

Making the Right Choice: Promoting Sustainable Food Consumption through Consumer Awareness

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Introduction

Consumers have become increasingly disconnected with their food as America's food system grows larger and continues to devastate the environment. The problem here is that consumers may not know how their consumption habits affect the world around them. The food system makes it difficult to know if a certain food was produced in a sustainable manner or not and most people do not know where or how a food was produced. If information about food production is not easily accessible, then consumers cannot shop responsibly. When people make conscious choices at the grocery store, they are using their dollar as a vote which collectively could change the way that food is produced resulting in more sustainable foods being more easily found in the aisles of the grocery store.

If all these problems plague the typical grocery store and blind the average consumer, then what more information do consumers need and how can sustainable food consumption be promoted to advocate for sustainable food production? Through communicating more information about sustainable food production to consumers through programs and education that foster awareness along with support from policies; consumers can advocate for changes in the grocery store and sustainable food production and consumption can be promoted more effectively.

Methods

In order to answer these questions, original research was conducted at the Minnesota Street Market and the Coborn's grocery store in St. Joseph to help understand the problem on a local level. To conduct this research, customers voluntarily filled out a short survey of four questions regarding their consumption habits surrounding sustainable food as well as their own input on the main questions of information about and the promotion of sustainable food.

To help further explain the problem, other secondary literature, studies and sources were used to help set up the background information. In addition, programs and grocery stores promotion of sustainable food in attempt to alleviate the problem was researched to support the findings to the solution.



Figure 1: MN ST Market Logo



Figure 2: Coborn's Logo

Results

Question 1: Do you consider whether a food was produced with sustainable methods or not when you purchase it? Why or why not?

- The overwhelming majority of consumers valued the sustainability of food.
- Only a few did not consider how a food was produced to be important.
- A few people answered with 'sometimes.'

Question 2: What is your biggest factor for not purchasing sustainable food?

- The high cost of sustainable food was the top reason.
- A lack of availability and accessibility was the second most common answer.
- A lack of information about food production was third most common.

Question 3: What more information would you like/need to make sustainable food choices?

Basic information: Consumers wanted to know what it means to define something as sustainable, organic or local. Other common results were wanting to know whether foods are GMO free, or about organic food production.

Information about the cost factor: consumers answered that they want access to "knowledge about price comparisons to sustainable versus conventional food."

Environmental impact information: Included in their answers was a desire for information about "where and how food was made," "how it's produced, how much water is used", "the distance a food travels," if it produced with chemicals, and "a way to see how it affects the environment."

Outliers: Some people concluded that they did not need any more information because it "is not the roadblock for me" or "I know enough about it, but it needs to be easy to get." Seven surveys indicated no answer.

Question 4: What would be the best way to promote this information?

Labels: Many consumers answered that labels on products which are more visible and explain how and where it is produced would help to prevent green-washing.

The Internet: Consumers answered that learning about the food they purchase on the internet and face to face with people will help them learn about food products and how they are produced. Websites can be the future for deciding what to put in a grocery cart. For example, a beef company called Le Fermier provides internet access and a telephone number to call, consumers had easier times learning about their food and the perceived availability and positive attitudes were increased.¹

Grassroots and community-based solutions: Consumers discussed community-based solutions when they wrote they would like to see "more farmers/local markets," "education in schools, programs to help low income families have access to sustainable food," handouts, films, advertising, radio and posters around the community.

Outliers: Answers that did not fit into a category included: "I learn best on my own, but I love the idea of a physical presentation, maybe incorporating it into everyday things," or "through every available channel." Some answers expressed that changes will be made through tragedy such as how there could be a "people collapse" similar to the beehive collapse. Five surveys indicated no answer.



Figure 3: Produce Aisles at Coborn's



Figure 4: Produce section at MN ST Market



Figure 5: An exchange at the St. Joseph Farmer's Market.

Conclusion

Once the promotion of sustainable consumption is improved by increasing information accessibility for consumers, issues revolving around unsustainable food production can shift towards less environmentally degrading methods. Consumers do not change their individual values day to day. However, with the support of companies like Le Fermier and their internet information and groups like Eostre Organics who foster sustainable agriculture, then positive restructuring can be sustained.

Through a combination of different methods to promote sustainable consumption, consumers can gain the knowledge they need to make informed choices. No single solution will solve such a complex problem since the food system is composed of intertwining pathways that are almost impossible to trace back to the beginning. Together however, different solutions such as the internet, grassroots and community based organizations to aid individual responsibility can fill the ambiguous distance that is growing between the production and consumption of food. Consumers being misinformed, uneducated and confused about how their food is grown can be turned around by this combination of promotions to change the way they shop. The food industry will only continue growing and producing food in a way that is unsustainable until the general public with government support demands a change. People simply have to gain the power because knowledge sustains change.

Sources

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