

Focus Groups Talk About Food Thermometers:

Yes, educators, we know that encouraging thermometer use could be a challenge.

Focus group research conducted for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) in 1998 confirmed that. Six focus groups involving more than a hundred people revealed both barriers and opportunities in terms of thermometer use.

Many people felt “that they have been cooking without a thermometer for years without suffering any adverse results.”

According to Susan Conley, “it’s important to acknowledge that perception. And then we want to try to create a question in people’s minds, to remind them that they may have been sick from foodborne illness, and just never recognized it. It’s never too late to learn new things.”

The recommendations from the 1998 focus group report stressed these ideas:

Behavior Change Is Possible:

While participants in FSIS-convened focus groups at first tended to dismiss the suggestion of thermometer use, group discussion also “indicates a least the willingness to consider change given the proper circumstances and motivations.”

Target Parents:

“Parents of young children indicated they could be persuaded to change their behaviors if they felt such changes would ensure the safety of their children,” focus group research revealed.

In addition, “parental use of thermometers in the home models this behavior to their children....”

Highlight Ordinary Meals, Not Special Events:

Focus group participants confirmed what consumer researchers report: people use food thermometers when preparing holiday meals. As a result, the report suggests educators emphasize everyday use of food thermometers.

Because participants said they can’t “visualize how a thermometer would be used” on a pork chop, hamburger or chicken breast, demonstrate how it’s done and illustrate with pictures.

In addition, stressing the ease with which a thermometer can be used to check food doneness cannot be overemphasized, according to the report.

Emphasize Taste, Not Safety:

“Many participants stated that they would be more likely to use a thermometer if they were convinced that it would enhance the flavor and quality of the meal they prepared,” according to the report.

The report also noted that cookbooks and recipes would be ideal tools for promoting thermometer use if they would provide instructions for cooking to specified temperature rather than for a specified period of time. To access the report on this focus group research, go to: www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/topics/focusgp.pdf

A final thought--don’t underestimate the power of information:

In 1999, another round of focus group testing took place on the Thermi™ messenger and educational message. It also demonstrated the power of information.

Once the 1999 focus group participants were informed that new research shows that one out of four hamburgers turns brown prematurely, “they were much more interested in using food thermometers to ensure safety.

“People care about food safety and when they understand food safety risks, they are willing and eager to make changes,” Conley said. ●

Marketing Tips:

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■ Stressing the ease with which a thermometer can be used to check food doneness cannot be over-emphasized.