

Informing and Providing Consumer Choice?

The Role of Different Actors in the Food Supply Chain

When Informing Consumers about Sustainably Produced Food Products

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## ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that food consumption choices are one of the main causes of environmental impacts in Western societies. Moreover, informing consumers about sustainable food choices is recognized to have an influence on promoting responsible consumerism. So far, however, there has been little discussion about which of different actors in the food supply chain do the consumers perceive to be responsible for promoting sustainable food alternatives.

The objective of this research paper is to provide information, on how consumers feel that the different actors in the food supply chain could motivate responsible consumerism. In addition, the paper will examine what information channels and what type of information is perceived as being effective when informing consumers about sustainably produced food products.

This paper draws on data from four focus groups where 19 Finnish consumers were asked to discuss their views of organic food, Fair Trade food and locally produced food. The data collected is analyzed by using qualitative content analysis. The results will provide empirical insight into how consumers wish to be informed about sustainably produced food products and which supply chain actors consumers perceive as being in a key role when promoting the consumption of sustainably produced food. While the research has its limitations and further research would be required to elaborate the issue, the findings of this research still have implications for planning marketing communication to consumers and, potentially, for product development.

Food consumption and food choices are a vital part of humans' lifestyles. In addition, food is one of the key consumption contexts in terms of environmental and social impacts in the World. Thus, responsible food consumption and sustainably produced food products are something that should be promoted actively to consumers. Moreover, promotion is in a key role when informing consumers about the environmental and social impacts of their food, and other, consumption, choices. (Belz & Peattie, 2009.)

Environmental and social issues are increasingly in the mainstream of communication both in marketing as well as in the news; however, it is fruitful to explore the ways in which consumers make informed choices about sustainably produced products. Consumers form their initial understanding of a product partly based on the information initiated by the marketer. This information can be, for example, in the form of advertising or labels. (D'Souza, Taghian & Lamb, 2006.)

Although a considerable amount of literature has been published on marketing sustainably produced food, these studies have seldom taken into account either the role of different supply chain actors or consumer perceptions of the effectiveness of the different information channels and information types.

A great deal of research has been focussed on the effects of environmental or ethical labels on consumers' purchase behaviour. In spite of the fact that consumers have difficulties in understanding the meanings of different labels and on package information, the results have indicated that labels are a suitable instrument of marketing communication. (Bjørner, Hansen & Russell, 2004; D'Souza, 2004; Karstens & Belz, 2006; Belz & Peattie, 2009.) The importance of informing consumers, the significance of marketing communications and knowledge as well as the dominant role of food retailers has been stated in numerous studies. (Bhaskaran, Polonsky,

Cary & Fernandez 2006; Duffy, Fearn & Healing, 2005; Jones, Comfort & Hillier, 2009; Kottila, M-R. 2009; Marsden, Harrison & Flynn, 1998; Picket-Baker & Ozaki, 2008.)

This paper aims to provide information, on how consumers feel that the different actors in the food supply chain could motivate responsible consumerism. In addition, the paper will examine what information channels and what type of information consumers perceive as being effective when informing about sustainably produced food products. The results will provide empirical insight into how consumers wish to be informed about sustainably produced food products and which supply chain actors consumers perceive as being in a key role when promoting sustainable food consumption.

This paper has been organized in the following way: first, the concepts of food supply chain and marketing communications are outlined and elaborated. Next, the results of an empirical study are presented and discussed.

### **Food Supply Chain and Communication**

In this paper the term ‘sustainably produced food’ is used to refer to organic food, locally produced food and food produced in line with the principles of Fair Trade. These three types of so called alternative foods can be considered as sustainably produced, since in their supply chain the social and/or ecological aspects of production are taken into account more so than in the case of conventional products (D’Souza et al., 2006).

Organic food is food grown without most artificial fertilizers or pesticides, in a way that emphasizes crop rotation, makes the most of natural fertilizers and ensures that the life of the soil is maintained. Animals are fed with organic feed and kept in ways which minimise the need for medicines and other chemical treatments (Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission, 2009). The European Fair Trade Association (EFTA)

defines Fair Trade as a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect. This partnership seeks greater equity in international trade and contributes to sustainable development by securing the rights of and offering better trading conditions to producers and workers, especially in the developing countries (European Fair Trade Association, 2006).

