

Ticking the anti-globalisation box

Last year, PhD research student **Shadi Hashem** spent time at ORC investigating consumer food choices around organic food and box schemes. This involved a survey of box scheme customers to better understand how they make their food shopping decisions.

Among alternative food networks that operate in the UK, organic box schemes are the most popular and the most successful in carving a niche in the supermarket controlled organic market by holding a 12 percent share of the overall organic market sales, accounting for approximately £236 million in 2016¹.

This study investigated consumer motives to purchase from local organic box schemes with two main research questions:

1. To examine the relationship between motives and consumer awareness of problems in the agro-food system.
2. To investigate the importance of different motivational factors.

The survey

Detailed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 22 UK box-scheme customers were carried out between November 2015 and January 2016. These were customers of ten box schemes delivering in no more than a 60-mile radius from their farms. Also, a structured questionnaire was completed by a self-selecting sample of 416 box scheme customers.



Photo: Goldhill Organics

Results

The research shows that box scheme consumers are generally motivated by a variety of factors which are influenced by a range of social, economic and environmental values and moral concepts of food production and consumption. These include environmentally-friendly products, supporting local farmers, supporting small-scale family farms, and building trustworthy relations with farmers. These factors could be broadly considered as altruistic reasons for purchase, as they are not directly translating into personal benefits for the consumers. Other factors that consumers mentioned in their decision to participate in a local box scheme are regarded as personal motives, such as access to more healthy and safe food, high-quality food (in terms of taste, freshness) and convenience such as easy accessibility and availability of wide varieties of vegetables.

The study further revealed that the majority of box scheme consumers have been able to make a distinction between box schemes as a direct local sale channel to the current mainstream structure of food provisioning. They seek to move to local and organic food as they perceive it to be more 'authentic' and 'ethical,' while the 'mainstream' was more based on industrial, and retail interests. In particular, the research identified a number of generic issues of concerns amongst box scheme consumers which covers various ecological, economic, social, and individualistic concerns (Table 1).

Table 1: Box scheme consumers, problem recognition and derived motivation

Issues mentioned		Issue description	Motivation
Food safety	GM	Concern about the possible impact on health of GM food and on the environment. In particular 'unexpected consequences' of GM.	Eating healthier food by consuming more organic to reduce exposure to toxic substances for themselves and family.
	Pesticides/agro-chemicals	Reliance on synthetic pesticides and fertilizers to maximise production, regardless of environmental and health impacts.	
Economic	Decline of small-scale family farms	Concern about supermarket policies, particularly price squeezes, reliance on cheap imports and specifications that could increase food waste.	Support small-scale organic and local farmers to ensure their viability by creating more sale opportunities (successful direct sale to food consumer) and a solid customer base.
Environmental	Food miles	Negative environmental issues associated with the major food retail/industrial food sector.	Minimising food miles was central to consumers' decision to participate in local box schemes.
		Negative environmental implications of food trade globalization such as global warming/climate change, which result from the reliance on fossil fuel in transportation.	Eating in season: consumers revealed a strong motivation to eat more in-season food. For environmental reasons and to enhance their sense of pleasure around food consumption.
Social	Disconnection from where food has come from	Concerns about not knowing where their money goes, where food has been grown, and how it has been produced.	Direct contact with food producers (farmers) and the land through farm visits or by knowing where their food has been produced and/or sourced from. Helped consumers to learn about production methods, market issues, access to greater range and new vegetables.
	Disconnection from who produces the food	They stressed that losing the sense of connection by not knowing who is behind their food and where it has been sourced from is the reason why they started to search for more local food to build this sense of connection again with the soil and farms, and the economic and the social conditions of those who take the effort and burden to produce for them.	The consumers' experience of having direct access to food producers and any information that they may require helped consumers to build a trustworthy relation with food producers.



