Consumers' Values and Beliefs Regarding Organic Foods

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The organic food market in the U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase over the past decade. As more organic consumers emerge, the importance of understanding their motivations grows. Previous research on consumer interests in the U.S. has focused on fresh produce, and has mostly used quantitative methods. This research was designed to build knowledge about consumer interests in diverse organic food products using a range of research methods. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to more effective food marketing practices for organic producers. Areas of particular interest were consumers' views on the role of the government in agriculture, the industrialization of the food system, impacts of agricultural production on the environment, the safety of food, and animal welfare.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in conducting the consumer research. Starting in February of 2002, five focus groups were held in both rural and urban areas of the northeastern U.S., followed by 27 one-to-one interviews with additional food shoppers. Participants in both the focus groups and individual interviews were adults of diverse ages, incomes, educational backgrounds, gender, and occupations who were primary food shoppers in their households. Interviews were completed in October 2002. The purposes of the focus groups and interviews were: to identify participants' specific interests related to the previously defined topics of the research; to learn the language they used to describe these interests and their concerns and experiences; and to generate potentially plausible hypotheses that could be tested using a written survey.

Following analysis of the qualitative data, we developed a 13-page written survey which was tested during summer and early fall 2003, and mailed to 1,100 people between November 2003 and February 2004. Survey recipients were randomly selected using mailing lists from the town or city office of two rural and one urban community in the northeastern U.S. Up to four mailings were sent to each household in an effort to generate a high response rate; 38% of households with valid addresses responded. Three key areas explored in the survey are knowledge of U.S. national organic standards and how that knowledge is related to food buying behavior; consumers' beliefs about the benefits of purchasing foods produced on organic, local, and small-scale farms; and the reasons behind the food purchasing decisions of different categories of food shoppers, including those who respectively do and do not buy organic foods.

To learn about the relationship between an individual's commitment to organic and his or her knowledge and beliefs in various categories, it is necessary to have a measure of commitment. Our mail survey used two different measures that together helped us to identify current organic food buying behavior in six food categories, as well as to assess future intentions to buy organic food. The following results reflect analysis of the written survey, and are predominantly framed using food buying groups that emerged from our two food buying measures.

We examined whether current organic buying behavior, or potential future organic buying behavior, corresponded to National Organic Standards knowledge. Results show that, as a group, frequent organic buyers had the most knowledge about national organic standards, and non-organic buyers had the least knowledge. However, among the non-organic buyers, those who said they were thinking about buying organic food in the future had more knowledge of the standards than those who had no intention to buy organic food in the future. Although the differences among groups of buyers were statistically significant, no differences were very large.

For each of the six food categories used to asses organic food buying behavior, shoppers were asked to select every statement that reflected a reason they bought that type of organic food. The choices were: lacks chemicals from production or processing; supports animal welfare; tastes better; is more healthful; is fresher; uses less packaging; looks better; is better for the environment; protects wildlife; supports farm workers' health; is more natural; and is produced without added hormones. For all organic food buyers, the top three reasons for buying organic baby food, fruits and vegetables, grains, and miscellaneous foods were that they were more healthful, lacked chemicals, and were more natural. For dairy and meats, the top responses were similar, but included "is produced without added hormones" instead of "more natural." Using responses to these same questions, we compared frequent organic food buyers to occasional organic food buyers to identify any possible differences between the two groups' reasons for buying organic foods. Frequent organic buyers tended to provide more reasons for buying organic foods, and more commonly gave reasons that were related to the process of production, rather than just the quality of the final product.

To examine the extent to which an interest in buying from small-scale farms and an interest in buying from local farms corresponded to organic food buying behavior and rationales, people who bought from all three types of farms were asked to indicate the importance to them of different possible reasons for doing so. Respondents were more likely to state impact on the environment as more important to them when buying from an organic farm, compared to buying from a local or small-scale farm. Slightly more importance was also placed on food safety as a reason to buy organic, compared to local or small-scale. However, consumers placed greater importance on a number of other reasons to buy from local or small-scale, compared to organic, but none of the reasons stood out as being that much more important.

In summary, organic food consumers in the rural and urban communities of this northeast U.S. sample have diverse interests and beliefs that motivate their organic food buying behavior. While considerations about the quality of the product appear to be strong motivators for most organic food buyers, interest in the process of production appears to be greatest among more frequent buyers of organic foods. Perhaps it is a broad range of interests that solidifies the commitment to organic for these frequent buyers. The greatest opportunity for increasing sales of organic foods seems to be among people who are currently occasional buyers of organic foods, rather than among those people who buy no organic foods at all. However, there may also be opportunities to increase sales among the group of people that currently buy no organic foods, but are considering buying organic foods in the future. For all consumers, messages must be carefully targeted and must build on their relevant values.