Locally produced food is not an unambiguous concept, but it can be briefly described as the local food systems or short food chains in which food is produced near the consumer (Urban-Rural Interaction, 2001). In terms of the sustainability of locally produced food, a report by DEFRA (2005) states that there is a clear cause and effect relationship between food miles and the environmental, social and economic burdens associated with transport. This implies that locally produced and consumed food may have a positive contribution to responsible consumerism.

### **Supply chain of food**

In the case of food supply chains, the production and distribution of food could be regarded as a supply chain (Marsden, Murdoch & Morgan, 1999). According to Mentzer, DeWitt, Keebler, Min, Nix, Smith and Zacharia (2001) the supply chain is: “a set of three or more entities or more entities (organizations or individuals) directly involved in the upstream and downstream flows of products, services, and/or information from a source to a customer” (p.4).

The food supply chain is recognized to play a significant role in sustainability, since it fulfils human needs, provides employment and economic growth and has environmental impacts. The food supply chain is also acknowledged as a means of fulfilling consumer expectations for improved quality and origin. Consumers are becoming increasingly more aware of the environmental and social impacts of food production and consumption. This awareness has caused consumers, consumer organizations, policy makers and other stakeholders to exert

pressure on food producers and retailers. (Weatherell, Tregear & Allinson, 2003; Maloni & Brown, 2007; Belz & Peattie, 2009.)

In this study the food supply chain is thought to comprise of the following actors: agricultural producers, food processing industry, food wholesalers, food retailers and consumers. Consumers are perceived as active actors in the food supply chain, since in the so called alternative food chains, such as organic chains, the relationship between consumers and food producers is of greater importance than in the conventional, industrialized food chains (Marsden, Banks & Bristov, 2000).

### **Information and Consumer Choice**

The idea of marketing as the provision of products or services to meet the consumers needs or as a means for companies to persuade consumers to purchase and consume even more does not dovetail with the ideals of sustainability and responsible consumerism. However, marketing does have a role in understanding and changing consumer behaviour by influencing attitudes and beliefs. In this role marketing can be said to recognise the role of consumers as decision makers when moving towards sustainability. (Jones, Clarke-Hill, Comfort & Hillier, 2008.)

The early models examining pro-environmental behaviour are based on the assumption that the ample availability of information about environmental issues is followed by positive attitudes towards protecting the environment, which in turn results in pro-environmental behaviour. These models were soon proven to be wrong. Research has shown that in many cases the increase in the amount of knowledge and awareness does not result in pro-environmental behaviour. (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002.)

However, the status of information in the case of marketing is somewhat different, since consumers tend to base their choices both on information from external sources as well as on their previous experiences. In order to purchase a product or service, consumers have to become aware of its existence and get an experience of the product or service. Marketing communications or promotion is the main means for companies to make consumers aware of their assortment of products or services.

This is also true when informing consumers about sustainably produced products and their attributes. According to Pickton and Broderick (2005, as cited in Oates, McDonald, Alevizou, Hwang, Young & McMorland, 2008 p. 353), the sources of information that the consumers use vary from corporate and marketing communications, such as television and print advertising, websites and packaging, to more intangible communication instruments, such as word of mouth and opinion leaders. This complex information environment with numerous information sources creates problems for both the marketers as well as to the consumers.

In the case of sustainably produced products, such as food, the sustainability itself – whether the organic origin, locality of production or fairness of employee treatment – is a so called credence attribute of the product. These attributes are not directly visible or something that the consumers can ascertain by themselves. Thus, they have to trust the information given by others, such as the different actors in the food supply chain or the organizations issuing different environmental or ethical labels. (Karstens & Belz, 2006; Weatherell et al., 2003). Although the amount of information does not necessarily correlate with the consumers' willingness to purchase sustainably produced food or other goods, informing consumers about different alternatives, either sustainable or conventional, does unquestionably provide the prerequisites for consumer choice.

Promotion is the most visible instrument of the marketing mix and the main means of informing consumers. It comprises of all the channels through which a company or organization communicates with its target groups or stakeholders when promoting its products or activities. Although advertising is often understood as the synonym for promotion, there is a vast variety of other instruments that companies and organizations can use for marketing communications. These instruments include, among others, sales promotions, point-of-purchase communication, personal selling and e-communication. (De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van den Bergh, 2007.) There are other means of marketing communications, but in the case of marketing food products, these four aforementioned instruments are the most relevant ones, since the other means, such as exhibitions and trade fairs are more used in the business-to-business marketing context.

