The perception of organic values and ways of communicating them in mid-scale values based food chains

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Abstract: The rise of the organic sector in the past has led several businesses, cooperations and enterprises to prosperous growth. Organic products are gaining more and more popularity and proof successfully their ability to hold ground against conventional products on supermarket shelves. The crucial question remains how to maintain the original quality principles and values associated with the organic sector in times of over proportional growth. The growing distance between consumers and producers reduces obviously the possibilities for direct feedback loops which in turn has consequences for farmers' identification with their products at the point of sale.

These issues encouraged partners from 10 different countries, to examine within the frame of the Core Organic ERA-net Project 'HealthyGrowth' factors supporting and hindering integrity and trust within growing organic businesses. The project focusses on mid-scale values-based food chains as a potentially promising alternative between direct marketing and anonymous conventional marketing channels.

This paper combines a review of scientific literature on values associated with organic products by consumers and producers with the 'Detailed Case Study Descriptions' provided by project partners to assist case study selection. This shall allow answering the following questions:

What are qualities and values that stakeholders along the value chain want to communicate and how can they successfully be communicated down- as well as upstream? How can effective communication substitute face to face relations in terms of relationship and trust?

Keywords: organic values, mid-scale value chains, communication, convention theory

Introduction

"We all must keep figuring out ways to better communicate to customers and consumers the values behind our products", says Doc Hatfield, founder of the US co-op Natural Country Beef referring to the challenging task to successfully deliver the values behind organic products to consumers (Stevenson & Lev, 2013). Especially in times of conventionalization and globalization threatening the organic sector this is gaining increasing importance and raises issues about growing without corrupting certain quality principles and values of the organic sector while maintaining identification of farmers with their products and communicating values and motives related to organic.

The organic sector had been originally known for selling many if not most products directly to consumers. This means that producers and consumers met physically either at the farm, a small shop or weekly farmers markets with the possibility to get information and give feedback. While this entailed negative implications for the farmers, like huge time requirements or limited sales volumes, the direct feedback often outweighed these restrictions. The "potential for interaction and transparency in this form of relationship delivers accountability and trust, and, through this, security and confidence – qualities that can only be assumed, or accepted as given, without this interaction" (Mount, 2011; 109).

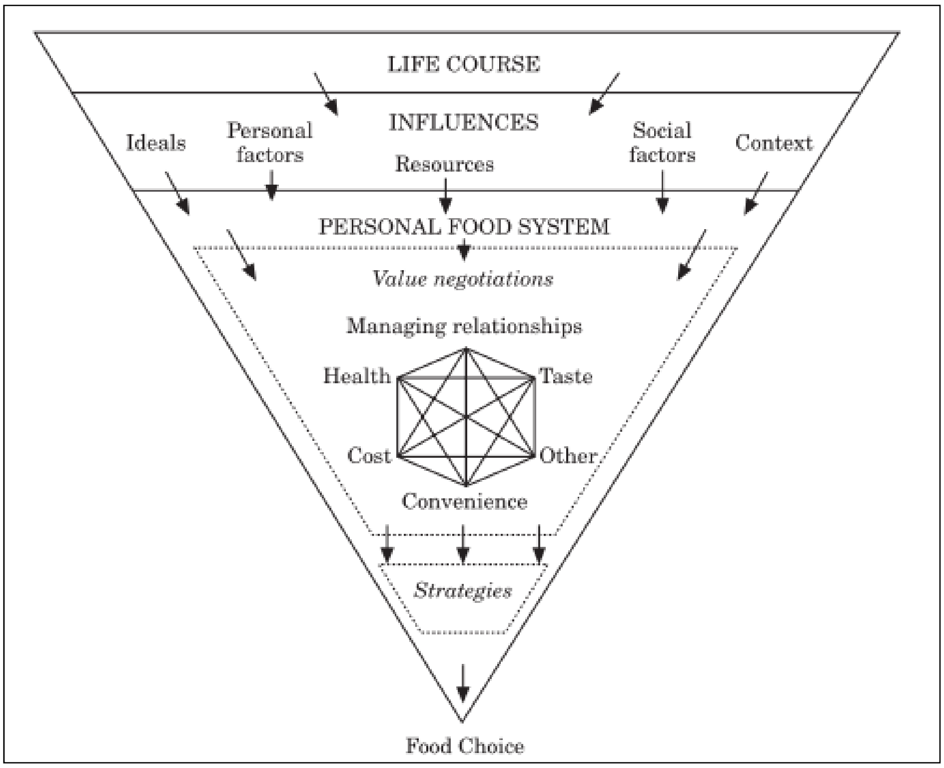
In the course of market development however, bigger, impersonal and more standardized distribution channels satisfy the demand for organic products which have established themselves in the broad society. In Austria for instance, in 2010 almost 70% of organic sales were effected through retailer stores (BMLFUW, 2010; 53). For producers the market increased but the possibility to communicate with consumers and to receive feedback on their satisfaction with product quality decreased. Recently there is a growing number of enterprises which aim to combine the advantages of bigger market channels with the benefits of close producer-consumer interactions. Often these enterprises associate with other partners to form new types of mid-scale values based chains that want to combine values with volume. This paper, thus tries to answer the following questions: [1] What are the values attached to organic products within mid-scale values-based food chains by producers as well as consumers and [2] how can the virtues of direct marketing be retained in indirect marketing chains? Those questions are crucial to answer in order to manage communication in expanding food chains and provide helpful answers how communication can contribute to maintain trust, integrity, confidence, credibility and identification between all actors involved. Hence to answer these questions we have made a literature review of relevant studies in Europe and the US.

