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**USING PUBLIC RELATIONS TECHNIQUES TO MARKET ORGANIC FOOD:  
UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR**

by

Catherine Elise Girone

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Public Relations & Advertising  
College of Communication  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
at  
Rowan University

Thesis Chair: Dr. FitzGerald

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## **Abstract**

Catherine Elise Girone  
USING PUBLIC RELATIONS TECHNIQUES TO MARKET ORGANIC FOOD:  
UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR

2011/12

Suzanne FitzGerald, Ph.D.  
Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purposes of this research were to determine which consumers tend to purchase fresh organic food and which consumers tend to purchase packaged organic food, which type of messaging organic food distributors rely on to entice customers and which messages work most effectively to promote organic food consumption, and which channels different organic consumers use to gain knowledge about organic food. Implications for organic food marketing are discussed.

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## **Chapter One Introduction**

Food labels are taking over our food packaging. From Animal Welfare Approved to Seafood Safe, there are over 100 different types of food labels that inform us about the safety and background of our food, according to Consumer Reports (2011). “Organic” food is one of the more popular food designations, but there is a lot of conflicting research about how much consumers actually know about organic food, what types of people buy organic food, and why they choose organic over conventional food. Determining which types of consumers already buy organic food and their different motivations for consuming organic food will help organic food marketers best determine what messages will increase organic food consumption and what channels will be most effective.

### **Background**

Organic food is not a new phenomenon. According to Allen (2007), organic food and farming’s social presence began as a counterculture movement in the 1960s as a reaction to growing concerns about environmental issues and the increasing use of chemicals in food production. Historically, organic food was typically produced on small, family-run independent farms that rejected conventional farming practices and sold their food locally at small specialty stores, farmers’ markets, and roadside stands.

In the late 1980s, the large, natural-foods supermarkets we know today began opening as the organic food market blossomed due to its growing popularity and incorporation into the mainstream food market. By the mid 1990s, retail sales of organic food totaled nearly \$4 billion, and by 2002 it was an \$11 billion industry (Allen 2007).

Organic food sales are even surviving the economic downturn. As noted by Mitchell (2011), interest in natural and organic foods is growing, and according to Stolz (2011), organic food is increasingly available in conventional retail outlets as a result of the continuous growth in the organic market. The Organic Trade Association's 2011 Organic Industry Survey confirms this growth: U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to \$26.7 billion in 2010. Sales in 2010 represented 7.7 percent growth over 2009 sales. Organic fruits and vegetables experienced the highest growth in sales during 2010, up 11.8 percent over 2009 sales. Organic dairy, the second-largest category, experienced nine percent growth to achieve a value of \$3.9 billion. Organic food and beverage sales represented approximately 4 percent of overall food and beverage sales in 2010. Leading were organic fruits and vegetables, now representing over 11 percent of all U.S. fruit and vegetable sales. Currently, the countries with the largest organic food markets are the United States, Germany, and France, while the highest per capita organic food consumption is in Denmark, Switzerland, and Austria.

This rapid growth has caused a dramatic shift in the types and numbers of organic food retailers, manufacturers, and distributors, as well as widened the customer base. Because of organic foods' growing popularity, there is an increased desire to research and analyze the U.S. organic marketing system, according to Dimitri (2009). The 2008 Farm Act, which allocated \$5 million for initial spending on expanded organic food data collection and an additional \$5 million per year of authorized findings, was put into place by the USDA. The Act gives researchers funds to collect and distribute price reports relating to organic foods, analyze the production, handling, distribution, retail, and consumer purchasing patterns of organic food, and report statistical analysis on

organically produced foods. According to Dimitri (2009), there is a particular interest in researching what types of consumers purchase organic food.

### **Legal Definition**

To be certified organic, products must be grown and manufactured in a manner that adheres to standards set by the country in which they are sold. Overall, organic operations must demonstrate that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using only approved substances. The 2002 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Standards regulation also requires farmland to be dedicated to organic farming methods for three years before that farm's products can be labeled as organic.

In the United States, the National Organic Program (NOP), a segment of the USDA, is the federal regulatory framework responsible for governing organic food and enforcing said regulatory framework. The U.S. legal definition of organic food was formally institutionalized in October 2002 by a set of certification standards created and implemented by the USDA. Organic food is defined as food that is grown or processed without the use of conventional inputs of modern, industrial agriculture, including pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), irradiation, or food additives (Allen 2007).

Organic fruits and vegetables must be grown with ecologically based practices, such as biological pest management and composting. Soil fertility and crop nutrients must be managed through crop rotations, cover crops, and supplemented with manure and crop waste material and allowed synthetic substances. Organic fruits and vegetables must

be stored and shipped separately from conventionally grown produce and packed in containers that are free from synthetic fungicide, preservative, or fumigant. (Dimitri 2009) Organic grains, oilseeds and legumes are grown in the same way as organic produce, and must also be kept separate from conventionally grown products of the same type. (Dimitri 2009)

Organic dairy products come from the milk of animals raised under organic management. Organic-milk-producing cows are kept separate from conventional dairy cows and are not given growth hormones or antibiotics. All organically raised cows must have access to pasture, the outdoors, shade, shelter, exercise areas, fresh air, and direct sunlight. Organic dairy cows must be raised organically for one year prior to having their milk labelled “organic.” The process by which the milk is bottled and the cheese, ice cream, yogurt, and other dairy products are packaged must also be certified as organic and must be kept separate from conventional dairy products. (Dimitri 2009)

Other animal-based organic food, such as meat and eggs, must come from animals that are not given any antibiotics or hormones throughout their entire lives. This livestock must have outdoor access and be fed 100 percent organic feed (Allen 2007). These animals must be raised separately from their conventionally raised counterparts, and consume 100 percent organically produced feed. The animals must have access to the outdoors, shade, exercise areas, fresh air, and direct sunlight, and their bedding must be clean and dry. (Dimitri 2009)

## **Labeling**

Organic foods have strict regulations when it comes to their labeling. Farm and processing operations that grow and process more than \$5,000 gross income from the sales of organic agricultural products must be certified by USDA-accredited certifying agents. Farms with gross income from organic sales totaling \$5,000 or less are exempt from this certification; however, they are still required to meet all certified organic grower and handler requirements to maintain the organic integrity of the organic products they sell. People who label a product “organic” when they know the product does not meet USDA standards can be fined up to \$11,000 for each violation.

In 2009, *The Washington Post* came out with an article that broke down the differences between levels of organic products. Products labeled “100 percent organic” are an entirely organic item or a product made of entirely organic items, as defined by the USDA. Products with this label must show an ingredient list, the name and address of the handler (bottler, distributor, importer, manufacturer, packer, processor) of the finished product, and the name and seal of the organic certifier.

The “USDA Organic” label can be placed on foods that are made up of 95 percent organically grown and produced ingredients. The five percent non-organic ingredients could include additives or synthetics if they are on an approved list. The label must contain a list that identifies the organic, as well as the non-organic, ingredients in the product, and the name of the organic certifier.

The “Made with Organic” label indicates that the product contains at least 70 percent organic ingredients. Again, the label must include a list of the organic and non-organic ingredients, as well as the name of the organic certifier.

