

Strategic options for sensory quality communication for organic products to different target groups and research needs

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Key words: organic products, sensory properties, consumer expectations, strategies

Abstract

In the EU-funded research project ECROPOLIS (www.ecropolis.eu) sensory properties and sensory profiles from organic products as well as consumer expectations were analysed in six European countries (CH, DE, FR, IT; NL, PL). Recommendations were made for processors, organic label associations, retailers and educational organisations, in particular through the interactive on-line data base OSIS (<http://osis.ecropolis.eu>). The product groups were: yoghurt, cookies, plant oils, salami, tomato sauce, and apples. There are mainly two areas, where strategic options can be developed: a) for the product development and b) for the sensory quality communication. Communication measures can emphasise the most preferred sensory attributes in order to better attract specific consumer segments. In those countries, where organic labelling has not a positive influence or even a negative image for certain products, attributes other than organic should be communicated. In a differentiation strategy more emphasis should be given on the communication of sensory differences and specific characteristics (e.g. specific traditional recipes).

Introduction

The taste of organic products is getting in the future a more important buying motive for consumers. This was the main rationale for the research done in the EU funded ECROPOLIS project, where several SME's and SME associations were involved. The project focussed on sensory properties of organic food by collecting and analysing data about sensory profiles from organic products and consumer expectations in six European countries (CH, DE, FR, IT; NL, PL). The main purpose of this project was to provide and exchange sensory information on organic food, in particular for organic label associations, producers, processors, retailers and educational organisations, in particular through the interactive on-line data base OSIS (<http://osis.ecropolis.eu>). The product groups were: yoghurt, cookies, plant oils, salami, tomato sauce, and apples.

This paper outlines strategic options for sensory quality communication and product development policies for different target groups as well as recommendations focussed on research for sensory quality product development and marketing (Schmid, 2011).

Material and methods

Different methods have been used such as literature review, analysis of regulatory framework, laboratory sensory profiling, consumer focus groups, consumer sensory testing. Details can be found in the different research reports of ECROPOLIS project (www.ecropolis.eu).

Results

Research work done in ECROPOLIS project has generated many findings and recommendations for different actors and for different product groups. The main focus is on strategic options for different actors. There are mainly two areas, where strategic options can be developed: a) for the product development; b) for the sensory quality communication. On a product development level a company or organisation can follow two main strategies: a. a standardisation or imitation strategy (product properties of market leader); and b. a differentiation strategy (e.g. with traditionally produced products). The strategic decision to determine what product type for which target group is developed and promoted in the organic market, needs a good knowledge of the attitudes, expectations and preferences of different consumers segments in a specific market. The consumer segmentation model developed in the ECROPOLIS project provides first insights into these issues (Obermove et al. 2011).

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a. Recommendations for processors and SME's

The consumer testing showed several country-specific sensory preferences for all main product groups, which needs to be considered in the product development.

A standardisation strategy might be a first step in entering the market to ensure a constant demand, however could be risky for some product groups on the long run due to competition by other companies. In this strategy, it is important to ensure appropriate standardised sweetness, spiciness & dryness comparable with conventional benchmark products. Communication measures can emphasise most preferred sensory attributes in order to better attract specific consumer segments. In countries, where organic labelling has not a positive influence or even a negative image for certain products, attributes other than organic should be communicated.

In a differentiation strategy more emphasis should be given on the communication of sensory differences. Furthermore the use of specific ingredients or traditional recipes could be successfully supported by communication measures. How strong the organic origin will be communicated depends on the image of organic of the product group in the respective country as well as the presence of strong conventional brands and well known products. In the differentiation strategy it is also recommended to make consumer tastings in shops and offer training for sales staff. For some product groups like apples or plant oils it might be interesting to introduce special labelling systems, e.g. indicating the taste for different flavour groups.

b. Recommendations for SME-associations and label organisations

Generally the product development is not a core issue of SME associations and label organisations; however guidance can be given to related companies about consumer attitudes and preferences (e.g. from consumer and sensory research).

In a differentiation strategy particular additional requirements in standards or Codes of Practise could be developed to support the differentiation (dialogue with industry necessary). Other measures envisaged could be: taste awards, establishment of a sensory information system for market actors, information campaigns or tasting for product groups, in cases where the impact of organic standards are significant.

c. Recommendations for retailers

There are different strategies, which retailers and retail chain follow with regard to sensory quality. In a standardisation strategy it is important to communicate the added value of organic farming in different areas (not only sensory quality) in particular for product groups, where organic has a good image in the country. It is important that the retailers or retail chains give regularly a feedback to processing companies on consumer preferences to be used for product improvement.

In a differentiation strategy the retailer(s) or retail chain can develop further retailer-specific requirements for different product groups to support the differentiation (in cooperation with the processing industry, wholesalers and farmers organisations). Important other measures are: tastings at the point of sale; special communication system or labelling to highlight special tasty products at the point of sale.

d. Product group specific recommendations – the case of yoghurt

The kind of recommendations is illustrated with the case of yoghurt (Schmid, 2011).

Table 1: Strategic options for organic yoghurts in different countries with regard to product development and communication

YOG-HURT	Imitation / standardisation strategy	Differentiation strategy (freshness, authenticity)	Country specific issues
Product development	Standardised fat content (ensure creamy character).	Ensure freshness character through minimal processing (no double milk pasteurisation). Fruit yoghurts without flavours and colouring additives or extracts: reduce colour and flavour deficits by requiring special tasty fruit varieties or by mixing different fruits.	Different expectations regarding liquid on surface (e.g. IT yes, CH no). Creaminess: particular important in CH and PL.
Communication measures	Communicate: "organic is as good as standard products, but they are also organic", particular in countries with a positive image for yoghurts (DE, PL, and FR).	Communicate the paler colour of fruit yoghurts, e.g. strawberry yoghurt as sign of naturalness and authenticity. Make consumer tasting in shops (to explain and experience differences). Offer training for sales staff. Communicate freshness character (in DE and PL).	Preference for organic yoghurts in DE, PL, IT. Preference for conventional yoghurts in FR. Low influence of organic labelling in CH and IT: use other attributes then organic.

Sources: Schmid 2011, Buchecker et al. 2011, Cezanne et al. 2011, Obermove et al. 2011, Espig et al. 2011, Stoll et al. 2010

Countries: CH Switzerland, DE Germany, FR France, IT Italy, PL Poland.

e. Recommendations for training and educational institutions

In a country there might be different institutions capable and willing to support the development of the organic market and of sensory marketing. In most cases these might be a task of SME-associations and umbrella organisations to support their members in training and education. In general information about professional sensory analysis methods and product improvement methods should be provided.

Discussion of challenges and research needs for sensory quality development and communication

From a commercial point of view, integration of the range of sensory quality attributes in the product development and marketing shows a high potential in the market place. It will improve the added value of the organic products. Targeted research and development ideas could provide the basis for achieving this in a much better way.

One challenge in delivering commercially relevant results is to develop a commitment and interest in a mutually beneficial agenda with food businesses. Regular network meetings, exchanging knowledge derived from research and the implementation of research that responds directly to business needs would help.

Research that improves understanding of what motivates consumers based on their diverse expectations, the development of new business models and the identification of new added values could bring together the currently rather separated business and R&D communities. It would be desirable that research started in Ecropolis could be the starting point for innovative technological improvements of sensory deficits, even by linking the quality research with the agronomic field research looking at the impact of choice of varieties and cultivation techniques on the sensory properties.

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