruits and vegetables

*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
of the University of New England.*

by

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## Declaration

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*I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.*

*I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.*



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## Abstract

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Price and choice in the purchase of fruits and vegetables is an under-researched area. While the salience and role of price in choice has been studied in some depth by marketing researchers, these studies have been largely confined to various grocery-based product groups. Little attention has been given to this topic in the general product group comprising fruits and vegetables. Research which has focused on price-related issues has mainly emanated from the economics discipline and in studies conducted at the aggregate level. Yet, there are many features of fruits and vegetables which suggest that a closer examination of price in their choice may contribute to our general understanding of behaviour in response to this attribute. Fruits and vegetables are often priced differently to one another, they are subject to quality and price variability which is unrelated to competitive influences, and their constitution is such that they can provoke strong sensory responses in consumers.

The research comprising this thesis sets out to develop a comprehensive perspective of how price features in *actual* consumer choice in the purchase of fruits and vegetables. In so doing, it explores both the salience and role of price in choice. The research draws on the theory and evidence developed in the fields of economics and marketing and, where relevant, the literature of physiology.

A series of studies were conducted to identify consumers' perceptions of the product group and to ascertain their choice patterns. A multimethod approach was adopted to gain breadth as well as depth of insight into purchase behaviour. One study was based on post-purchase surveys and, the other, on the collection of verbal reports. Studies preliminary to the main research were also conducted to develop a profile of retail prices for fresh fruits and vegetables, and a questionnaire to elicit personality and behavioural characteristics of consumers.

At a broad level results of the studies indicated that latent concerns with price often do not manifest in constant price vigilance. Rather, consumers utilise global or local decision rules

in which price is implicit rather than explicit. In this respect the notion of price-defined consideration sets was clearly evident in consumers' shopping strategies. Ongoing attention to price was influenced by factors such as perceived price variability of the product, the price level and required volume of products, and experience with quality variation. Where any one of these factors were high attention to price was generally greater. However, greater attention to price did not necessarily translate into price responsiveness. The activity reflected more the need to monitor certain products. This tends to support the presence of a band of 'acceptable prices' where price responsiveness lies at the threshold of the band.

These, and other, findings discussed in the thesis point to the need to review conventional thinking on consumer behaviour in both economics and marketing. Consumers are efficient shoppers but not in the manner proposed by many economic models of choice. Nor can choice of fruits and vegetables be neatly slotted into marketing theories of low-cost purchases or brand-related behaviour. The particular implications for marketing and for economics together with possible avenues for further research are outlined in the closing chapter of the thesis.

## Acknowledgments

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'Yod has extensive cybernetic, mathematical and systems analysis programming, probability theory, up-to-date scientific knowledge of an encyclopedic width. He's also programmed with general history, forty languages, Torah, Talmud, halakic law...'

'Do you remember your equivalent of birth?'

'[The moment I came to consciousness] I was flooded with internal readouts, temperature. distances from me to other objects, chemical analyses, reports on the temperature of various parts of my skin and of the atmosphere... All facts seemed equal to me, any sensory readings as important as any other. That my left foot was seventeen point three centimetres from the lab table appeared as important as my ability to interface with bases at a speed and facility surpassing any human intelligence.'...

He turned and stared again at the moon. 'Now it's finally turning yellow. How often my stored information is partial. It says a banana is yellow when it is brown and black and yellow, and inside cream with brown flecks. It says the moon is yellow that rose from the bay red. The definitions of feelings I am programmed with are precise, orderly, but what I experience is sometimes sharper than I know how to endure'

('By the light of the unyellow moon', *Body of Glass*, M Piercy 1991)