Consumer Attitudes in North-West England to Organic and Regional Food

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INTRODUCTION

The market for organic foods in the UK is considered to be one of the leading ones in Europe, and world-wide is estimated to have a value of £1 billion (SA, 2003). The main reason why consumers buy organic food is considered to be health benefits, followed by taste. Of growing importance also are concerns for the environment and animal welfare, but these more altruistic concerns remain less important then personal ones. The rapid increase of demand for organic food over the last few years is seen to be the result of various food-scares (Farodoye, 1999; MINTEL, 1999; SA, 1999; Datamonitor, 2002). The development of the market appears, therefore, driven primarily by consumers, but retailers, especially the multiples, have had a key role in furthering growth, promoting products, increasing range and aiding farmers to convert. The majority of what are considered to be "heavy" organic buyers are in Greater London and the South East.

Organic farming is also frequently associated with the promotion of food production and short supply chains, i.e. consumption close to the place of production. This implies that organic food must be purchased by consumers in rural areas near to where most of it is grown, and last year the sales of organic food through farmers' markets, box schemes and farm shops reached a dynamic growth rate of nearly 30 per cent, higher than the organic sector as whole. However, most organic food in the UK remains purchased through supermarkets (SA, 2003). Consumer studies do not differentiate between urban and rural consumers, so that the available knowledge reflects general, rather than specific, trends.

This paper present results of a series of focus groups carried out in North-west England in the city of Lancaster, in order to supplement existing survey knowledge of consumer attitudes to organic food in relation to more rural areas and attitudes to organic marketing initiatives. The work was carried out as part of a larger EU-funded project on Organic Marketing Initiatives and Rural Development (OMIaRD QLK5-2000-01124), in support of a case study of one Organic Marketing Initiative in the region.

BACKGROUND TO THE REGION AND THE WIDER CASE STUDY

Agriculture is a cornerstone of, and the major land use in, the rural economy of Lancashire, North-west England, ranging from mixed, arable and horticultural production in the costal plains, to extensive beef and sheep grazing systems in the uplands. There is no strong tradition of organic farming, and in terms of land area farmed organically and the sales of organic products, the North West of England lags behind other areas of UK, notably the South (Lees and Rogerson, 2001 cited after Foster and Beckie, 2003). Organic food in Lancaster is also sold in a number of other outlets: several multiple retailers belonging to national companies as well as one regional chain, a whole food shop, organic stalls on the weekly markets and one vegetable box scheme. Production and consumption of organic food in the north of England lags behind the rest of the country (see also Midmore *et al*,. (2004, this volume) for further details and results of the wider case study).

METHODS

The focus groups were conducted between the 12 and 14 November 2002 in Lancaster, a small university and market city in the county of Lancashire. The qualitative method of focus groups was aimed at gaining an understanding of factors that might influence buying behaviour in rural areas, such as consumer knowledge of, expectations and attitudes to, organic food, attitude to and preference for different distribution channels, the origin of food and organic food. The research also provided the customer perspective of one particular Organic Marketing Initiative (OMI) for other work in the project (a vegetable box scheme located nearby that delivers bags of organic vegetables for a fixed price each week, (Midmore *et al*., 2004: this volume) .

Fifty-one participants in six groups were recruited from existing and potential customers of a vegetable box scheme, and with variation in terms of some social characteristics, but being a qualitative research method, and not random sampling, this cannot be taken as in any way representative of the UK population. One regular customer of this Organic Marketing Initiative acted as regional contact, organized the venue and carried out the recruitment.

The author moderated the groups with assistance from the University of Applied Sciences in Hamburg, the German project partner in the project. Moderation followed a common guide covering unprobed "top of mind" associations with organic food and origin of product, and consumer expectations of the specific OMI including the use of projective techniques. All discussion groups were taped and transcribed and, with the help of a VHS recording, statements could be attributed to the type of participant (gender, previous contact with the initiative). The results highlight general discussion as well as conclusions in relation to organic marketing initiatives in rural areas.

