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Kaw Valley Focus Groups on Local and Organic Produce

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(A Report of the Kaw Valley Project for Environmentally-Identified Products)

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ABSTRACT

Environmentally-Identified Products (EIPs) refers to food products that are described as organic or sustainable, were grown using Integrated Pest Management (IPM), or are in other respects viewed as having a less-negative impact on the environment than directly competing products. This report summarizes findings from focus groups conducted in eastern Kansas to determine factors of consumer motivation for buying or not buying Environmentally-Identified Products. The findings were consistent with previous literature on demands for EIP foods.

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This report is one in a series of reports on demands for EIPs (Environmentally-Identified Products) in the Kaw Valley of Kansas. David Burress is Principal Investigator and series editor for the project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- When selecting a place to shop for food, participants were most concerned with shopping and locational convenience, price, the availability of a wide variety of produce, and the availability of other services such as banking, dry cleaning, flowers, pharmacy, etc.
- Participants named price, freshness, firmness, ripeness, and lack of blemishes as most desirable produce characteristics.
- Participants who had made “impulse” produce purchases mentioned purchasing items that were new, rare, just coming into season, or uniquely displayed.
- Participants generally understood the term “organic” to mean food grown without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Participants uniformly said they did not consider foods advertised as “natural” to be organic.
- Participants mentioned the advantages of organic produce were that it was healthier for you due to lack of pesticides and that it was better for the environment, although not all participants had an identical understanding of these issues.
- Perceived disadvantages of organic produce were that it sometimes was not as pretty or colorful as conventional produce, that it might contain blemishes, that it did not always look as fresh, that it was sometimes more perishable, and that it was higher priced than conventional produce.
- There was some disagreement among participants over what constitutes “locally-grown.” Some thought the term should apply only to produce grown within or near their particular city or county while others would consider produce grown in Missouri, Kansas, or Nebraska to be local.
- It was uniformly believed that the term “locally-grown” applies to dairy and meat products as well as produce.
- Participants felt that consumer information is the key to increasing consumer demand for EIPs. Participants generally had a positive attitude towards EIPs and were willing to pay somewhat higher prices for them, but first they wanted to better understand the benefits of EIPs.
- Participants stressed the need for consumer education, increased availability for organic produce, and a decrease in the price differential between organic and conventional foods in order to increase consumption of EIPs. Television commercials, celebrity endorsements, and in-store brochures and displays were mentioned as possible marketing tools.

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmentally-Identified Products (EIP) are defined as food and other products which have been produced in such a way so that their growth, processing, and/or distribution has a reduced environmental impact compared to conventionally-grown, processed, and distributed products. EIPs may also include products that, independently of their impact on the external environment, are believed to have a healthier impact on the “internal environment” of the body than conventionally produced products. Some examples of EIPs include organically-grown and processed food, locally-grown and processed food, food grown using integrated pest management (IPM), grass-fed beef, and free-range chicken. In this report we will focus on food products only, omitting other EIPs such as clothing made from organic cotton and certain “natural” health and beauty aids.

As part of IPPBR’s research project on expanding local markets for Environmentally-Identified Products in the Kaw Valley of Northeastern Kansas, IPPBR conducted focus groups to determine factors of consumer motivation for buying or not buying EIP foods. Specific issues addressed in the focus groups were:

- What are desirable characteristics of retail grocery markets?
- What are desirable characteristics of fruits and vegetables?
- What are consumers’ concepts of organic produce?
- What are consumers’ concepts of locally-grown food?
- What ideas do consumers have that could improve the marketing of EIPs?

Chapter 2 explains the methodology. Chapter 3 presents findings from the focus groups. Chapter 4 summarizes main themes that arose in the focus group meetings. Two appendices describe the protocols that were followed.

2. METHODOLOGY

IPPBR conducted four focus groups, each consisting of 10-12 primary household food shoppers to determine factors of consumer motivation for buying or not buying EIPs. (The term EIP was not used in the actual focus groups.) The meetings were held on March 3, 4, 1999 at The University of Kansas Regents Center, Overland Park, KS; and on March 8, 9, 1999 at The University of Kansas Capitol Center, Topeka, KS.

Participants in the focus groups were recruited by random telephone call and were screened to ensure that they were at least 18 years old and that they were the primary food shopper for their household. Participants in the Johnson County focus groups were screened to ensure that they had some college education while participants in the Topeka focus groups were screened to ensure that they had less than a four-year college degree. The script for recruiting participants is given in Appendix 1. Participants were paid \$50 for participating in the group, and light refreshments were provided. The meetings were held at 7:00 PM in midweek and lasted between one and two hours.

