

Research report

Food and sustainability: Do consumers recognize, understand and value on-package information on production standards?

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Abstract

We tested how consumers recognize, understand and value on-package information about food production methods that may contribute to a more sustainable agriculture. Nine copy tests were formed, each containing one out of three products and one out of three panels of information. The products were (1) fillet of chicken, (2) semi-skimmed milk and (3) fillet of salmon. The panels of information were (a) a certified organic logo and details about the animal welfare standards of organic products, (b) just the logo, or (c) a statement in which the product was attributed to the world market. About 371 customers of a supermarket in the city of Amsterdam filled in a questionnaire, which included a subset of three copy tests. The results showed that many consumers did not realize that the organic logo already covers all the standards. They were inclined to underestimate the distinctive advantage of the logo; products with logo and details got higher ratings of positive attributes but were also considered more expensive. As a consequence, the detailed information panels enabled consumers to choose more in agreement with their personal values but the net impacts on purchase intentions were small.

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Introduction

On-package information about food production methods is increasingly relevant for those consumers who want to differentiate between conventional products and products with distinctive advantages in terms of moral and health aspects of eating (Caswell, 1997). This type of product information is also one of the promising instruments for policy makers in government and industry who aim to foster sustainable consumption and production patterns (OECD, 2001). Since a series of regulatory failures and food scares within Europe (Vogel, 2003), more transparency may even be considered crucial to secure a healthy, nutritious diet for consumers and a more sustainable food system for society. However, there are many discussions in the literature about the real access of consumers to information about production and processing technologies, for example, through various labelling systems (Conner, 2004; Fischler, 1980; Nestle, 2002;

Tansey & Worsley, 1995). In fact, the mechanisms for consumers to express their values in purchasing decisions are limited and they may easily run into problems if they are overwhelmed by too much information or misled by too little (Andrews, Netemeyer, & Burton, 1998; Wansink, 2003). One of the options for food producers is to limit the amount of on-package information to a label, such as a certified logo or an organic seal that is intended to symbolize a whole set of organic production standards. Another option is to include a panel with more details about such standards. The question that we want to address in the present experiment is how consumers recognize, understand and value sustainability-related on-package information in both forms.

To develop an understanding of the potential impact of different labels on more sustainable food choices, we designed an experiment in which realistic circumstances are combined with theory-based insights on information processing and decision-making. Our approach builds in particular on the relatively transparent character of organic agriculture. Although the organic sector is not the only form of agriculture that claims to be more sustainable than

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current practices, it has a well-defined and certified set of standards, which makes it much more transparent than the conventional sector (Pretty, Ball, Lang, & Morison, 2005). The difference in transparency between organic and conventional agriculture may be reinforced by contextual factors, such as marketing strategies. In the United States, for example, several food companies that are specialized in organic products have put a lot of effort into creating an image of being completely organic in their supermarkets (Klintman & Boström, 2004). This strategy chosen by supermarkets that often serve the upper part of the market may accentuate some typical cultural differences between the conventional and the organic food chain, such as the greater weight the latter gives to the principle of “naturalness”. In Europe, on the other hand, there seems to be less polarization between these food chains as it is more common that a supermarket provides both organic and conventional foods. The latter forms the context for our experiment.

The Netherlands, where our experiment was located, can stand as a good example of the European situation. Measured in organic sales per capita, it has a middle position among the Western European countries after forerunners as Denmark and Austria, and ahead of France and the United Kingdom (Wier & Calverley, 2002). About 80% of the households bought at least one organic product in the year 2004, but the total number of organic purchases is low; although the sector is growing, its market share is still less than 2% (Biologica, 2005). This combination of high familiarity and low sales may result from the fact that many supermarkets provide organic and conventional foods side by side. This presentation brings more consumers into contact with organic products, but it might accentuate the premium price of organic products rather than the underlying differences in production processes; the first is printed on front of the package but the latter are just symbolized by the logo of organic products (i.e., the certified Dutch “EKO” logo, which is in agreement with international standards for organic farming).

We focused our experiment on the transparency of products that are highly relevant from the perspective of sustainability. Traditionally, transparency is more important for perishables, such as meat and fish, than for other foods. Nowadays, meat and fish are also extremely relevant for the aim of sustainability. This aim may require that the inhabitants of Western countries change their food choices by consuming less meat and fish or by giving preference to meat and fish with an environmental advantage, such as organic products. The main rationale for this diet shift is that intensive feeding of animals is a rather inefficient means of producing dietary protein, which also causes a variety of undesirable environmental impacts (Heller & Keoleian, 2003; Smil, 2002). Until recently, protein products were usually marketed in a fairly “anonymous” or “low key” manner, as fresh, unpackaged products. Just like what happened with milk much earlier, however, meat and fish are increasingly packaged for sale in supermarkets,

which gives producers the opportunity to develop on-package information about, among other things, important characteristics of production methods (Tanner, Kaiser, & Wolfing Kast, 2004). Hence, we included meat and fish in our experiment and added milk as a third product for reasons of comparison.

The labels that we wanted to compare come in two general forms. The first is a panel with an organic logo and detailed information on organic production standards. The second is a panel with the organic logo only. From the perspective of consumers, the many differences between organic and conventional products may not all be equally interesting, but it is well-known that, for example, animal welfare is one of the more salient issues in North-western Europe (European Commission, 2005). Accordingly, organic standards to protect animal welfare may create distinctive advantages in the cases of meat, fish and milk. To find out to what extent consumers are aware of these advantages, we created two experimental conditions in which organic products are displayed either with or without detailed on-package information about animal welfare standards. For reasons of comparison, we added a third condition of on-package information in the form of a panel with the statement that the product comes from the world market and has been produced in compliance with legal standards. This control condition was meant to represent the standardized food that seems to come from nowhere in particular.

The reason to combine the statement on the product’s world market origin with an assertion of compliance with legal standards was that imported food may be seen as less safe than food with a national origin (Juric & Worsley, 1998; Nygård & Storstad, 1998). We wanted to neutralize such a view, because we were not interested in this type of country-of-origin issues. It should also be noted that the Netherlands is characterized by an open economy in an extended network of international trade and that this has its effects on consumers. Although for many consumers in Western Europe a quality food is first a product that comes from their own country, surveys in the European Union have shown that this argument mattered far less in the Netherlands (European Commission, 2004, p. 47). Hence, the marketing of both conventional and organic products is less focussed on country-of-origin issues than elsewhere.

The contrasting degrees of transparency created by combinations of products (i.e., meat, fish and milk) and on-package information (logo plus details, logo, or statement on world market) may impact on consumers’ beliefs about a product through changes in the profile of perceived product attributes and in the strength of intentions to buy the product under certain circumstances. Two crucial theoretical issues at this juncture are (a) the degree to which consumers are able and willing to go beyond the information given, such as the logo and the text, and (b) the relationship between depth of processing and the impacts of the information. The key role of the depth of information processing has been documented by

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