If a product contains less than 70 percent organic ingredients, the word organic cannot be displayed anywhere on the packaging or display panel. The word organic can only be used on the ingredient label in relation to one or more specific organic ingredients.

According to Knudson (2007), the USDA Organic rule, which makes these specifications and came into effect in 2002, provides assurance to customers that these products are what they seem to be. Before 2002, there were no strict organic labeling laws, which led to confusion about what “organic” really meant.

Since 1989, the Quality Assurance International (QAI) has grown to be one of the leading accredited certifying agents under the USDA’s National Organic Program with several compliance accreditations by the USDA, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan and Conseil des Appellations Agroalimentaires du Quebec (Canada). QAI's programs provide certification services throughout the supply chain, assuring compliance with organic standards for agricultural producers, food-processing facilities, integrated manufacturing operations, contract packing operations, traders, distributors, retailers, and consumers (QAI 2011).

### **Problem Statement and Significance**

The purpose of this research is to increase the understanding of what messages entice consumers to purchase organic foods and through which channels these consumers prefer to receive these messages. Current research has focused on finding the “typical organic consumer,” but it seems that there may be different types of organic consumers that each purchase organic food for different reasons. These different types of consumers

need to be studied and the types of organic food they buy need to be determined so that organic food marketers can place the correct messaging in the correct channels.

Public relations practitioners in the food sector will benefit by knowing which types of consumers purchase different types of organic food, whether fresh or packaged, because research shows that a different type of consumer buys each respective product (Regine 2011). Practitioners will also benefit from knowing whether positive or negative framing messages affect consumers, because then they will know which types of messaging to include in which channels, such as food packaging, health magazines, cookbooks and more.

### **Delimitations**

This researcher will not study individuals who purchase organic products other than foods and beverages, nor will the researcher study consumers of purely traditional, or non-organic, food. This researcher will not study the entire universe of organic food consumers due to time and monetary restraints.

### **Hypotheses**

**H1. It is expected that consumers of fresh organic food are more likely to be consistent organic food consumers.**

“Organic shoppers should be subdivided into those who buy organic foods occasionally and those who buy organic foods on every shopping trip, to identify whether there are substantial differences in these two groups,” (Zepeda 2007). Previous research has shown significant differences in the attitudes of consistent and occasional organic

food shoppers: for example, consistent food shoppers tend to be more environmentally-friendly and health conscious in general, while occasional food shoppers typically buy organic food for primarily health reasons, not environmental reasons. This researcher aims to find out if these differences are consistent with this new research and to discover whether there are more differences between consistent and occasional organic food consumers.

**H2. It is expected that consumers of packaged organic food are more likely to be occasional organic food consumers.**

“A few studies have attempted to develop profiles and descriptions of regular consumers of organic food [...] Yet many organic products have become commonplace in conventional supermarkets. Little knowledge exists pertaining to the motivations and characteristics of the occasional organic food consumer” (Hughner et al. 2007) This researcher will explore the new packaged organic food trend that is permeating conventional food stores to assess whether occasional organic consumers, who typically value convenience over health and environment reasons, are the more likely candidates for packaged organic food purchase. This researcher will also attempt to determine attitudes and behaviors of this largely unstudied group of consumers.

**H3. It is expected that organic food distributors rely on positive framing messages more than negative framing messages to entice consumers.**

“Using actual advertising messages or statements from organic food packages could test the practical application of positive/negative framing. An investigation of the



type of message framing that is currently in use by organic food marketers may reveal opportunities to improve strategies currently used by companies,” (Gifford 2005). This researcher will inquire about which channels organic food consumers use most regularly to gain information about organic food. This researcher will then conduct a content analysis on these channels to see whether positively- or negatively-framed messages are currently used.

**H4. It is expected that consistent organic consumers use a more diverse selection of channels to research organic food.**

“Rather than reflecting demographics, education may reflect knowledge and information-seeking behavior. This would imply that in future studies, one might wish to utilize variables that directly measure knowledge and information-seeking behavior rather than education,” (Zepeda 2009). Since previous studies have found a correlation between education level and organic food consumption, yet the correlation differs across several studies, this researcher will attempt to discover whether consistent organic consumers have high information-seeking tendencies. This researcher will ask consistent and occasional organic consumers how they find information about food, how often, and through how many different channels.

**Procedure**

This researcher will also do an in-depth interview with a manager at Whole Foods, Kristen Molnar, to discover how the store advertises organic food. Molnar’s answers will be used to frame questions for a consumer survey.

This researcher will develop a survey to distributed to consistent and occasional organic food shoppers through a snowball method. This survey will include questions about where the consumer shops, what types of food the consumer prefers to buy organic, where they gain information about food, and demographics. The survey will also include a short paragraph with a positively- or negatively-framed message about organic food with questions about how these messages affected the consumer in regard to their organic food preferences.

This researcher will then perform a content analysis of the most popular channel respondents select on the survey to see if popular organic food messages are positively- or negatively-framed, and to see if the messages align with consumer attitudes about message framing and organic food.

## **Summary**

Although the organic food trend is unmistakably growing, current research cannot pinpoint exactly who is buying organic food and why. This researcher will conduct the study with the intent of discovering which types of people buy certain kinds of organic food. Regine (2011) conducted one of the few public relations-centered organic food research studies, asking whether positive or negative framing is more effective in getting consumers to purchase organic food, and this researcher will replicate some parts of that study.

To begin understanding the attitudes and behaviors of the different types of organic food consumers, it is important to delve into past research and literature about

organic food consumers and organic food public relations practices. Chapter Two details this literature review of the current research in the field.

### **Definition of Terms**

Consistent organic consumer - for the purpose of this study, a consumer who buys organic food at least weekly.

Conventional food store - a store that offers primarily traditionally grown, non-organic products

Occasional organic consumer - for the purpose of this study, a consumer who buys organic food less than once per week.

Organic food - food that is grown or processed without the use of conventional inputs of modern, industrial agriculture, including pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), irradiation, or food additives (USDA 2002).

Negative framing - messaging that presents risks or negative consequences that may be experienced if a product is not consumed (Gifford 2005).

Positive framing - messaging that presents benefits that may be gained if a product is purchased or consumed (Gifford 2005).

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Organic Consumer**

Currently, there is no clear picture of who buys organic food and why they buy it. Previous studies on organic food consumers have mixed results when it comes to the demographics of the buyers. Some researchers, such as Willer and Yuseffi (2004), found no clear linkages between organic food purchasing and gender, age, or education. Others, such as Shaffer (2002), found that organic food was more in demand for males, while Byrne et al. (1991) found that females are more likely to purchase organic food. In several studies (Dimitri 2009), age was not found to be significant. However, Shaffer (2002) found that young people are more likely to buy organic food, while Goldman and Clancy (1991) found that the middle-aged are more likely to buy organic.

