

Targeting occasional buyers - the need for quality related communication approaches

A. Bodini, T. Richter, R. Felder

Abstract - Occasional organic buyers often purchase selected organic food items according to perceived added value in terms of quality and food safety issues or perceived additional ecological and social performances along the supply chain. They clearly take a more critical view of organic food and the organic farming concept in general than regular buyers do. The main barrier preventing this group from expanding its consumption of organic food is the higher price, which, in their perception, is not justified sufficiently by added quality attributes (Zanoli, 2004; Richter et al., 2004). However, in many cases the problem behind is related to the complexity of quality profiles. To tackle this issue, the paper discusses quality-related communication approaches based on an experimental test by using the method IDM. The authors recommend to identify relevant information attributes of organic food, relating to specific product characteristics, to focus the communication on key quality attributes and to use personal promotion of producers.

INTRODUCTION

Recent experiences indicate that consumers are willing to pay more when quality standards behind products are transparent and visible. Consequently first SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) in the food business sector have started to implement business to consumer (B2C) communication tools which provide consumers with more transparency concerning product and process quality or price transparency along the supply chain (e.g. 'www.natureandmore.com'; 'Fair Milch'; 'www.bio-mit-gesicht.de').

The occasional organic consumer can be characterised as a patchwork character whose food choices are driven by convenience and price; health and wellness, environment- and social/ethical-orientation. Consequently occasional buyers often buy just selected organic food items according to perceived added values in terms of quality and food safety or perceived additional ecological and social performances along the supply chain. The main barrier preventing this group from expanding its consumption of organic food is the higher price,

which, in their perception, is not justified sufficiently by added quality attributes.

An important problem arises from the lack, in consumers' eyes, of transparency of quality differences between competing conventional and organic products. In a situation in which food quality becomes more complex, consumers tend to reduce their involvement in the food purchase decision-making process. Consequently the price is becoming more important as easy choice criterion when added values are not visible or understandable.

METHODS

To identify relevant quality attributes, superior key quality parameters and suitable sources for quality related information, an experimental test was conducted on 102 Swiss consumers in September 2005. The study aimed to get insights on the scale and content of information consumers seek in order to make precise purchase decisions, with respect to the concrete case of apples. By means of 'Information-Display-Matrix' (IDM) (Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg, 2003) test persons have to explore and assess product related information for a number of product stimuli (see table 1):

Table 1. General structure of Information-Display-Matrix

Product attributes	Product stimuli			
	A ₁	A ₂	A ₃	A _m
E ₁	e ₁₁	e ₁₂	e ₁₃	e _{1m}
E ₂	e ₂₁	e ₂₂	e ₂₃	e _{2m}
.
E _n	e _{n1}	e _{n2}	e _{n3}	e _{nm}

Source: Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg, 2003

The test entailed four different apple varieties which were presented as real product. Eleven attributes were showed within the four given product stimuli: type of flavour; variety, price, cultivation system; origin; purpose of use; energy used in the production, storage and transportation; package system; fair trade labelled; brand; traceability system. The product attributes and varying attribute levels for the single product stimuli were noted down on information cards which were presented in a matrix style in addition to the product stimuli (attributes on the front page, product related attribute levels not visible on the back side of the card). The test person was assigned to explore those pieces of information (attribute levels) they would need in order to take a clear purchase decision for one of the stimuli (one of the four apple varieties).

A. Bodini, Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania, Alsyllion Agrokipion P.O.BOX 85, GR-73100 Chania, Creete (antonella.bodini@email.it); T. Richter and R. Felder, Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, CH-5070 Frick (toralf.richter@fiBL.org)

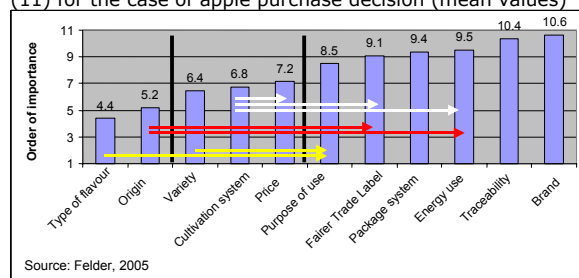
Besides this, tested consumers had to order the sources of information according to their individual relevance, i.e. from the most important to the least important source of information. Furthermore only those sources of information assessed as relevant for the purchase decision had to be explored. This means that test persons had to stop exploring information at the point they considered themselves able to take the purchase decision. Interviewers noticed of the viewed attributes and ranked the explored information from the most to the least important. Afterwards tested consumers chose the preferred stimuli and had to explain why this stimuli was chosen.