Each focus group followed the general protocol included in Appendix 2, but deviations from the protocol were allowed as needed to make the conversation flow more naturally. Two facilitators were present at each focus group and took detailed notes. The proceedings were also tape recorded and transcriptions were made; however, in one case the tape recording was found to be unusable. For that case, the analysis was based on the facilitators' notes and memory.

3. FINDINGS

Desirable Characteristics of Retail Grocery Markets

The discussions began by asking participants what factors they considered when choosing a place to shop for food. The five factors most often mentioned were convenience, location, price, availability of a wide variety of produce, and the availability of other services such as banking, dry cleaning, flowers, a pharmacy, etc. Participants in all four focus groups were primarily concerned with these five factors. However, the Topeka (non-college) groups were more concerned about price and less concerned about the availability of “other services” than the Johnson County (college educated) groups.

Other factors participants mentioned as important when selecting a place to shop were advertised specials, lean meats, lack of pricing tricks, habit, familiarity with the store, and the availability of small grocery carts for children to use.

Most participants mentioned they shopped at large chain supermarkets. A few Johnson County participants mentioned shopping at natural food stores, while participants at all four groups mentioned shopping at farmers’ markets, road-side stands, and pick-your-own produce sites. Motivation for shopping at sites other than the large chain supermarkets were primarily for entertainment and for the perception of higher quality of produce available at alternative markets.

Desirable Characteristics of Fruits and Vegetables

Participants were asked to discuss what characteristics they looked for when purchasing fruits and vegetables. The five most important characteristics were price, freshness, firmness, ripeness, and lack of blemishes. Other factors included display characteristics such as produce that looked as if it was just picked, the availability of pre-packaged quantities, color, fragrance, weight (i.e., the heavier, the riper and juicier), and labeling. The need for organic or pesticide-free labels was mentioned prior to any prompting.

Participants were next asked if they had made any produce purchases on impulse, and, if so, what kinds of produce they had purchased. Participants mentioned purchasing new or rare items and items that were just coming into season. Participants also mentioned purchasing organic produce or items that were uniquely displayed.

Consumers’ Concepts of Organic Produce

Consumers generally understood the term organic to mean food grown without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers. However, consumers expressed frustration at the lack of a uniform standard

for organic produce as well as the complete lack of information about what chemicals had been used on conventionally-grown produce.

Several people did not understand why organic produce cost more if fewer inputs are needed in their production. Participants thought that organic consumers were more health-conscious individuals, more educated, more open-minded and aware than the average consumer, and were among the pioneers of society.

Terms brought up to use as a substitute for organic were “non-toxic,” “chemical free,” and “naturally grown.” Consumers associated organic foods with better health, purity, and lack of artificial inputs. When consumers were asked whether they considered an item advertised as “natural” to mean organic, they uniformly said they did not.

Participants mentioned some disadvantages of organic produce were that it sometimes was not as pretty or colorful as conventional produce, that it sometimes contained blemishes, that it did not always look as fresh, that it was often more perishable, and that it was higher priced than conventional produce.

Consumers’ Concepts of Locally-grown Produce

Consumers’ concept of locally-grown produce was not quite as clear as their concept of organic produce. Some people thought the term locally-grown meant that produce was grown within a 100 to 200 mile radius of the area. Others considered produce grown in Missouri, Kansas, or Nebraska to be locally-grown. Still others said only produce grown within or near their particular city limits or county, such as within a thirty-mile radius of the point of sale, should be considered as locally-grown.

Participants agreed that the terms organic and locally-grown were appropriate to use on other food items besides fresh produce (i.e., dairy or meat products).

Ideas for Improving the Marketing of EIPs

Finally, participants were asked to come up with marketing ideas to increase consumption of organic produce. Overwhelmingly, participants stressed the need for consumer education about the benefits of organic produce and the potentially harmful health and environmental effects of conventionally-grown produce. Participants felt that increased availability of information about how produce is grown and the effects of pesticides on health and the environment were of utmost importance if consumers were to be persuaded to purchase EIPs. Participants generally believed consumers would be willing to pay more for organic produce and EIPs, but they need to first better understand the benefits. Also, even though participants believed people would be willing to pay more for EIPs, they still felt EIPs needed to become less expensive and more widely available.

Suggested ways to increase market share included having a celebrity spokesperson do television commercials for EIPs or promote organic produce on television talk shows. One person mentioned a T.V. commercial for the California Organic Growers Association she had seen. In the commercial, an actor licked a candle and took a bite from a conventional apple. The actor then drew a comparison between eating a conventional apple and licking a candle because of the wax coating often applied to conventional apples to increase their shine. Other promotional ideas included having educational flyers or brochures available where organic produce is sold and in-store sampling.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Focus group participants were generally interested in and receptive to ideas about organic produce. However, participants consistently emphasized the need for more information about the benefits of EIPs. If consumers are going to pay higher prices, they need to understand why. Participants also stressed the need for increased availability of EIPs. Currently, consumers do not perceive the risks of conventional produce as great enough to warrant the additional time costs required to seek out organic produce and the additional monetary costs to purchase them.