According to Stevenson et al. (2011), mid-scale organic food chains are characterized by values attached to products *and* values associated to the kind of relations between actors along the supply chain. In general our literature search revealed that there is a lack of studies focusing on the relationships between actors along organic values based chains. Therefore, in the frame of this paper, we focus on values of organic production attached to products. But even this seems to be more profoundly researched on the consumer side than on the side of producers or other actors along the food chain. We found a number of studies dealing with the question why farmers convert to organic, but these questions target more their actual attitude towards work and life and not the values they see incorporated in their products. Therefore we restrict ourselves to values that consumers perceive related to organic products and try to elicit the values of producers indirectly by analyzing their motives and attitudes to cultivate their land organically.

Theories on categorizing values

The literature review yielded various theoretical approaches to identify and cluster consumer's buying behavior: For instance Schwartz' values theory and the theory of planned behavior (TPB), (Aertsens et.al 2009), the food choice process model' of Furst et al. (1996; 251) and finally convention theory (Boltanski and Thèvenot, 1991; 1999). In the following we briefly present the two most fitting approaches we integrated for our categorisation.

Figure 1: The food-choice process model from Furst et al. (1996) adapted by Connors (2001;190)



The ‘food-choice-process model’ developed by Furst et al. (1996; 251), here (see fig.1) in a slightly adapted form, presents three main factors that influence people’s final food choice. A ‘life course’ represents personal roles and the social, cultural and physical environment which fundamentally determine the final food choice. The life course generates a set of influences like ideals, personal or social factors, resources and the food context. These influences inform and shape people’s personal food system, including conscious value negotiations and unconsciously operationalized strategies that may occur in a food-related choice situation around the six categories (managing relationships, health, cost, taste, convenience and other) displayed. Last but not least it is important to note that people in their value negotiations always have to prioritize conflicting values and constantly keep them in balance with respect to their life situation (Connors et al., 2001). This means that people’s food choices are dynamic and get constantly re-negotiated and adapted according to the respective situation.

Figure 2: The seven worlds of the Convention Theory (Source: Own compilation after Thèvenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000).

Worlds	Examples of Indicators
Market	economy, price/cost, availability
Industry	technical efficiency, professionalism, hygiene standards, competence
Civic	collective welfare, social justice, equity (e.g. ‘fair price’), solidarity, rural development
Domestic	tradition, familiarity, closeness, trust relations
Emotion/Inspiration	personal enrichment, fulfillment, well-being, health
Opinion	reputation, name, prestige
Green	preservation of environment, ecological sustainability, animal wel-

A similar model of categorization was elaborated by Boltanski and Thèvenot (1991) with their ‘Convention Theory’. Their basic assumption is that actors base their argumentations on distinct sets of justifications – “conventions of quality” (also called “worlds”) – along a certain set of criteria. Initially Boltanski and Thèvenot distinguished six categories (“market”, “industrial”, “civic", "domestic", "emotions" and "opinion"). Later Thèvenot, Moody and Lafaye (2000) extended the original set with the "green" convention. Convention theory, while including most of the other values listed by Schwartz (2006) (i.e. hedonism which can be allocated to the Convention of Emotion/Inspiration or benevolence which fits into the Green Convention), pays attention to more general justifications of purchasing behaviour, where considerations of price, technical efficiency or professionalism, as potential value attributes of the industrial and market sphere, is given equal space and relevance. Furthermore, the value negotiations listed in Furst's model can fully be integrated into convention theory. Health and taste concerns can be included in the category of Emotion/Inspiration, cost aspects are displayed in the 'Market' category whereas convenience can be allocated to the 'Industrial Convention. In this respect the convention theory provides a broad and useful tool to assess values. Haas, (2010) used it for instance as an appropriate framework for the explanation of cognitive and evaluative processes around aspects of "organic food quality".