The goal of marketing communications is to try to influence or persuade the consumer by communicating a message. Marketing communications can be either personal communications directed to individually addressed persons or mass communications where the receivers are numerous and cannot be individually identified. (De Pelsmacker et al., 2007.)

In terms of promoting sustainably produced products, the goals of the actors in the supply chain are rather similar to those of the promoters of conventional products. The first goal is to inform consumers about the sustainably produced product and its benefits. The second goal is to persuade consumers to experiment this new product and preferably switch their brand loyalty. The third goal is remind consumers about the sustainable product and its availability. The fourth goal is to reassure the consumer that the purchase of the sustainably produced product is a sensible choice. (Peattie 1995; Belz & Peattie, 2009.)

In the case of sustainably produced food and other products, labelling is an important instrument when communicating with consumers about the sustainability and when generating demand of sustainably produced products. Labelling has a crucial role in marketing food and

domestic appliances and it is used more often than the traditional means of mass media advertising, such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers.

As a device of promotion, environmental or ethical labels are often used as a simple way of presenting complex information to consumers. The assumption behind the labelling programmes is that credible information will affect consumer brand choice, thus increasing the market share of sustainably produced products. (Belz & Peattie, 2009; D'Souza, Taghian & Lamb, 2006; Bjørner, et al., 2004.) However, the labelling programmes are not without their problems. Research has indicated that consumers are seldom capable of making informed choices based on information given by environmental or ethical labels, since consumers experience difficulties when trying to identify the different labels and their meanings. Nevertheless, environmental and ethical labels may influence consumers' purchasing behaviour, since the labels indicate that the product is generally acceptable. (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; D'Souza 2004.)

In addition to promotion efforts of companies, public policy, the civil society and NGOs have a role in promoting responsible consumerism. Public policy might do this by controlling the ways companies promote their products and services but also by advancing sustainable means of fulfilling social and cultural needs instead of consumption. The civil society and NGOs might promote responsible consumerism by initiating a civil discourse about the different social and cultural functions of consumption and the redirecting of consumption toward more sustainable forms. (Schaefer & Crane, 2005.)

### **Materials and Methods**

As there are relatively few previous focus group studies on consumer behaviour and promotion in the context of sustainably produced food products, a qualitative focus group approach was used in this study. Powell and Single (1996) define focus groups as "a group of

individuals have been selected and assembled by the researchers and asked to discuss and comment on, based on their personal experiences, the topic that is the subject of the research” (p. 499).

As a research technique, focus groups are used to gather data through group interaction on a topic that is determined by the researcher. Thus, the researcher is in an active role in creating and monitoring the group discussion. Focus group research is, therefore, a research method that is devoted to data collection and the interaction in the group discussion is the main source of data. (Morgan, 1996.) The main goal of focus group research is to reach into the participants’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions (Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups can be seen as a combination of the strengths of participant observation and individual interviewing (Morgan, 1997).

In this study, the purpose was to investigate how consumers experience of the roles of different actors in the food supply in motivating responsible consumerism. Moreover, the purpose was to examine what information channels and what type of information Finnish consumers perceive as being effective when informing about sustainably produced food products.

Four focus groups were held in November 2008, with a total of 19 Finnish consumers – 12 females and 7 males – in Jyväskylä and in Heinola. The focus group members were recruited from an eco-shop (Group 1), a local food market (Group 2), a corner shop (Group 3), and two supermarkets (Group 4). The interviews took place at the University of Jyväskylä (1, 3 and 4) and at a local food market in Heinola (2). The average age of the respondents was 44 years with ages ranging from 18 to 78 years. The average household size was 2.3 persons and the majority of the respondents lived in an urban area. Most of the focus group members seemed to have at least a moderate habit of buying organic, local, and fair trade food, especially those consumers who were recruited from an eco-shop and a local food market. It is obvious that people interested in

sustainably produced food are also more willing to participate in focus groups covering these topics. (Ulvila, Paloviita & Puupponen, 2009.)

The participants in the focus groups were asked to talk about their views and experiences associated with locally produced food, organic food, and Fair Trade food (discussion theme 1), their views on the importance of locality and origin of the food (discussion theme 2) and their views on the factors that influence their buying behaviour of the discussed food types (discussion theme 3). The participants were also asked to offer their suggestions for increasing the supply and demand of locally produced food, organic food, and fair trade food (discussion theme 4). The term “sustainably produced food” was not used in the discussion protocol. Each group was moderated by the same moderator to ensure consistency in interviewing style. Additional assistance was provided by a note taker and technical assistant. Each group lasted for 90 minutes, and was digitally recorded and later transcribed. (ibid.)