The focus groups revealed that people generally had a good understanding of the meaning of the term “organic” and were interested in learning more about organic produce. In each of the two Johnson County groups there was an outspoken advocate of organic produce to whom the groups were receptive and interested in listening.

The findings from the focus groups are consistent with the findings of studies reviewed in Harris, Burrell, and Eicher (2000). Consumers are concerned about the way their food is grown, and they want information about it when purchasing any produce. People are interested in purchasing organic produce and are willing to pay a premium for it if they understand the benefits.

APPENDIX 1: Telephone Screening Script

WORDS TYPED IN UPPERCASE ARE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER AND ARE NOT READ TO THE RESPONDENT. WORDS TYPED IN LOWERCASE ARE READ TO THE RESPONDENT.

WHEN YOU REACH A PARTY ON THE TELEPHONE, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INTRODUCTION SLOWLY, AND BE SURE TO PAUSE AFTER EACH SENTENCE.

Hello. My name is _____, and I am calling from the Institute for Public Policy and Business Research at the University of Kansas. We are doing a study on behalf of the US Department of Agriculture to learn about consumers' food purchasing behavior.

First, because we are studying households, can you tell me if this is a residence?

NO OK. Thank you very much for your time. Good bye. HANG UP
YES CONTINUE TO 1

IF CONTINUING . . .

1. I would like to talk with the person in your household who does most of the grocery shopping. Would that be you?

IF NO TO MAIN SHOPPER, GO TO 2
IF YES TO MAIN SHOPPER, GO TO 3

2. May I please speak to that person?

NO When would be a good time to contact him/her?

W R I T E D O W N C O N T A C T I N F O R M A T I O N :

Ok. Thank you very much for your time. Good bye. HANG UP

YES WAIT FOR PERSON TO GET ON LINE

Hello. My name is _____, and I am calling from the Institute for Public Policy and Business Research at the University of Kansas. We are doing a study on behalf of the US Department of Agriculture to learn about consumers' food purchasing behavior. GO TO 3

3. NOW YOU HAVE REACHED THE MAIN SHOPPER

Are you age 18 or older?

NO OK. Thank you very much for you time. Good bye. HANG UP

YES GO TO 4

4. We are seeking to identify people who would be interested in participating in a group discussion about consumers' food purchasing behavior to be hosted by the Institute for Public Policy and Business Research. Participants in the group discussion will be paid \$50. The discussion will take place at ___[Johnson County, Topeka]___ on a weekday night in early March and will last about two hours.

If you qualify, would you be willing to participate in this group discussion?

NO OK. Thank you for your time. Good bye. HANG UP

YES GO TO 5

5. Great! So that we may ensure we have a representative group, I would like to ask you a qualifying question. There is no right or wrong answer. We simply ask so that we ensure we recruit a variety of individuals. Please be assured that this information will be kept confidential.

What is the highest level of education that you or your spouse or domestic partner have completed? [NOTE: GO TO's shown below apply to Johnson County college-educated group. The opposite pattern was used for Topeka non-college group.]

- Less than high school GO TO 6
- High school or equivalent GO TO 6
- Some college or technical training GO TO 7
- Bachelor's degree GO TO 7
- Graduate school or professional degree GO TO 7
- NOT ANSWERED GO TO 7

6. Ok. I'm sorry, but we have already fulfilled our needs in recruiting individuals with your similar educational background. Unfortunately we won't be able to invite you to participate at this time. Thank you very much for your time. Good bye. HANG UP

7. Ok. Fine. May I sign you up to participate?

YES GO TO 8

NOOk. Thank you very much for your time. Good bye. HANG UP

8. Excellent. I would like to confirm your telephone number and ask your name and mailing address so we may send you a confirmation letter and directions to the meeting.

Is your telephone number (____) ____-____?

NO GO TO 9

YES GO TO 10

9. What is your correct telephone number?

10. May I have your name and mailing address, please?

Great. That's all the information we need. You will be receiving a confirmation letter with directions to the meeting in a few days. If at any time you have questions, you may call Brian Harris at (785) 864-3701. Thank you very much for your cooperation. We look forward to seeing you! **HANG UP**

APPENDIX 2: Focus Group Protocol

DESCRIPTION

Purpose: To determine consumer motivation behind buying or not buying organically-grown food products.

Probe issues including: How do customers define organic produce? How do they react to organic produce? What factors might be predictive of buying organic produce? How do the terms “organic” and “locally-grown” relate?