Similar disparities are found when researchers study the education level of organic food consumers: Swanson and Lewis found a positive relationship between higher education and organic food consumption (1993), but Byrne et al. (1991) found the opposite, and Wilkins and Hillers (1994) found no relationship between education level and organic food consumption. Overall, despite different research results, education level has been the one factor that consistently influences the likelihood of a consumer buying organic products (Dimitri 2009). Zepeda (2007) hypothesizes that education, rather than reflecting simply a demographic, may reflect knowledge and information-seeking behavior. Zepeda found that consistent organic shoppers tended to be knowledgeable about current trends in organic food and sustainable agriculture and were more likely to gather information from the Internet, books or cookbooks than occasional or non-organic consumers. While the consistent organic consumers frequently subscribed to health and

wellness magazines, non-organic consumers know little about organic foods and do not go to great lengths to seek out information about the food that they eat or other food topics.

Another demographic often included in studies of organic food consumers is whether or not the shopper has a child and is the food provider for that child, since some studies have shown that parents are more likely to buy organic food for their children since they believe it is safer (Greene 2007). Organic baby products are commercially produced infant formulas and baby foods that have obtained organic certification. According to Greene (2007), they are often recommended as substitutes for conventionally marketed baby foods in order to reduce the amount of chemical exposure for rapidly developing infants. Since babies' bodies are smaller and their brains grow faster, they are more vulnerable to environmental toxins as they absorb more pesticides per pound of body weight than adults (Greene 2007). However, Zepeda (2007) found that consumers who had a child under the age of 18 reduced the probability that the consumer would purchase organic food. Again, demographics prove inconsistent across studies.

Other demographics that have been previously studied include whether the consumer is vegan, vegetarian, or allergic or sensitive to any foods; whether the consumer has a particular religious or political affiliation; whether the consumer enjoys cooking or cooks several times per week; and whether the consumer supports the local economy or local farmers (Hughner 2007, Zepeda 2009, Dimitri 2009).

Zepeda (2007) posits that these mixed demographic findings may be due to the studies occurring at different times in different regions of the United States as well as different countries. Another possible reason is that some studies were done on the general

population, while others target food shoppers and others even more specifically target organic food consumers.

According to Zepeda (2007), existing literature indicates that economic and demographic variables alone do not define a clear picture of the typical organic buyer, but they do reveal helpful directions to pursue in future studies: the underlying preferences and motivations for purchasing organic foods, including beliefs about the environment, personal health, animal welfare, and dietary restrictions, as well as barriers such as limited availability and lack of knowledge or trust in organic foods. Current researchers have, for the most part, focused on these underlying attitudes in behavior in their studies.

Dahm et al. (2009) conducted a study of students to determine whether positive attitudes about organic foods and other environmental issues would predict consumption of organic foods and other healthy and eco-friendly practices. As defined by Dahm (2009), eco-friendly behaviors range from purchase and consumption of organic foods, recycling, energy conservation, water conservation, driving hybrid cars or carpooling, and ozone protection. Again, there is disagreement about whether there is association between consumption of organic foods and other environmentally behaviors: Davies et al. (1995) found that consumers of organic foods did not necessarily care much about the environment, but two more recent studies (Lockie et al. 2004, Magnusson et al. 2003) found a significant relationship between organic food consumption and other environmentally friendly behaviors.

Dahm et al. (2009) focuses specifically on students because much recent literature indicates that high school students and college students have increasingly positive views

toward organic foods, yet these beliefs are not always strong enough to motivate students to purchase organic food instead of conventional food. Because the literature is unclear about whether consumer purchases are motivated by knowledge and attitudes, Dahm et al. (2009) believes the links between knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors should be explored with regard to organic foods and other environmentally conscious behaviors. This study found a significant relationship between a positive attitude about organic foods and other environmentally conscious behaviors and healthy lifestyle practices such as a healthy diet and regular exercise.

### **Possible Deterrents to Organic Consumption**

One of the main deterrents to buying organic food is the cost. Brown and Sperow (2005) estimated that the cost of an all-organic diet, even using the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, would increase expenditures by 49 percent for a family of four. Price differences between individual organic and conventional foods ranged from -74 percent to 450 percent (Zepeda 2007). Some researchers have found that organic food consumers have higher incomes, while some researchers found no relationship. While some researchers discovered that high cost is a barrier to organic food purchases, it may not necessarily be linked to income: instead, it may be linked to willingness to pay (Zepeda 2007). If consumers feel that paying a higher price for organic food is "worth it," they will spend the extra money and cut corners in other areas, but if consumers feel that conventional food is sufficient, they will purchase conventional, non-organic food, even if their income is high (Li et al. 2007).

Another major deterrent to buying organic food is a lack of availability. According to Zepeda (2007), where a consumer shops has the largest significant impact on the probability that the consumer will purchase organic foods. Few shoppers have access to food cooperatives or health food stores that primarily sell organic food. This could explain why more consumers purchase conventional food instead of organic food.

Another deterrent to buying organic food is a lack of familiarity with organic foods or brands. According to Demeritt (2009), the current renaissance in food culture has led to an increasing focus on food categories that share some similarities with organic food, such as Fair Trade, humane, cage-free or free-range options. Consumers who are not well-educated on the exact specifications of organic food may be buying these “pseudo-organics” instead of investigating true organic options. Demeritt (2009) points out that “today, consumers are confused, yet continue to be engaged by the vast array of messages, symbols and labels they encounter when making decisions about what to eat or drink and where to shop.”

Lack of trust in organic brands may also be a deterrent. In a 2009 study, Zepeda and Li conducted interviews of organic consumers, and found that many of them preferred to buy organic food from local farmers even though organics are becoming increasingly available in supermarkets. One interview respondent said, “I’m not sure you can trust the organic label at a Walmart, considering almost everything they sell is made in China...is it real or just fantasy organic?” (Zepeda and Li 2009). Studying the different preferences of consistent organic consumers and occasional organic consumers may point to significant differences in shopping venues, based on underlying attitudes about the origin of organic food.



## **Possible Reasons for Organic Consumption**

Several researchers have studied the growing demand for organic foods and have attributed this growth to different factors. One recurring factor is environmental concerns (Zepeda 2007). Environmental concern appeared throughout studies in a variety of different forms, from concern about water contamination, pollution, and energy and resource conservation (Zepeda 2007).

Another possible motivation for consumers to purchase organic foods is health concerns. The Natural Marketing Institute's 2010 Health and Wellness Trends Database shows 64 percent of US adults feel foods are less safe today because of the number of chemicals used in growing and manufacturing processes, and 56 percent feel that foods today have fewer nutrients due to soil depletion and over-processing (French 2011). According to Zepeda (2007), a series of highly publicized food scares was another huge motivation for consumers to begin purchasing organic food instead of conventional food because they believed organic food to be less threatening. Families with newborn children typically appear in this group, because as Greene (2007) points out, many families are introduced to organic food after having a child and after researching how organic food can be safer for their child's developing body. Because organic food is produced without antibiotics, GMOs or synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, many people associate organic food with positive health benefits for humans (Zepeda 2007).

Another motivation for buying organic food stems from concern about animal welfare. Organic cows, pigs, chickens and hens are all required to have a variety of "comforts" such as time at pasture, access to fresh air and sunlight, and overall better living conditions than their conventionally-raised counterparts (Dimitri 2009).