### **Analysis**

The recorded focus group data was transcribed and the transcripts were analysed by using qualitative thematic content analysis. The transcripts were first reduced so that all the data irrelevant to this research and its research questions was left out and expressions which were relevant to the research were coded by using different colour codes. For this study, the units of analysis were sentences and units of thought containing several sentences.

Next, the expressions coded from the data were grouped into categories in order to classify the expressions from the data concerning the different marketing communication instruments and the different supply chain actors. The results were then organized in a table format (table 1). When describing the research results, quotes from the focus group data are used for illustrative purposes. The quotes have been translated from Finnish into English. During the

translation process the quotes were slightly clarified by revising their style more towards literary language, leaving out the incoherence typical of colloquial language.

### **Research Results**

Although the focus group participants were not asked to discuss about their impressions of different marketing communications instruments, certain instruments were systematically brought up during the discussions. These instruments were advertising, sales promotions, personal selling, point-of-purchase communications and e-communications. Out of these means of promotion only advertising was perceived as being a negative phenomenon, since it was experienced to be irritating, associated with manipulation and promotion of uncontrollable consumption as well as increasing the price of the product.

In terms of the different actors in the food supply chain and their responsibilities when promoting sustainably produced food products, clear responsibilities could be found. Based on the data it can be stated that consumers feel that the food retailers have the main responsibility for informing consumers about sustainably produced food. However, agricultural producers and the food producing industry are also perceived to have a responsibility for informing consumers. As for the wholesalers and consumers, the responsibility is seen to be rather insignificant. The results of the analysis of the data are illustrated in table 1. The table shows the different actors of the food supply chain that were felt have the possibility and the ability to promote responsible consumerism by informing consumers about sustainably produced food. In addition, the table depicts the different instruments of marketing communications that the different actors in the food supply chain use. For clarity, the different means of promotion and marketing communications identified from the data are named in the same manner as they are named in the

marketing literature (eg. De Pelsmacker, et. al. 2007; Pickton and Broderick, 2005), although the focus group participants did not use these names during the discussions.

Table 1 *Marketing communication instruments and the actors of the supply chain*

<i>Marketing communication instruments</i> ↓	<i>Supply chain actors</i> →	<b>Agricultural producers</b>	<b>Food processing industry</b>	<b>Food retailers</b>
<b>Advertising</b>		- Announcements in newspapers		
<b>Sales promotions</b>			- Distributing samples of sustainably produced products together with information leaflets	- Theme days in stores → tasting and sampling of foods, - Producers invited to tell about products, - Special offers
<b>Personal selling</b>		- Farmer's markets, - Market halls, - Door to door selling,		- Agricultural producers coming to supermarkets to sell their products
<b>Point-of-purchase communications</b>			- Packaging containing information about sustainability (eg. about animal welfare or what Fair Trade is)	- Separate areas in stores for organic, locally produced and Fair Trade products, - Information about environmental and ethical labels in stores - Sustainably produced products clearly indicated
<b>E-communications</b>				- Online food stores with a large assortment of sustainably produced products

Consumer and wholesalers have not been included in table 1 as supply chain actors, since they were not brought up during the discussion as actors who would inform consumers about sustainably produced food. Nevertheless, wholesalers were said to have a great deal of power in the supply chain, since all products that are found in the supermarkets and food stores go through the wholesaler and it is rather challenging for the small scale producers of organic or locally

produced food to manage to get their products to the retailers via the large wholesale businesses.

One of the focus group participants gave the following suggestion for solving this problem:

*Small scale producers of organic and locally produced food should unite and form networks in order to increase the availability of these foods.*

(man, in his fifties)

Although consumers were not perceived to be responsible of informing each other about sustainably produced food, they were not seen as completely passive actors of the supply chain either. Consumers were said to be able to promote the consumption of sustainably produced food by organising organic food circles through which consumers can order organic and/or locally produced foods directly from the producers. These food circles are a perfect example of the so called alternative or short supply chains where emphasis is put on the relationship between consumers and food producers by giving consumers information about the origins and production methods of the food products (Marsden et al., 2000).