The consumer perspective

Health

A number of quantitative studies come to the conclusion that health (often linked also to 'food safety) is the strongest motive for purchasing organic food (Schifferstein and Oude Ophuis, 1998, 2001; Chinnici et al., 2002; Chryssohoidis and Krystallis, 2005; Botonaki et al., 2006). These results are additionally confirmed by qualitative studies (i.e. in focus group discussions, laddering techniques) (Connors et al., 2001; Harper and Makatouni, 2002; Makatouni, 2002; Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002; Padel and Foster, 2005). Also other researchers have found a significant relation between consumer's health-related attitudes and their purchase of organic food (Magnusson et al. 2003; McEachern and Willock, 2004; Durham and Andrade 2005; Midmore et al. 2005; Stobbelaar et al. 2007).

However, health claims' (addressing the Emotion/Inspiration Convention) may not be used in communication strategies for organic food and farming due to legal restrictions (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011; 124). Furthermore, while the claim that organic farming benefits the environment is generally accepted, the assumption that organic products would be healthier or safer compared to conventional ones remains an issue of emotional debate (see for example the reactions to the Stanford study of Smith-Spangler et al. 2012 by Benbrock, 2012).

While it has been demonstrated that organic practices may impact the nutrient content and that organic food consumption may reduce exposure to pesticide residues and to antibiotic-resistant bacteria (Smith-Spangler, 2012; 359), there is a lack of evidence showing that there are measurable beneficial impacts on health (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011; 124 quoted from Seal and Brandt, 2007). Thus the potential health benefits are multivariable and cannot be directly transformed into a message that organic food can contribute to better health.

Environment

Consumers often perceive organic as an environmentally friendly mode of production ('Green Convention) as well as including intrinsic quality and safety characteristics (see i.e. Vindigni et al., 2002; 625) like sustainable soil/land management and hygienic processing standards (Industrial Convention). On the other hand environmental concerns have a positive effect on shaping consumer's perceptions and attitudes towards organic (Schifferstein and Oude Ophuis, 1998; Magnusson et al., 2003; Durham and Andrade, 2005; Midmore et al., 2005; Padel and Foster, 2005; Stobbelaar et al., 2007).

Other values

Sensory properties (tastes better), food safety and ethical concerns are mentioned as further important values (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011; 124; quoted from Tregear et al., 1994; Chinnici et al., 2002; Magnusson et al., 2003; Baker et al., 2004; Lockie et al., 2004; Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & Huylenbroeck, 2009b quoted from Thøgersen, 2007). Besides, animal welfare is for instance reported as an important motivation for buying organic meat (Harper and Makatouni, 2002; McEachern and Willock, 2004).

Differences according to country and customer group

However, aside from the health aspect, values appear to differ according to country. In Sweden (Magnusson et al., 2001), Denmark (Stobbelaar et al. 2007; Hjelmar, 2010) or Italy (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002) studies could show, that regarding purchasing arguments for organic food, taste is a stronger motive applied by consumers in these countries compared to other parts of Europe. A study by Chinnici et al. (2002; 191) found out that in Sicily apparently also stimuli like curiosity, novelty or excitement can play a role. This phenomenon is better known under the term "exploratory buying behavior tendency [EBBT]".

In turn, Chryssohoidis and Krystallis (2005) among their Greek consumer group and Zanoli/Naspetti (2002) among Italians found out that care for the environment and nature are less relevant for organic food purchase. A study by Baker et al. (2004) revealed similarly for UK consumers that they made no connection between organic food consumption and care for the environment nor would they buy organic because it supports the local economy or makes them "feel good" (Padel & Foster, 2005; 618). In contrast to that Brown et al. (2009; 183) showed that in the UK consumers address environmental concerns by favoring local products that have travelled less food miles. On the other hand, for consumers in Denmark and Germany values like animal welfare and environmental protection seem to play a crucial role (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011 quoted from Wier et al., 2008; Alvensleben, 2001). Animal welfare was found to be also important for consumers in Austria, Italy, UK and Switzerland whereas another study came to the conclusion that in these countries local production, regionality or to support farmers by paying them a fair price are additional values for consumers, more important than environmental concerns (Zander et al., 2010; 6; Zander, Stolz, & Hamm, 2013; 138)

Finally, there are differences between regular and occasional buyers as the first group ranks environment and social responsibility higher than the later according to studies by Magnusson et al. (2001), Zanoli and Naspetti (2003), Padel and Foster (2005), Krystallis et al. (2008) and Mondelaers et al. (2009). Furthermore, to pick out and separate exactly the values of the merely organic consumers is sometimes difficult as the literature review revealed that the motives of organic consumers overlap with 'locavores' (Green Convention) and those focusing on small-scale farmers (Civic Convention) or traditional foods (Domestic Convention) (Haas 2010).