Finally, growing interest in organic food may be linked to Generation Y's universal food preferences. According to Regine (2011), Generation Y consumers tend to prefer all-natural weight control foods, anti-aging foods, protein-rich breakfast and snack foods, and health and wellness foods. Furthermore, Generation Y consumers are "optimistic about their food choices saving the planet," (Regine 2011).

### **Relevant Consumer Behavior Theory**

Since studies of demographics have thus far proved inconsistent, researchers have begun applying different theories of economics, psychology, and consumer behavior to organic food shoppers with the intent of discovering why consumers purchase organic food.

Zepeda and Li (2007) attempt to model consumers' probability of buying organic food by combining Lancaster's (1966) approach to consumer theory with Weinstein's (1988) precaution adoption process.

Lancaster (1966) suggested that when consumers purchase products, they are purchasing them in order to obtain the attributes of a particular good or service, not just quantities of these goods and services. In the case of organic food, this approach would mean that in order to determine why consumers buy organic food, researchers should discover the attributes different consumers look for, such as health benefits, environmental benefits, or others (Zepeda and Li 2007).

Weinstein (1988) originally developed his precaution adoption process to explain how people develop preventative behavior when faced with hazards, but when applied to

organic food consumption, the model offers insights into how consumers make behavior changes based on the potential hazards of not buying organic food (Zepeda and Li 2007). Weinstein's (1988) model outlines five stages that individuals go through before they actually change their current behaviors: awareness, personal connection, intention to act, opportunity, and action. According to Weinstein, "Different interventions will influence the five different stages... Thus, the perceived costs of taking an action affect whether one intends to act or takes action, have no relevance if one is not aware of the potential action. The implication is that effective communication regarding consumer choice must be targeted to the relevant stage of the audience," (1988).

Zepeda and Li (2007) modified the precaution adoption process by eliminating one of Weinstein's two stages of risk: they chose to analyze only personal risk, but to eliminate risk to others, because they had no data to support the idea that individuals were buying organic food to benefit others. Another aspect of the precaution adoption process that Zepeda and Li (2007) altered for their purposes is Weinstein's assumption that all individuals have the ability to take precautions. Although organic food availability is becoming more widespread, it is not universally accessible, making the fourth stage (opportunity) important.

Zepeda and Li (2007) assert that Lancaster's approach can be applied to any of Weinstein's five stages. This hybrid model is useful when applied to the question of who shops for organic foods because it can help explain differences between consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior. Previous researchers have been confused with the number of survey respondents who indicate a positive feeling toward organic food, yet continue to purchase conventional food. Zepeda and Li's (2007) hybrid model shows that

individuals may have awareness of an issue (Stage I), but no personal connection (Stage 2).

Zepeda and Li (2007) set out to discover which types of people actually buy organic food by creating a survey that addressed each of the five stages, and finding out which variables link these consumers to each of the five stages. In Stage I (awareness), variables measure awareness and knowledge, such as whether respondents could define organic food and the practices that go into producing organic food. The survey included true/false questions about different aspects of organic food to determine if consumers knew that organic food is produced without fertilizers, radiation, hormones, or genetically-modified organisms.

Stage II (personal connection) variables measure a respondent's personal concerns about the environment, family health, or personal health. Questions in this portion of the survey addressed whether the respondent was concerned about his or her diet or concerned about a family member's diet due to food allergies, intolerances, sensitivities or a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. Questions also addressed how the respondent felt about environmental issues such as water contamination, pollution, energy conservation and wildlife preservation.

Stage III (intention to act) questions simply aimed to assess whether respondents planned on buying organic food. These questions focused on food beliefs, asking respondents to rank food safety, brand, cost, convenience, and nutrition in order of importance.

Stage IV (opportunity) variables included the respondents' shopping venues and economic variables. Questions in this section focused on where respondents' usually

shopped, which shopping venue is closest to their homes, and how much of that venue's store is devoted to organic foods.

Another variable, which Zepeda and Li (2007) consider a multistage variable because it affects awareness, personal connection, and intention, is the respondent's level of cooking enjoyment and frequency of cooking. Zepeda and Li (2007) postulated that because organic foods are primarily produce and other types of foods that require skill to prepare, it is likely that respondents who enjoy cooking will purchase organic foods because they have more knowledge about food and they personally enjoy the cooking process rather than seeing it as a necessary chore.

Zepeda and Li's (2007) findings indicate that the main limitation on consumers' organic food purchase is the lack of availability. They see this as the reason previous research has found a connection between higher income and organic food consumption: perhaps organic foods are simply more available in more affluent neighborhoods. Their findings indicate that with organic food availability increasing so quickly, it is likely that the organic food market will continue to grow, since lack of availability is currently the main deterrent to purchase.

Zepeda (2009) later attempted to come up with a new consumer behavior theory to predict and explain organic food consumer behavior. To do this, she used a combination of several pre-existing consumer behavior theories including Kirscht's (1974) Health Belief model, Stern et al.'s (1999) Value-Belief-Norm theory, Guagnano et al.'s (1995) Attitude-Behavior-Context theory, and some consumer traits such as knowledge, information-seeking behavior, habit, and key demographics. To understand

how Zepeda (2009) used a combination of these ideas to predict organic food consumer behavior, it is important to understand each individual theory.

John P. Kirscht's Health Belief model operates under the assumption that each person has a set of health cognitions centered around his or her personal susceptibility to a condition, the perceived severity of that condition, the efficacy of a behavior, and barriers to the behavior (Kirscht 1974). In the years following this model's development, health belief theorists have added "modifying factors," including personal and social characteristics such as age, sex, culture and knowledge, and postulated that these factors influenced health belief. Finally, Kirscht points out that behavioral differences among different groups may reflect different levels and combinations of beliefs, which Kirscht refers to as the "final pathway," (1974).

Zepeda (2009) points out that the Health Belief model can be used to frame decisions about diet that are health motivated because consumer behavior may be driven by the trade-off of a disease's perceived threat and the perceived benefits, minus any barriers or costs of the dietary change. However, while there is evidence that some organic consumers are motivated by health concerns, they are also motivated by environmental, social and economic concerns (Dimitri and Greene 2002, Hughner et al 2007). Therefore, while the Health Belief model may be a start in discovering why consumers purchase organic food, Zepeda only uses the Health Belief model as one component of her theoretical framework.

To incorporate environmentally-motivated consumers, Zepeda (2009) looked to Stern (2000) and his theoretical framework for general environmentally significant behaviors. Stern et al.'s (1999) Value-Belief-Norm, used to explain several categories of

behaviors from public sphere behaviors, private sphere behaviors, and behaviors within organizations, encompasses three other theories used to explain what Zepeda refers to as “environmentally significant behavior: value theory, the New Ecological Paradigm, and norm-activation theory.

Shalom H. Schwartz’s value theory (1994) essentially predicts that values underlie actions. Schwartz puts forth ten basic values and characterizes them by their central motivational goal: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism (1994).