During the focus group discussions it was also brought up that the retailers should find out about the local food producers and establish contracts with them thus increasing the assortment of locally produced and possibly organic food products in the stores. In addition, it was stated that the retailers should not offer the consumer various choices but rather decide for them what they can purchase by limiting the food product range to only sustainably produced products. One of the focus group participants rationalises this by saying:

*By limiting the assortment only to sustainably produced products they can guide the consumers and advertise themselves as a store that sells only locally produced, organic or Fair Trade food products.*

(man, in his thirties)

However, the majority of the focus group participants stated that retailers do not have to limit their assortment to only sustainably produced food products, but it would suffice to indicate clearly which of the food products in the stores are sustainably produced.

Despite the fact that NGOs and the government are usually argued to have a major role in influencing consumer behaviour and promoting responsible consumerism, the focus group participants did not mention NGOs or the civil society as important actors when promoting responsible consumerism by informing about sustainably produced food. NGOs, such as Finfood whose responsibility it is to market certified organic food products in Finland, were briefly mentioned, but they were not seen as important promoters of sustainably produced food or responsible consumerism.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to shed light on consumer experiences of how different actors in the food supply chain could motivate responsible consumerism by promoting sustainably produced food.

The present findings seem to be consistent with the findings of previous research that highlights the focal role of retailers and information within the food supply chain. Retailers and especially supermarket chains are significant promoters of food, whether sustainably produced or conventional, since they reach a large number of consumers due to the fact that in the Western countries supermarkets are the main place to do grocery shopping for many consumers. (Lindgreen, Hingley & Vanhamme, 2009.) Retailers may, therefore, motivate responsible consumerism by providing information in the form of marketing communications to the consumers.

In addition to the major role of the retailers, agricultural producers were also thought to be active actors in the supply chain of sustainably produced food products, since farmers markets and direct contact with the agricultural producers were valued as a source of product information. This demonstrates the importance of the relationship between consumers and food producers in the alternative food supply chains.

Moreover, this study set out to determine what information channels and what type of information consumers perceive as being effective when informing about sustainably produced food products.

The results are consistent with those of other studies which claim that informing consumers does provide them with freedom of choice. The unanticipated finding was that environmental or ethical labels were not perceived as an effective means of motivating responsible consumerism or informing consumers about sustainably produced food products. According to Belz and Peattie (2009) sustainability labels are one of the most widely used marketing communication instruments when informing consumers about sustainably produced products. However, the results of this research indicate that consumers perceive other marketing communications instruments far more effective than labels. Labels were found to be confusing, since there are far too many of them at the moment and difficulties were also experienced when trying to find out what the environmental and ethical labels mean.

Another surprising finding was that advertising in the mass media – such as TV, radio or print advertising – was not perceived to be an effective means of delivering information. Those marketing communications instruments that involve either personal contact with the seller, concrete experiences of the product, for example sampling the food product, or take place at the point-of-purchase, were the ones that the focus group participants found to be the most effective when informing consumers about sustainably produced food.

This study has its limitations and the results can be generalised to a wider population only on a theoretical level by comparing the results to the results of previous research carried out in this field. Moreover, the sample of nineteen consumers covered by the four focus groups is very limited and requires additional elaboration. Furthermore, the results must be considered as an outcome of the Finnish cultural and socioeconomic context and cannot be generalised to other cultural contexts. This study focuses only on consumers' experiences of marketing communications and further research should be done to elaborate on the promotion of sustainably produced food products from the point of view of the other actors in the food supply chain, such as retailers or agricultural producers.

Nevertheless, the findings of this research have implications for planning marketing communications to consumers. Consumers feel that a grocery store or a supermarket is a place where the information about food products is readily available and thus they do not need to search for the information for example on the internet or from brochures. (Duffy et al., 2005.) As Lindgreen et al., (2009) suggest, it would be important for the supermarket chains to promote their assortment of sustainably produced food products, to inform their customers, give these products more clearly indicated shelf space or provide the opportunity for consumers to taste these products.

However, not only the retailers can be held responsible for promoting sustainably produced food. It can be stated that the possible development of a comprehensive marketing programme for sustainably produced food would require cooperation between all the food supply chain actors as well as the development of new ways of communicating the impacts of food consumption and the environmental and social advantages of sustainably produced food. (Bhaskaran, et al., 2006.)

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