The producer perspective

Studies focusing on what producers associate with organic are primarily qualitative and deal more with questions on the work motivation of farmers. However values can then often be deducted from their results. In general farmer's main purpose to produce organic consists of a mix of several reasons. According to a statewide quantitative survey of organic farmers in Washington (Goldberger, 2011; 290) farmers believe that organic is environmentally (e.g. promoting soil conservation, reducing toxins released into the environment, protecting water resources and biodiversity), socially (e.g., establishing relationships of trust with consumers, protecting human health, providing safe working conditions) and last but not least also economically (e.g. providing adequate farm income, supporting local business, enhancing rural economic development, providing sufficient wages to farm workers) more sustainable (Goldberger, 2011; 292).

A qualitative study conducted on Riverford Organic Vegetables (the largest vegetable box supplier in the UK) revealed that for the farmers and actors involved in the business, decisive work motivations and values were providing and sharing 'good food' at affordable prices, by honest means (Clarke, Cloke, Barnett, & Malpass, 2008; 224), thus arguing in a mixture of emotional and civic qualities. Also to 'harvest, store and sell produce in a way that provides freshness and the best flavor as well as the best appearance' was mentioned (ebd.), which is associated to an emotional quality aspect as well. Another central part for farmers appears to be the connection between them and others ("That's so important to me when, like me, you believe the pleasure of food is greater when you know how and where it's grown'', George Watson, farmer and founder of Riverford Organic in an interview in the Sunday Times, 29/09/02, Business, p. 17).

This rather 'domestic' argumentation is also supported by the results of a statewide quantitative survey among Maryland (USA) producers, where 74% of the certified organic and 'organic interested' respondents indicated that they wanted to sell locally (Berlin, Lockeretz, & Bell, 2009; 267) as well as by a qualitative study in Hedmark County/Norway (Torjusen, et al., 2001; 211) were producers named direct sale and local consumption as one of their main goals. Similar findings are reported by Zander et al. (2010; 32) in their survey in central European countries where producers rated the regional/local production as one of the most important and also very well promotable features.

The Riverford study names besides connectedness, close relationships and trust also health aspects ("I just didn't particularly want to use chemicals") or autonomy ("I quite like paddling my own canoe and doing things my own way") (Clarke et al., 2008; 224). Health aspects appear to be also a central point for the Norwegian farmers of Hedmark (Torjusen, et al., 2001; 211). Nevertheless, economic concerns are always present as well ("[F]or me, what's successful and what's not is solely about meeting our production targets, if you like, and keeping quality good, staff retention, all those sort of day to day things" (Clarke et al., 2008; 224)).

Environmental concerns (Green Convention) are also of great importance to farmers, although there are seen some discrepancies with this attribute. On the one hand it can be very difficult to use 'nature' in the profiling and marketing of organic as the efforts need to be unambiguous and communicable (Hansen, Noe, & Højring, 2006; 164), on the other hand there are cases where farmers also relativize and even feel uncomfortable with the idealistic projections that picture organic as pre-modern (Clarke et al., 2008; 224).

To sum up, many farmers have an emotional connection to organic and they do share the concerns and values of consumers and try to comply to them. However, their priority of on-farm economic viability can obscure other goals (Ross, 2006). Furthermore, values communicated may vary according to business type. More locally producing farmers might see more value added to their product by promoting attributes like 'regionality' (Domestic Convention) others focus more on biodiversity and nature conservation (Green Convention). Nonetheless, it has to be kept in mind that all the studies bare the risk of rectification or pluralism which are both possible outcomes of discursive communication, but have very different impacts. Rectification identifies homogenous values and qualities, pluralism makes values and qualities heterogeneous and complex. Thus the values named in the studies have always to be seen in this context.