The New Ecological Paradigm (Dunlap and Van Liere 1978), a widely used measure of pro-environmental orientation, originated as a 12-point scale of environmental questions that measures the degree to which one agrees with the the need to limit growth and be in balance with nature. Dunlap et al. (2000) later revised the scale to include 15 items. The revised scale incorporates a wider range of components of an ecological worldview, offers a balanced set of pro- and anti-New Ecological Paradigm items, and avoids outmoded terminology (Dunlap et al. 2000).

Norm-activation theory (Schwartz 1977) implies that moral norms are activated when individuals become aware of adverse consequences to themselves and others and accept the responsibility that their actions can avert these consequences. Norm-activation theory is consistent with Kirscht’s Health Behavior model in that they both permit organic food consumption to avoid adverse consequences, whether health- or environmental-related (Zepeda 2009).

Overall, Value-Belief-Norm theory asserts that values (value theory) directly determine beliefs (New Ecological Paradigm) which then affect norms (norm-activation theory), which in turn affects behaviors.

Zepeda (2009) adds yet another theory to explain organic consumer behavior because previous research showed that the Value-Belief-Norm theory, while it was able to better explain pro-environmental behaviors than the individual theories that comprise it, was able to explain less than one-fifth of the variation in consumer behavior (Stern et al. 1999). Kirscht (1974) predicted this when he stated that attitudes are rarely able to demonstrate predictions of specific behaviors because situational forces often provide powerful influence or constraint on behavioral expression, and Stern (2000) reaffirms this, noting that attitudes matter only when there are no direct barriers to a certain behavior. Stern (2000) then proposed combining the Value-Belief-Norm theory with Guagnano et al.'s (1995) Attitude-Behavior-Context theory to explain how attitudes translate into behaviors in different situations.

The Attitude-Behavior-Context theory proposes that attitudes affect behavior when the context is neutral, but that context, which can include anything from policies, regulations, costs and other external factors, can deter a certain attitude from translating into an equivalent behavior (Zepeda 2009). Zepeda's (2009) final study incorporates semi-structured interviews with questions aimed at determining whether the combination of the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory and the Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) theory can predict organic consumer behavior. Zepeda (2009) also introduced the elements of demographics (D), knowledge (K), information-seeking behavior (IS), and



habit (H). She refers to this theory in its entirety as the VBN-ABC-D-K-IS-H theory, or the Alphabet Theory.

According to Zepeda's (2009) study, the Alphabet Theory proved to be an effective method of predicting organic food consumption. A series of semi-structured interviews with a variety of food consumers, from "heavy organic" to "light organic" to "non-organic" buyers, indicated that particular values, beliefs and norms about the environment, personal health, religion and the economy shape consumer attitudes towards organic foods and motivate consumers to purchase them. The Alphabet Theory "provides an explanation of the distinction between light organic buyers and heavy organic buyers. This distinction stems to some extent from contexts, the degree of information-seeking, the degree to which one's VBN system is oriented to distrusting corporations, and the degree to which one seeks to build community and personal identity through food networks" (Zepeda 2009). Overall, Zepeda (2009) finds that food shoppers are motivated by values, beliefs and norms that shape their attitudes toward purchasing organic foods, and that context and habits, especially those developed early in life, have important impacts on food-shopping behaviors.

Gifford et al. (2005) attempts to understand how and why consumers purchase organic food by studying the influence of different types of messages on consumers' motivations to buy. Gifford et al. (2005) uses an economic theory called Prospect Theory, developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), that helps explain how consumers make choices when faced with uncertainty.

In expected utility theory, behavior is predicted as if people make completely rational decisions. Prospect Theory, on the other hand, takes into account the fact that

humans do not always react rationally to information or situations in which uncertainty is involved. When it comes to organic food consumption, there is much uncertainty involved. The USDA Final Rule (2002) outlines the differences between organic and conventional farming and production methods, and provides specification for the different levels of the USDA Organic seal that appears on different types of foods today. However, the potential benefits of these organic practices remain uncertain and difficult to measure, so consumers deciding to purchase organic goods are confronted with uncertain risks or rewards (Gifford et al. 2005).

An important outgrowth of Prospect Theory is the effectiveness of message framing. According to Gifford et al. (2005), positive message framing presents benefits that may be gained if a product is purchased or consumed, and negative framing presents risks or negative consequences that may occur if the product is not purchased or consumed. This study tested whether positive or negative framing influences consumers to change their attitude or behavior about organic food. Prospect Theory also takes into account “confirmatory bias,” meaning that people have the highest trust in messages that are congruent with their prior attitudes. Another important aspect to remember when studying message framing is that negative framing can create reactance, or an increased desire to partake in the product that the warning message is aimed at deterring. As Clee (1980) points out, fear appeals in advertisement could lead to reactance if the messages are perceived as manipulative.

Gifford et al. (2005) created three surveys to test whether positive or negative message framing is more effective in motivating consumers to purchase organic food. One survey simply stated the definition of organic food and acted as the control survey.

The second survey also included the definition of organic food, followed by a short paragraph detailing the benefits of buying and eating organic food. The third survey included the definition of organic food and a short paragraph detailing the negative effects of not buying or consuming organic food. In this study, recipients of the positive framing messages reported a significant increase in survey influence, meaning that survey participants who received the positively-framed messages were more likely to feel positively towards organic food. However, in the case of organic foods, reactance did not seem to be an issue, so negative framing could be used in conjunction with positive framing messages: even though it did not increase influence, it did not lower it either (Gifford et al. 2005).

### **Public Relations Messages and Channels**

In public relations, there is a model known as the M-A-C Triad (Message - Audience - Channel). This model demonstrates that for a public relations message to be effective, it needs to be the right message, targeted at the right audience through the right channel (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005). If any of these aspects are invalid, effective communication is not likely to occur.

According to Fulginiti and Bagin (2005), public relations practice encompasses four main audiences: internal, external, intermediary, and special. Internal audiences have a vested interest in what happens to a certain organization or cause because they are members of the organizational family. External audiences are individuals or groups outside the organization that still have an interest in the organization's well-being. Intermediary audiences are "gate" audiences that lead to the target audience. In the case

of organic food consumers, the intermediary audience could be food store owners. PR practitioners would have to target this intermediary audience to convince them of the benefits of stocking organic foods before reaching the target audience: individual organic food consumers. Finally, special audiences are usually made up of external audiences who have a special relationship with the organization that is not always beneficial. Before starting any public relations campaign, it is important for practitioners to identify and target the correct audience (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005, Broom 2009). After the audience is identified, it should be segmented by relevance, involvement, importance to PR goals, relationship with the organization, and management imperatives (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005). Finally, each different audience must be profiled and ranked in order of importance to the organization and its needs. Profiling an audience means gaining as much information about it as possible, including, but not limited to, the audiences' attitudes, knowledge and behavior in regard to an organization or cause. Ranking an audience depends on the practitioner's need to reach the audience and the practitioner's ability to reach the audience (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005). It is important to divide audiences in this way because, as Broom (2009), points out, "the notion of a monolithic and passive mass audience does not describe reality," (192).

