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Targeting occasional buyers – communicating quality

Occasional organic buyers often purchase selected organic food items according to perceived added value in terms of quality and food safety, or perceived additional ecological and social performance along the supply chain. They 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). In many cases the underlying problem is the complexity of quality profiles.

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}

Table 1. General structure of Information Display Matrix

Method

Experimental test with apples conducted on 102 Swiss consumers in 2005.

Using an Information Display Matrix (IDM), test persons explored and assessed product related information for a number of product stimuli (Table 1).

The IDM records the scope and structure of information required in concrete buying and near-buy situations.

By means of a face-to-face questionnaire directly after generating the IDM, additional information was collected on the information sources consumers rely on to gather information about fruit quality parameters.

Eleven attributes were recorded for four given apple product stimuli: type of flavour; variety; price; cultivation system; origin; purpose of use; energy used in production, storage and transportation; package system; fair trade labelled; brand; traceability system.

Test persons were asked to explore the items 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). They further ranked the sources of information according to their individual relevance, i.e. from the most important to the least important source of information.

Results 1

IDM results show that consumers seek information about four product attributes on average for an apple purchase.

The most relevant attributes are the type of flavour, the origin, the apple variety, the cultivation system and the price (Fig. 1).

The type of flavour and the variety can be key indicators for the purpose of use, the origin can be a key indicator for fair trade issues, the energy use and the cultivation system (conventional, integrated, organic production) can be key indicators for a certain price level, for fair trade and energy use issues (arrows in Fig. 1).

This means that even when consumers are interested in many qualitative, social and ecological issues along the supply chain, they often rely on a small number of key quality attributes.

Results 2

The information sources used to explore quality related information differ substantially between a fruit purchase and a high involvement product purchase.

While sales people, product flyers, independent product test assessments or the Internet are the main information sources when purchasing high involvement products, in the case of fruit purchase the surveyed consumers often prefer a more straightforward source of information, such as that coming from producers at the point of sale (at farmer shops, markets or during promotion activities in supermarkets; Fig. 2).
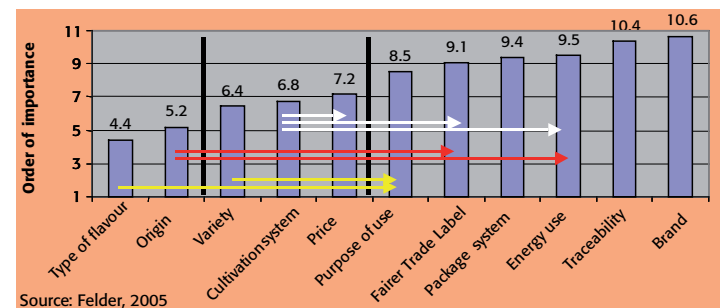

Source: Felder, 2005

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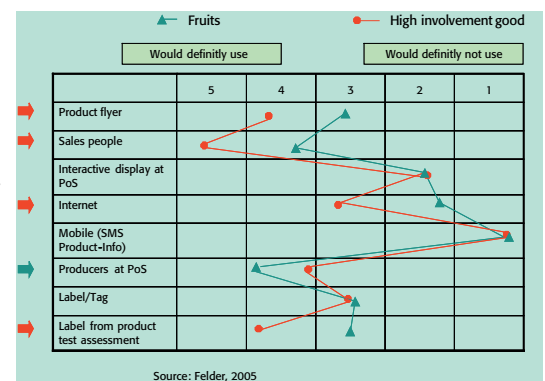

Source: Felder, 2005

Figure 2. Sources used by consumers to gather product information, comparing fruit purchase with the purchase of high involvement products (e.g. bikes, TV)

Conclusions

To make organic food more attractive to occasional organic consumers, communication must focus more strongly on quality issues. 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. Thirdly it should use producers or well-informed sales people as multipliers for authentic quality communication. Media like the Internet or leaflets are scarcely used in the case of low-involvement products such as food.

Further work is needed to develop strategies for improving communication of complex quality characteristics of organic food, such as sophisticated IT solutions for B2C communication.

References

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