By means of IDM the scale and the structure of required information in concrete and near buying situations can be recorded. By means of a face-to-face questionnaire directly after operating the IDM, additional information had been collected. In particular, further insights into the actual buying behaviour with regard to fruits and organic products, attitudes with regard to social and ecological quality criteria, as well as information with regard to the informational sources consumers rely on to inform themselves about fruit quality parameters were detected.

RESULTS

The results of the IDM indicate that consumers explore information essentially on four product attributes on average, when taking a purchase decision for apples. The relevant attributes detected are the type of flavour, the origin, the apple variety, the cultivation system and the price (see fig. 1). When consumers were asked *a posteriori* about their purchase decision and the meaning of attributes, some key quality indicators were identified. For some consumers the type of flavour and the variety are key indicators for the purpose of use, whereas the origin is a key indicator for fair trade issues. On the other hand the energy use and the cultivation system represent key indicators for a certain price level, for fair trade and energy use issues (see arrows in fig. 1). That means, even when consumers are interested in many qualitative, social and ecological issues along the supply chain, they often rely on less key quality attributes.

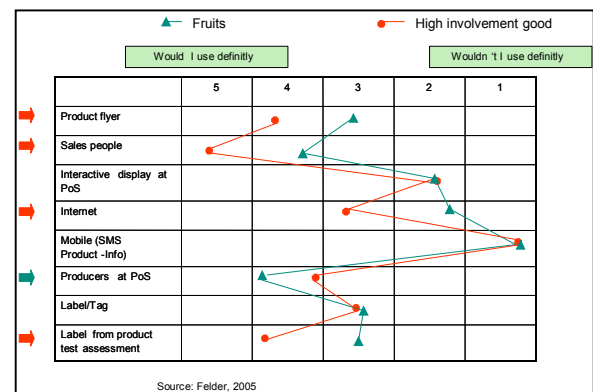
Figure 1. Results IDM –importance of product attributes ranked from most relevant (1) to least relevant attribute (11) for the case of apple purchase decision (mean values)



The survey revealed that the information sources, which are used for exploring quality related information, differ clearly between the case of fruit purchase compared with the case of high involvement product purchase. While sales people, product flyers, inde-

pendent product test assessments or the Internet represent the main information sources when purchasing high involvement products, quite often in the case of fruit purchase, the surveyed consumers stated to prefer a more straightforward source of information, such as that coming from producers at the point of sales (at farmer shops, markets or during promotion activities in supermarkets) (see fig. 2). By contrast all tested electronic media sources were not revealed to be preferred as frequently used source of information for quality issues related to fruits.

Figure 2. Used sources of consumers for product information comparing the case of fruit purchase and the purchase of high involvement products (e.g. bikes, TV)



CONCLUSIONS

The organic sector has been considered emerging and profitable, however often without applying suitable tools to communicate extra quality values of organic food. To make organic food more attractive to occasional organic consumers, the communication policy must focus more strongly on quality related issues. An appropriate communication should firstly be based on informing consumers about the extra quality values of organic food. Secondly it should focus on identified key quality attributes and thirdly it should use producers as multipliers or well-informed sales people for authentic quality communication. Media like the Internet or leaflets are scarcely used in the case of low-involvement products such as food. In addition whenever stories and images showing the life, the happiness and the problems of organic farmers and their production make the organic sector more visible, consumers feel mostly emotional loaded and therefore attracted to organic food.

Further research and attempt should be addressed in order to develop strategies for improving communication of complex quality characteristics of organic food, such as sophisticated IT solutions for the B2C communication.

REFERENCES

- Felder, R. 2005. Das Informationsverhalten von Schweizer Konsumenten beim Einkauf von Obst (The behaviour of Swiss consumers towards information when buying fruits). Diploma thesis at Schweizerische Hochschule fuer Landwirtschaft. Zollikofen.
- Kroeber-Riel W., Weinberg P. 2003. Konsumentenverhalten (Consumer behaviour). München.
- Richter, T.; O. Schmid; G. Hempfling. 2004. Organic dairy products from Switzerland – consumer views and implications. Results of focus group interviews with regular and occasional buyers of organic dairy products in Switzerland. Frick.
- Zanolli, R. 2004. The European consumer and organic food. OMIaRD Vol. 4, School of Management and Business. UWA. Aberystwyth.