RESULTS

The results of the focus groups in Lancashire give some important insights into attitudes to organic food in North-west England, although they can not be seen as representative of the population as a whole. However, some participants had a higher than expected level of environmental awareness, which may be a reflection of the recruitment carried out in association with one particular Organic Marketing Initiative, although not only customers were specifically invited to participate.

In the first round of discussion, all six focus groups strongly associated ‘organic’ with fresh fruit and vegetables and tended not to mention other products (meat, dairy etc.). The association of organic vegetables with soil was largely seen as positive, the proof of a genuine, wholesome and healthy product that has an earthy feel to it (*“dirty but pure”).* Many participants associated organic with “*no chemicals/pesticides”* and healthy, but also with attributes that were not related to the farming method, such as “*friendly service”* and “*unpackaged”*. Some initial associations with organic products were negative, frequently mentioned were “*expensive*” but also “*elitist*” and "*disfigured and discoloured vegetables”*.

Furthermore, despite generally high levels of education among the focus group participants, there was a low level of knowledge and understanding of inspection and certification systems and the legal protection of the term organic on food products. *"Is organic an actual definable term or is it just another bendable thing" (M)?*

This was reinforced by widespread confusion about labelling issues.

The results confirm that consumer motivations for buying organic products vary. 'Health' was a main reason, but also more altruistic reasons entered the discussion (e.g. '*better for the environment'*), especially among the more regular consumers. Interestingly, some consumers made a connection between local and organic food as they gave '*supporting local producers*' as a motivating factor for buying 'organic' food. However, the expressed preference for local over organic suggests that they may be willing to switch to other (non-organic) suppliers, if they better correspond with their personal values, and hence they may not be as fully committed to organic food as consumers who buy for health reasons.

There was widespread support for buying local food among most of the participants, followed by support for buying British, but participants did not express a preference for other regional products from outside their own area. Although no firm conclusions can be drawn from this, it does suggest that careful consideration and market research should accompany any regional food branding initiatives that seek to target a consumer base outside the home region.

The most significant barriers to buying organic food were price and price perception, access and availability, visual product quality and presentation, and mistrust of organic food in supermarkets. Eating habits and lack of cooking skills were also identified. Many participants expressed a preference for buying organic produce from markets and specialist shops. Some went so far as stating that they would never buy organic produce in multiples *("If my option is to buy organic from the supermarket, I have no faith in it, so I just go in and buy the regular stuff" (female).* However, others preferred shopping in supermarkets because of the convenience of being able to do all shopping in one place.

The participants were also asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of the local Organic Marketing Initiative, a vegetable box scheme. As main strengths they mentioned good quality, fresh organic vegetables; trust; personal commitment of the owner to organic principles; home delivery service; commitment to seasonal and local production. Main weaknesses and barriers to joining the scheme were lack of knowledge about the OMI; elitist and exclusivity; limited product range and lack of choice, flexibility; difficulty with home delivery during working hours and for social reasons; absence of a shopping experience for vegetables (e.g. touching, smelling; bargain hunting). Contributions of the OMI to rural development were identified in the area of employment, economic benefits to the growers and retaining wealth in the region, as well as setting an example of a locally based but successful small business with a commitment to environmental issues. However, these impacts were felt to be indirect and limited by the small size of the sample.

CONCLUSIONS

The most important, and in some ways most surprising results, of these six focus groups in a rural market town in Northwest England were:

- The strong association of organic with vegetables and with "earthy", with poor visual quality and with high price.

- The relative ignorance of what the term organic means in terms of the legal production standards, inspection and certification procedures for all operators.
- The lack of awareness of the local Organic Marketing Initiatives and other outlets that sell organic food.
- The strongly expressed commitment to local food.

Participants made some recommendations for to improve such an Organic Marketing Initiative:

- More advertising outside the 'usual' circles.
- Trial bags.
- More information in advance about the content of a typical bag.
- Introducing an element of choice, potentially for a higher price.
- Extending the concept of home delivery to other products.

The OMI has already had experience of the latter two recommendations with varying degrees of success, so it would have to weigh these options (or variations of these options) carefully within the framework of its future development plans.

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