"Communicating trust? The role of Facebook for establishing producer-consumer relationships"

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*Abstract -* Which opportunities does Facebook provide for growing organic enterprises with regards to fostering trust, transparency and credibility? Why and in how far do enterprises make use of Facebook and what possibilities are there to foster direct and indirect exchange processes between producers and consumers? Regarding these questions, this paper revisits the first results of a survey conducted within the European research project ‘HealthyGrowth – From niche to volume with integrity and trust‘.

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Introduction

Organic products, just like regional products, are highly related to aspects of trust. When consumers purchase them they expect that they can be trusted to (for instance) comply with certain production standards, contribute to protecting the environment, secure a fair price for producers, ensure that the distance to the producer is short, or that an added-value is achieved for the region. Particularly in direct marketing, with its potential to enable interpersonal exchange relationships between producers and consumers, trust in these attributes is highly developed and distinctively strong.

As a matter of fact however, values-based food systems, like organic, experience an ongoing and unbroken popularity which usually entails being embedded into larger market structures where the direct contact between producers and consumers is not given any more or at least limited. Therefore, one decisive challenge for growing values-based food systems, rather than targeting aspects of infrastructure or logistics, is how aspects of trust and transparency can be maintained and secured when trying to convey them in larger and more complex structures. Web-based communication processes can be seen as a promising option in this respect. This contribution thus aims to show [1] which opportunities Facebook provides for growing organic enterprises to maintain trust and transparency, [2] why and in how far enterprises make use of it, and [3] what the possibilities are to foster direct and indirect exchange processes between producers and consumers.

Theoretical background

Unfortunately, so far no distinct sociological debate touches the topic of how to establish trust relationships via Facebook. Relevant research focusses more on what is called *customer relationship management* (CRM) (Malthousen et al. 2013) or *social media marketing* (Keller 2008). These concepts however try to build up and establish trust-based producer-consumer relationships primarily for economic reasons. Therefore, they do not approach the issue out of the sociologically interesting perspective of how to reach a basis of mutual understanding and communication on an eyelevel. Two authors coming closer to the topic with their approaches are Mount (2012) and Kiran (2013). Mount for instance elaborates on the issue of how to ‘scale-up‘ values-based food chains. He assumes that in order to be able to successfully mediate values attached to products, an equally decisive factor in indirect marketing is that there are also values attached to the kind of relationships between actors along the food chain. Kiran in turn investigates the role of (new) technologies. In his opinion, the deliberate and specific use of innovative technology would be able to convey values like trust. For example *“tracking technologies disclose the entire chain that food goes through from its origins to the shelf in the store […]. It is a type of technology that enables transparency between producer and consumer, and therefore has the potential to establish trust even in cases where producer and consumer do not meet”* (Kiran 2013, p.351). And Facebook, as well as other social media or web-based applications like (i.e. QR-Codes), do withhold the potential of taking the role of such a ‘tracking technology’.

Methodology

Within the ‘HealthyGrowth’ project, two Austrian case studies were analyzed more in depth regarding the topic of this paper. One is the ‘Bioalpin eGen.’ cooperative which bundles products of several hundred farmers, selling them under the brand ‘BIO vom BERG’ mainly via a local multiple retailer. The other one is ‘Biohof Achleitner’. They distribute around 7000 organic boxes per week to households. In the case of ‘Bioalpin’ six and for ‘Biohof Achleitner’ five semi-structured interviews had been conducted with various actors along the supply chain. These were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to qualitative content analysis. In addition, their Facebook page has been analyzed also quantitatively.

Results

Facebook is used primarily for three purposes. First of all, it represents a good marketing tool. This means that enterprises present themselves by posting texts, images and videos. They promote their business philosophies, inform about their history and general activities, introduce farmers, processors, retail partners or new products and announce events. In this respect, interviewees stated that Facebook has the advantage that there are usually no limitations regarding the use of images, texts or videos. This would make it very attractive in comparison to for instance expensive newspaper ads. Hence, it displays an affordable communication channel for small and medium-sized enterprises with a low budget. In addition, Facebook allows enterprises to specifically target customers according to a set of criteria that can be individually defined (i.e. according to country, interests, hobbies etc.).

Secondly, Facebook is used for exchange and networking. It represents an ideal platform for discussions and enables people to give positive or negative feedback. However, the possibility to directly contact the producers depends on whether the producers are active on the social media platform themselves and whether they are named, tagged or linked in the posts. Yet, consumers usually get instant answers to their questions and the enterprises receive a very good impression of what consumers like and dislike.

Thirdly, Facebook is used for mediating values. This can be seen when enterprises post respective links or articles that should emphasize their credibility and authenticity. Ideally, this then leads to increased customer identification. Another expression of the ambition to convey values is that organic enterprises are eager to foster transparency by providing detailed information on processing techniques and production conditions. This enables potential consumers to quite easily identify who the farmers behind a brand are and to gain deeper insights where the products are from and how they were produced.

However, it has to be said that there are of course also restrictions, for example concerning scope of people that can be reached. On the one hand, because especially younger generations (20 to 40 year olds) show affinity to such platforms and on the other hand, because Facebook applies something like an internal logarithm, which, depending how regularly the user interacts with the enterprise (comments, shares or likes posts or visits the site), determines which kind of information is shown in the newsfeed. Most of the content that is put online only appears to customers when they take action first by clicking the ‘like button’ on Facebook. This means that consumers are the ones who have to demonstrate interest first, hence making the initial step. Last but not least, another limiting factor is that any kind of web-appearance evidently demands temporal assistance and personnel support expenditures.

Conclusions

Generally, the interviews showed that there still is a need and also a desire for improving producer-consumer interfaces. In this respect, Facebook comprehensively represents a handy and useful tool for producers, consumers and the intermediary actors to easily get and stay in contact with each other. However, in the end, it is just one of many possibilities for establishing such a contact and in fact its ability to completely substitute the personal component is limited. Therefore, Facebook appears to be more suitable for maintaining relationships that already developed outside the web, rather than establishing new ones right from the ground. Moreover, while comparing the two cases, some peculiarities were found. On the one hand, the box scheme provider ‘Biohof Achleitner’ has way more followers on Facebook than the cooperative ‘Bioalpin’. This might have to do with the fact that ‘Biohof Achleitner’, being the last link in a rather short supply chain, is closer to the end consumer than the cooperative which distributes its products via a retailer. On the other hand, the cooperative’s commitment towards their producers/members is way higher. For instance, ‘Bioalpin’ promotes its farmers and processors much more via Facebook than ‘Biohof Achleitner’, to whom farmers appear to be more like mere suppliers and whose main objective seems to be to credibly convey his own business philosophy and not the values of primary producers.

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