"This is why I buy from a box scheme: I want to know how my food is produced, and what money goes to actual producers. Being careful who is affected by your shopping, what the value chain looks like and who is involved in production and under which conditions, for that reason I avoid shopping at specific supermarkets and for some products." (S, 50, Female)

"I think that small scale producers are being squeezed, those people who tend to work round the clock actually to produce food for us, these people who enjoy what they do which is farming, they are doing it because they like doing it and that is what impresses me but I feel sorry for them as they don't get adequate returns for their efforts. They tend to be organic farmers and they tend to grow what people want." (P, 42 Male)

"It is great keeping in touch with farmers who are the real people behind the food you eat and I enjoy receiving a direct monthly newsletter from them, going to their website and being always updated about what is going on out there on the farm, learning about the different vegetable varieties growing in each season and having knowledge about it." (A, 31, Female)

"I prefer to buy produce that comes from the local area, as we are conscious of food miles, so I would try not to buy fruit and vegetables that have travelled around the world. That's a core factor really that it has not travelled very far." (R, 47, Female)

"I'm not easy about genetic modification because I don't want species moving around having unexpected effects on each other. I mean with genetic modification you are changing something without being able to predict the consequences." (A, 42, Female)

"Taste is something important to me, taste depends on ripeness and maturity, doesn't it? The best thing about the veggie boxes is that they are picked a day or two before the delivery so they are mature and fully ripened." (D, 65, Male)

"The question is how are we going to achieve any changes? It actually has to start at a grassroots level. If two people in every street in this country said we are not going to buy eventually maybe there would be some impact. But in so many ways the world is so numb. So, yes one has to take an individual stance I think." (J, 60 plus, Male)

"We are reliant on importing and that is why we are not manufacturing anymore and that's why I care about getting things back to the local scale as far as one can. Maybe that's all one can do? That's very sad. Because if we let things go without fighting, it can drive people out of agriculture." (J, 25, Female)

When the issues identified were tested with a larger sample of box scheme consumers, most were relevant and important to them. However, when questioned about the factors that they are most sensitive about:

- 57% revealed that they would boycott products that have a negative impact on the environment, including products with high food miles and out of season, excluding products that can't be grown in the UK such as bananas, coffee and tea.
- The second most highlighted reason was related to food safety concerns (42%), associated with pesticides and chemicals, processed and GM food.
- In regard to the most importance factor that they would consider to avoid buying at specific food shops or brands; unfair deals to producers were the most stated reason with a share of 53%.

comment@organicresearchcentre.com

Respondents repeatedly criticised supermarket behaviour; the unclear provenance of food, and low retail prices, as reasons to consider avoiding buying from them (apart from those they perceive to have high sustainability and ethical records). The majority revealed that reducing their dependence on supermarkets was a main reason for buying from small-scale local shops, box schemes, farmers' markets and co-ops.

Discussion and conclusions

The results shows that consumers' decisions to participate and commit to box schemes were informed by a number of discourses ranging simultaneously from political or ethical (public) to individual (private). It was found that in seeking local and organic small-scale production systems, consumers were explicitly addressing their desire to bypass some anxieties they perceived to be largely associated with globalisation and the forces of capitalism.

This suggests that these consumers have deliberately engaged in ethical or political behaviour by participating in a direct sales channel to avoid perceived issues with the mainstream food provisioning, global trade, and the industrial food sector. It appears that consumers were completely aware and interested in knowing the chain through which their food has passed, and willing to commit and continue to support it because it helps in reinforcing their belief in wholesome and authentic food.

Also, consumers were confident in box schemes reviving traditional values around food shopping and food consumption. They believed that their participation could make a difference in regard to various environmental, political and personal issues. Participation in a box scheme could be seen as a response to the perceived ethical, political and environmental implications of food market globalisation and large scale agri-business strategies—a resistance action through consumers 'doing their bit' towards environmental protection by redirecting their custom towards organic local direct food channels^{2,3}.

References

1. Soil Association (2016) Organic Market Report 2016
2. Szmigin I, Carrigan M, McEachern MG (2009) The conscious consumer: taking a flexible approach to ethical behaviour. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33(2), 224-231
3. Micheletti M, Stolle D (2007). Mobilizing consumers to take responsibility for global social justice. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611(1): 157-175.

Recommendations to box scheme operators:

- Maintain regular communication with your customers.
- Maintain high transparency about your production methods to boost consumers' confidence about authenticity and your own credibility.
- Provide customers with price comparisons to supermarkets.
- Provide customers with information about the role of local, organic production and consumption in reducing negative environmental and economic impacts from agriculture and food trade, improving viability of small British organic farms.
- Continuously review and upgrade your marketing strategies and the services you offer to maximise customer convenience and loyalty in the face of increasing competition.