

The plight the functionally illiterate face at the grocery store

By MADHU VISWANATHAN

They are a large group of American consumers, yet we know little about their behavior. They are functionally illiterate adults who don't have the skills necessary to understand labels or signs and cannot easily add or subtract. Estimates suggest that, to varying degrees, one-fifth or more of the U.S. population is functionally illiterate.

Because they have problems reading and writing, they cannot be studied by social scientists through surveys and other conventional methods. Over several years, my graduate student and I observed and interviewed people struggling with functional illiteracy at an adult education center in Illinois.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Many of them had standardized math and reading scores ranging from pre-first-grade to seventh-grade levels.

While such basic tasks as locating a product or reading its price in a grocery store require considerable effort, many functionally illiterate consumers choose a product as soon as they locate it. As one woman told us, "I don't read, I just look at stuffs that look good to me. I just get it, I don't have to go by ingredients."

Package size and unit price are frequently ignored because of the difficulty in combining two pieces of information such as price and size. Another woman, asked how she decides

on which size of loaf of bread to buy, said, "I just look at the tag and see what's cheapest. I don't look by their sizes." Still another person we interviewed looked for one piece of nutrition information on the ingredient label — sugar content — saying, "Anything sweet I eat it ... I get the one that got the most."

They rely heavily on audio-visual rather than written information. They might buy a bottle of Crisco oil, for instance, based on the picture of fried chicken on the bottle. When deciding how much of a food ingredient to buy, they might mentally picture how much would be needed for a recipe. They rely heavily on information they heard from somebody when making purchases.

Some found it difficult to compute basic prices. When asked what is half-price for a \$10 item, a man answered, "Maybe \$9." They often hand all the money they have to the cashier, and then let the cashier count it out. Sometimes they keep a specific denomination of money handy, such as a \$5 bill, to pay for a fast-food meal.

Maintaining self-esteem and avoiding humiliation is a major preoccupation. Many seek out familiar contexts by limiting themselves to stores where the employees were "friendly" and "did not rush you." They are often extremely dependent on spouses, relatives, friends or children. One person never leaves home unless a relative from a neighboring state visits.

Another told us, "My daughter do all the shopping."

Needless to say, functionally illiterate consumers are often cheated. They negotiate the marketplace environment using rudimentary rules such as ordering one item from a menu at a time to avoid running short of money, overpaying to avoid being "caught" unable to count, and buying small amounts to limit their losses. One man, asked how he protected himself from cheating at the counter said, "Just buy less of what you are going to buy. Buy less food."

The functionally illiterate provide awe-inspiring examples of overcoming the most fundamental constraints in day-to-day life. They challenge

the conventional presumptions and assumptions of literate decision-makers in business and government.

Creative public policy solutions can enable this group to make more informed choices in the shopping mall as well as the voting booth. And businesses that address the needs of this group of consumers are likely to be rewarded with enduring loyalty.

Madhu Viswanathan, an associate professor of marketing at the University of Illinois, directs the Consumer Literacy Project, which aims to improve the effectiveness of business and government in serving the needs of functionally illiterate consumers. This article is based on research conducted with his doctoral student, James Harris.