Groups: 2 groups with KC metro populations (similar socio-economic groupings)
2 groups with non-KC metro populations (similar socio-economic groupings)

Location: Regents Center, Johnson County (two groups)
Capitol Center, Topeka (two groups)

Participants: People who shop for groceries, including fruits & vegetables (preferably non-biased or neutral to the idea of buying organic foods)

Dates: Second and third week in March

Facilitators: Brian Harris, Susan Mercer, Carol Rose (2 at each session)

Details: 4 focus groups of 10-12 participants each
2 hour duration
\$50 participant fee

SCRIPT

A. INTRODUCTION (15 minutes)

1. Introduce self and assistant.
2. Explain the idea of a focus group.
Explain that the research is being conducted by the University of Kansas under a grant from the US Department of Agriculture.
3. Introduce the topic for this session:
To explore attitudes and habits related to the purchasing of food products.
4. State that the session will be audio-taped.
5. Assure participants of anonymity of responses.
Be sure that everyone has signed and has turned in the consent statement and receipt for payment.
6. Ground rules:
Speak one at a time.
Speak so that everyone else can hear you.
Do not hesitate to disagree with your counterparts; there are no right or wrong answers.
I may need to interrupt from time to time to keep the discussion on track.
7. Introduction of participants:
So that we all may know each other a little better, let's begin with each person providing the following:
 - FIRST Name?
 - Occupation?
 - Where do you live? (area of Kansas City or Topeka)
 - Who in your household makes most of the decisions about what food is purchased?

B. WARM-UP (25 minutes)

As we mentioned earlier, the main purpose of today's focus group is to explore consumer attitudes related to the purchasing of food products.

1. OPEN DISCUSSION

Where would someone living in Topeka go to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables for home consumption?

2. Why would someone go (here) versus (there)?

3. What makes for GOOD fruits and vegetables? Let me make a list. (use flip chart)

For example, when my mother used to send me to the store, she might say, don't buy the lettuce if it's brown and mushy. What would I need to look for to be sure I'm getting GOOD fruits and vegetables?

(Use a flip chart and write down all the factors participants can think of.)

5. Can you think of any other things?

6. My list is too long. Which of these things on the list can I get RID of? Which one is the least important? What would be the second one I would eliminate? (Proceed until only the top five are left).

7. What reasons can you think of why someone would "impulse buy" fruits and vegetables?

C. TEST OF CONCEPTS (25 minutes)

Now we're going to move on to another part of the discussion.

1. (If the term "organic" came out in the previous discussion.)

I know two people in Kansas City (Topeka).

One insists on purchasing organic fruits and vegetables. The other one doesn't.

What else do we know about these people? What other differences might there be between these two individuals?

2. We've talked some about the word "organic." Let's pretend this word doesn't exist. What could we use as another word?

3. I'm hearing that these are some of the advantages of organic produce (name them).

Is there anything else? (Try to get the participants to discuss among themselves - try to get an argument going.)

What about the disadvantages?

Note: Try to bring in the bottled water analogy. For example, if people say they don't want to spend extra \$ on organic, you could ask them, "What about other products where we spend \$\$ for pure or natural ingredients? Are people who use bottled water more likely to be the same people who use organic produce?"

4. Is there any particular occasion when organic food would be more appropriate?
(Do people buy it on special occasions, etc.)
5. Is there any particular fruit or vegetable in which organic is preferred? For example, do people really want organic tomatoes but don't care about organic carrots?
6. If a shopper sees fruits and vegetables with a sign saying "locally-grown," what does that term mean? How local is local?
Is it the same thing as organic? If not, how does it differ?
7. (Explore the concept of trying to introduce a Farmer's Market display in grocery stores.) For example, have you gone to a Farmers' Market?
Is it the same as organic?
Would a Farmers' Market within a grocery store work?
8. Does any of what we've talked about apply to meat and dairy products?

D. WRAP-UP AND CONCLUSIONS (20 minutes)

1. Let's suppose that I'm really interested in getting people to purchase fruits and vegetables that are grown in ways that are more healthful to consumers and more friendly to the environment. You are my team of consultants. I'M NOT HERE.

How can I increase my sales? What could a display within a grocery store say about organic products? I want you, as a team, to prepare a list of ideas and discuss it among yourselves (pretend I'm not here).

Also, try to get them to answer the following: What could a display within a grocery store say about organic products?

2. Finally, is there anything else you would like to say?
3. Thank you very much for spending this time here today. Your comments and insights will be very helpful for the research being conducted. If you have any questions about your participation in this project, feel free to contact me at the address shown on the consent form.

REFERENCES

Harris, Brian, with David Burress and Sharon Eicher. 2000. *Demands for Local and Organic Produce: a Brief Review of the Literature*, Lawrence KS: University of Kansas, Institute for Public Policy and Business Research, Report 254A

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