After audiences are identified, segmented, profiled and ranked, practitioners must craft the most effective message to reach each audience. Before creating these messages, practitioners must do research to "acquire" messages from their audiences. Researchers can acquire messages through a variety of ways, including focus groups, interviews, or surveys. Messages are usually a combination of three types of information: messages individuals or organizations want to send, messages audiences want to receive, and

messages audiences need to receive (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005). To create the best message for each audience, practitioners should come up with answers to an extensive list of questions about each audience. The practitioners should determine what the audience already knows about the issue, what the audience needs to know, what message points will give the audience greater understanding of the issue, what the source is of the audience's current feeling about an issue, how the audiences have behaved in regard to this issue in the past, and are the right audience members being targeted in this campaign (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005).

The third component of the M-A-C Triad, channels, refers to where the message is expressed. The advent of new technologies has created a multitude of channels that expand far beyond traditional newspapers and television new shows. While face-to-face communication is often preferred because it involves as few as two communicators and provides immediate feedback, "in much of contemporary society, face-to-face contacts give way to mediated transmissions," (Broom 2009, 192). Therefore, public relations practitioners need to choose the right media to transmit their message. Two key criteria: their audience needs to use and believe the chosen media. If the audience does not use it, they will never see the message, and if they use it but do not find it credible, they will not heed the message (Fulginiti and Bagin 2005).

### **Organic Food Public Relations**

Since past literature indicates that most people have a positive view of organic foods, Gifford et al.'s (2005) investigation into effective organic food messaging demonstrated that organic food promoters should use positive message framing rather

than negative framing to encourage a confirmatory bias among consumers. Kirscht (1974) also discusses the potential dangers related to promoting negative health messaging:

Communication about health-related events carry content and association that are potentially distressing, since ill health threatens our well-being and portends pain, suffering, and, possibly, the termination of life. Even a positive and upbeat message about health may intimate that negative possibilities lurk in the background...Research on fear arousal developed in the context of studying the effects of communication on cognitive and behavioral change. Although the health belief model per se is not a theory about change, it has often been utilized in interventions involving health messages.

Kirscht, 1974, p. 35

Gifford et al. (2005) also discovered that if consumers have a high amount of trust in the conventional food system, they are much less likely to begin buying organic food. In order to attract conventional food shoppers, public relations practitioners must do more to increase general consumer awareness of the potential dangers of consuming non-organic food.

Zepeda (2009) postulates that the organic food consumption is influenced by cues to action, mainly communication efforts such as media campaigns or expert-promoted advice. Several past studies have shown that consistent organic consumers tend to have higher information-seeking behavior and tend to research food through a variety of different channels. However, public relations practitioners cannot rely on consistent organic consumers to make up the entirety of their audience, so they must begin investigating where occasional and non-organic consumers learn about food and target these channels with messages suited to this new audience.

Several studies indicate that organic food has been insufficiently promoted and merchandized through traditional public relations practices. According to Roddy et al. (1996) and Chryssochoidis (2000), consumers have been negatively influenced by lack of organic food knowledge, the lack of organic food promotion, and ineffective retailing strategies.

This researcher will investigate how consistent organic shoppers and occasional organic shoppers differ in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors when it comes to fresh organic food and packaged organic food. This researcher will then investigate where these two audiences get their information about organic food and food in general, to increase knowledge about where to most effectively target each audience. Finally, this researcher will investigate current organic food messaging to determine whether it is positively- or negatively-framed, and will use some positively- and negatively-framed information about on organic food on a survey to determine which is more effective in promoting organic food to both audiences. This will cover all three aspects of the M-A-C Triad.

In the following chapter, the researcher will discuss the research methods employed to study consumers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to organic foods and the messages and channels these consumers use to gain information about organic foods.

## **Chapter Three Methodology**

### **Context of the study**

This research will seek to support or reject the notion that consistent organic consumers have different attitudes and behaviors toward packaged or processed organic food than occasional organic consumers due to each group's underlying knowledge and attitudes about organic food.

This research will explore positively and negatively framed messages about organic food to determine which type of messaging best entices consumers to purchase organic food rather than conventional food. This researcher will also investigate which messages entice consumers to purchase organic food, such as health or the environment.

Finally, this research will investigate which channels consumers use to attain information about organic food to determine where organic brands and companies should place public relations or marketing collateral.

### **Research methods**

This researcher will employ three methods of study: an in-depth interview with a Whole Foods manager, a survey of consumers and a content analysis of the most popular organic food information channel, as indicated by the survey.

This researcher will begin with the interview with the Whole Foods manager to collect qualitative data about how food stores, especially health food stores, promote organic food. This researcher will choose a manager from Whole Foods specifically because Whole Foods has a wide selection of organic food, and previous research has shown that proximity to a store that sells organic food is the biggest determinant for



organic food consumption. Interview questions will cover topics such as what types of food consumers prefer to purchase organic, whether fresh or packaged organic foods sell better, and where consumers say they get their information about organic food. The manager's answers will help shape the survey questions.

This researcher will then create a survey to collect quantitative data about consistent and occasional organic food consumers. The survey will include 15 questions, four that are demographics. The survey will primarily include close-ended questions, although some open-ended responses will be included for more detailed information. The survey will address consumers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about organic foods. The researcher will aim to collect 300 respondents.

The first four questions will be replicated from a Zepeda and Li (2007) study, where respondents were given four true-or-false questions about whether organic food could or could not be produced with the use of these four technologies: chemical pesticides or fertilizers, radiation, hormones, or genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). In the Zepeda and Li (2007) study, more than 75 percent of consumers were able to correctly define which practices are permitted for food to be considered organic, with the exception of the use of GMOs, so Zepeda and Li (2007) used whether the respondent answered the questions about GMOs correctly as an indicator of knowledge, and hypothesized that if a respondent had more knowledge about organic food, he or she would be more likely to buy it.

The fifth question will determine whether the respondent is a rare, occasional or consistent organic food consumer. Respondents who answer the question, "How often do you purchase organic food?" with "Rarely" will be classified as rare organic food

consumers. Respondents who answer the question with “Once a month” or “Twice a month” will be classified as occasional organic consumers. Respondents who answer with “Once a week” or “More than once a week” will be classified as consistent organic consumers.

The sixth question will ask which types of food the respondents prefer to purchase organic. Responses will include fruits, vegetables, dairy products, packaged foods, and other, where respondents will have a chance to enter in another food group if necessary. The ninth question will be open-ended, and will ask respondents to either list their favorite organic food brands or explain why they have no favorite organic food brands.

Questions seven and eight will deal with channels. Question seven will ask respondents to choose any and all types of channels they currently use to find information about organic food. Question eight will be open-ended and will ask respondents to list any specific sources they use to acquire organic food information, such as titles of specific magazines, cookbooks, websites, or other sources.