Preliminary findings and the role of communication within HealthyGrowth cases

So far we have seen that the values of consumers to buy organic products and the motives for farmers to produce organically do not differ to a large extent. A closer look at the webpages of different mid-scale organic businesses that will be analysed in the HealthyGrowth project furthermore indicated that values or attributes related to organic consumption among other stakeholders (processors, retailers etc.) in the value-chain are also quite consistent with those that could be identified above regarding consumers and producers.

The values communicated through their webpages, flyers, brochures or (where it could be found) also via film clips (i.e. on youtube, facebook etc.) do, according to convention theory, mainly employ the Civic (collective welfare, social justice, equity like “fair price”, solidarity, rural development, urban rural relation), Domestic (tradition, familiarity, closeness, trust relations) and Green (preservation of environment, ecological sustainability, environmentally friendly production, animal welfare, less use of pesticides etc.) Conventions. Nevertheless, communicating values towards the consumer is easier in direct marketing, where the awareness or feeling of sharing the same values is more present. In indirect marketing chains some values may get transformed by different intermediaries while others like trust, transparency or confidence are difficult to be credibly communicated at all.

An internal HealthyGrowth WP2 State-of-the-art Report (forthcoming) on research of organic food chains indicates, that indirect marketing chains use one or several of the following strategies:

- Bringing in again, at least occasionally, elements of personal communication to customers (i.e. during the delivery/distribution of organic boxes, via festivals/fairs or facebook or at tastings),
- Putting traceability cards at the point of sale with farmers name, and further information on the product (leaflets, flyers, brochures etc.),
- Showing pictures of the producer(s) and/or of the production side,
- Using color-coded labels,
- Placing ‘Food ambassadors’ in the stores which promote and inform about the product

It is not clear however to which extent these strategies actually deliver values. There are several angles to look at communication, be it the *content* about which the communication is about (values, prices, contractual agreements, quality issues etc.) the *form* (face-to-face, phone, written, indirect etc.) the *frequency* (daily, weekly, monthly, semi-annual etc.) or whether it is *internal* and *external.* According to Stevenson, (2013; 15), achieving a socialization and identification with the company’s culture is an important issue to succeed in a consistent story-telling containing the values. The need and ways to communicate vary, depending on size, organizational structure and business type. If a cooperative with several dozens or even hundreds of members wants to involve its members into important decisions, it has to invest more time in internal communication than a smaller one whereas for example the expenditures on external communication methods/mechanisms within local organizational structures where most of the customers are already quite familiar with a business can be kept rather low. Moreover, which ways of internal communication as well as which form, frequency and content will be used, is depending on the number of business partners one would need to talk/negotiate with upstream and downstream the value chain and might furthermore be also linked to specific interests these partners represent. Besides, for complex business structures it might be more difficult to deliver trust and transparency, evoking a kind of authentic feeling that connects consumers to producers, which obviously for many consumers is so important in direct marketing.

Conclusions

There are some outstanding values which consumers relate to organic products and their production in general, irrespectively of age, regional background or whether being a regular organic consumer or not. Other values however are not generally applicable and can vary among different types of consumers. Nevertheless aspects of communication like feedback loops for consumers to channel their acknowledgement or critique deserve more attention.

Studies on values associated to products on the producer side are rare and therefore don't paint such a dense picture as it is the case for the consumers. Besides, those studies that do include values of organic producers relate more to their motives of production and are not focusing on what values they see or want to see inherent to their products. Furthermore, the issue of relationships along the chain which constitute according to Stevenson and Pirog (2008) a decisive factor for mid-scale values based food chains, is comparably disregarded.

Therefore it is appropriate to take a closer look on how actors within the value chain communicate with each other, as for example the form of a message (print, visual, face-to-face, etc.) may determine the ways in which the message will be perceived. "[…] while it is clear that people communicate frequently with others, and that such communication has important implications for consumer behaviour, less is known about how the medium might shape the message. Does the particular channel consumers communicate through affect what they talk about and share, and if so, how?" (Berger & Iyengar, 2013; 567). But not only the medium through which communication happens requires more research, also the content and frequency can be vital. Thus, one way to overcome the impediment of upholding values or 'intangible qualities' (Mount 2011) associated to a direct exchange between producers and consumers in indirect marketing, is to increase and improve communication. This refers in particular to processes that exceed the mere exchange of goods/products and try to create the same 'intangible qualities' like trust, confidence or security at another level. These qualities are not merely bound to personal interaction only, but can also be related to a geographical region, they can be established via relationships to intermediates or be connected to emotional past experiences.

Thus, communication strategies which manage to identify the audience, select the right communication medium, present the benefits of the process and address the right values can thus be essential for the survival of organic businesses outside niche markets.

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