Questions ten and eleven will deal with messaging. The tenth question will ask respondents, “Why do you buy organic foods?” and offer a variety of reasons for the respondents to rate in order of importance. The given reasons will include health reasons and environmental reasons, as well as an open-ended “other” option for respondents to add a personal reason that the researcher may not have considered. This question will aim to see which message topics would be most effective in encouraging organic food consumption. The eleventh question will be a replication of a Gifford and Bernard (2005) survey. Gifford and Bernard (2005) wanted to determine whether positive or negative message framing influenced consumers to purchase organic food. They distributed two

surveys with identical questions, but introduced one version of the survey with a positively-framed message and the other version of the survey with a negatively-framed message to see how the messages affected the results. This researcher will use the Gifford and Bernard (2005) positively- and negatively-framed messages in a question on her survey, and will ask respondents which passage would be more likely to convince that respondent to purchase organic food over conventional food. The positively-framed message reads, “Studies show that soil fertility is increased and water contamination is decreased when organic farming practices are used. Animals grown according to the organic standards must receive access to the outdoors and are not overcrowded. Studies have also found that organic foods can have significantly higher levels of vitamins and other beneficial nutrients than conventional products. Improved taste is reported by many consumers and in taste tests,” (Gifford and Bernard 2005, p. 157). The negatively-framed message reads, “Conventional farming is a widely recognized source of land and water pollution from pesticide and fertilizer runoff. Pesticide byproducts are detectable in the bodies of children who eat conventionally grown food, while there is disagreement between scientists over whether this is harmful. Over half of all antibiotics used in this country are consumed by farm animals, and this is suspected to contribute to the growing resistance of many bacteria to antibiotics,” (Gifford and Bernard 2005, p. 157).

After the survey responses are complete, this researcher will look to question seven, “Where do you get information about organic foods? Please select ALL that apply” to find out which channel respondents most frequently use for organic food information. This researcher will then look to question eight, where respondents will be asked to list specific information sources, to determine which choice is most popular.

This researcher will conduct a content analysis on this most popular option to determine whether positive or negative message framing is used, and to find which topics (such as health or environment) are most popular.

### **Data collection**

The initial in-depth interview with the Whole Foods manager will take place in January 2012.

The survey will be distributed in February 2012 through the snowball method, meaning that the first survey participants will pass the survey on to more organic food consumers.

The content analysis collateral will be collected and analyzed in March 2012.

### **Data analysis**

This researcher will use a Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) SELECT Monthly account to collect survey respondents and analyze the data. The researcher will use Survey Monkey to cross-tabulate key questions.

## Chapter Four Findings

### Demographics

A total of 301 respondents were surveyed through a snowball distribution method.

The online surveys were tabulated using SurveyMonkey.com.

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of respondents have a college degree.

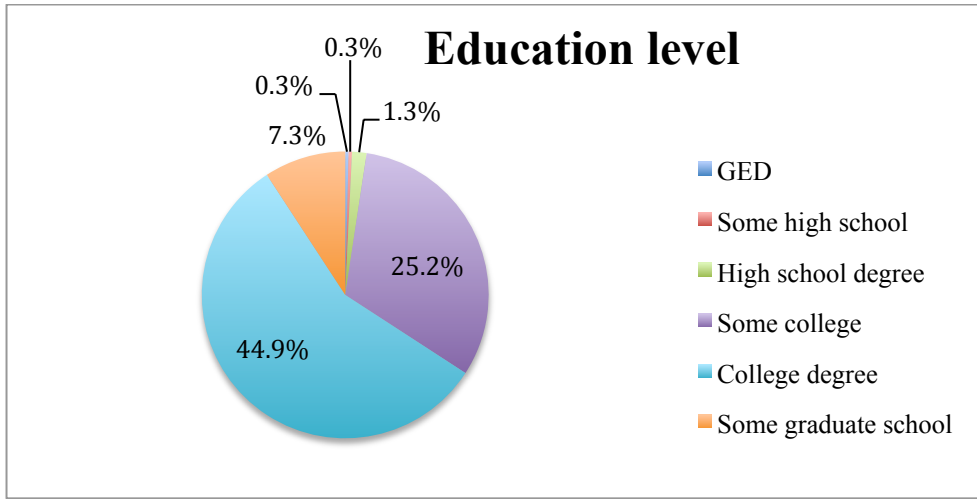


Figure 1: Respondents' education levels

As seen in Figure 2, nearly 88 percent of the respondents are female.

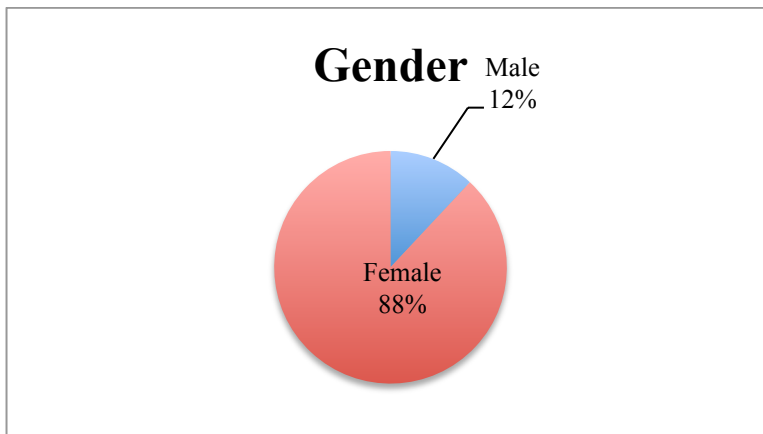


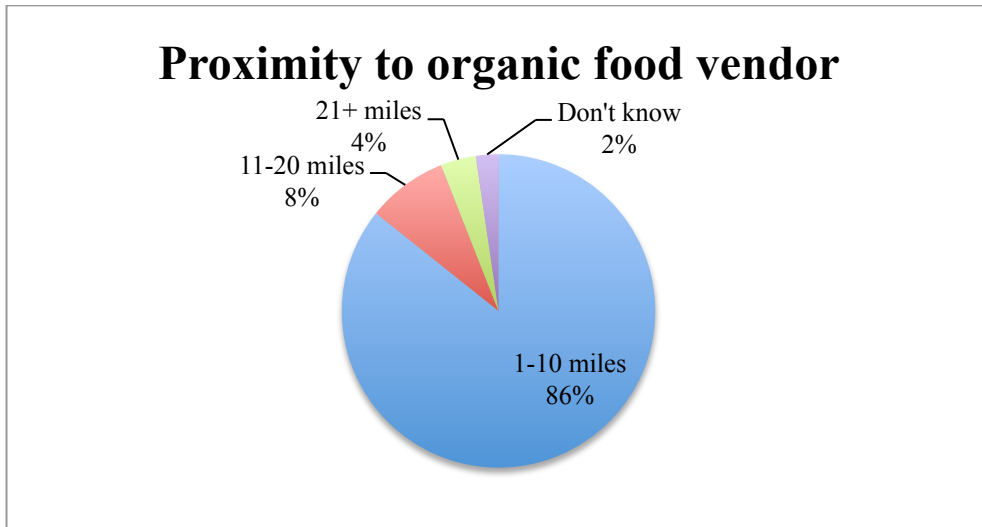
Figure 2: Respondents' genders

Table 1 shows that nearly all female respondents purchase organic food more than once per week, while only half of the male respondents purchase organic food more than once per week.

*Table 1: Respondents' genders cross-tabbed by how often they purchase organic food*

|        | Rarely | Once per month | Twice per month | Once per week | More than once per week |
|--------|--------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Female | 76%    | 91%            | 87%             | 91%           | 94%                     |
| Male   | 24%    | 9%             | 13%             | 9%            | 6%                      |

Figure 3 shows that nearly all respondents, 86 percent, live within 1-10 miles of an organic food vendor.



*Figure 3: Respondents' proximity to organic food vendor*

Figure 4 shows the respondents' ages, with the majority being 40-55-year-olds at 41 percent.

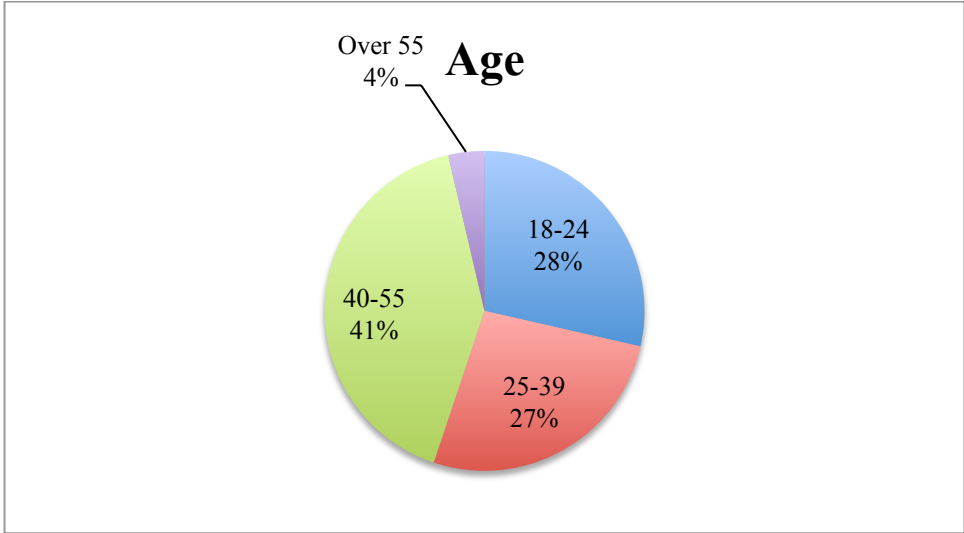


Figure 4: Respondents' age

Table 2 shows that respondents age 18-24 tend to be occasional organic consumers while respondents age 40-55 tend to be consistent organic consumers.

Table 2: Respondents' ages cross-tabbed by how often they purchase organic food

|             | Rarely | Once per month | Twice per month | Once per week | More than once per week |
|-------------|--------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 18-24 years | 44%    | 44%            | 39%             | 22%           | 8%                      |
| 25-39 years | 19%    | 12%            | 28%             | 31%           | 33%                     |
| 40-55 years | 35%    | 38%            | 28%             | 46%           | 52%                     |
| 56+ years   | 2%     | 6%             | 6%              | 1%            | 6%                      |

**Knowledge about organic food**

As seen in Figure 5, nearly half of the respondents incorrectly believe organic food can contain GMOs.

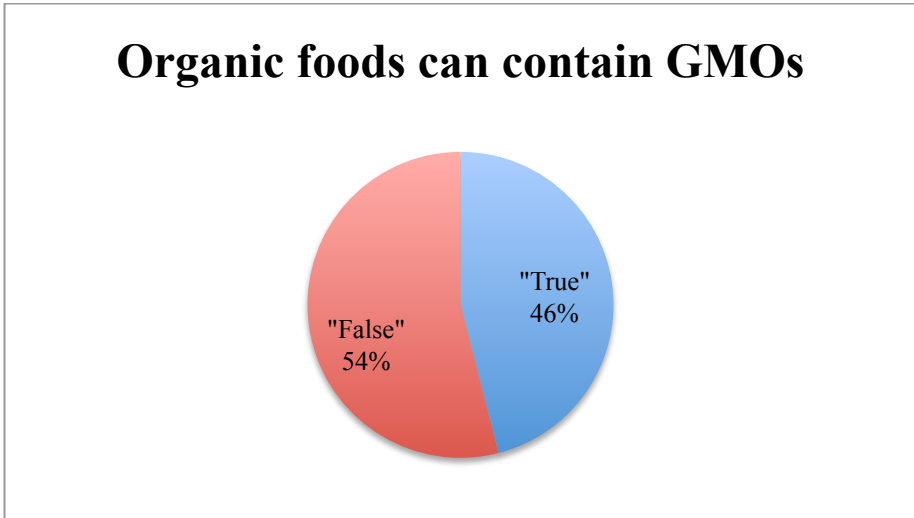


Figure 5: Respondents' knowledge of whether organic foods can contain GMOs

Figure 6 shows that nearly all respondents, 82 percent, know organic food can not contain chemical pesticides or fertilizers.

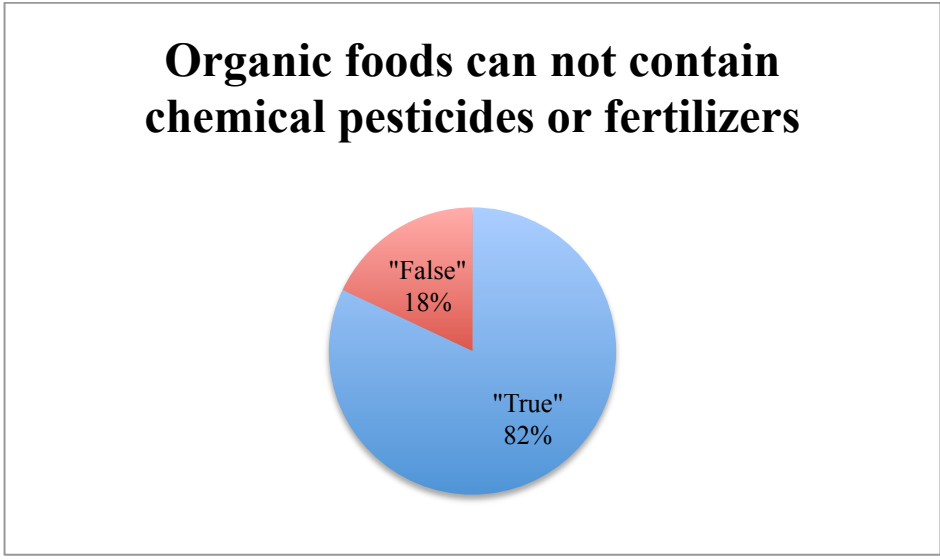
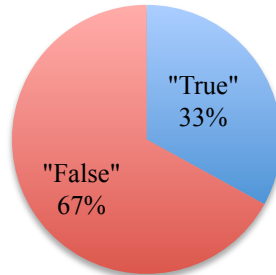


Figure 6: Respondents' knowledge of whether organic foods can contain chemical pesticides or fertilizers

As seen in Figure 7, about two-thirds, or 67 percent, of respondents know that organic food can not be produced with radiation.



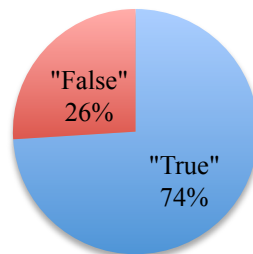
## Organic food can be produced with radiation



*Figure 7: Respondents' knowledge of whether organic foods can be produced with radiation*

Figure 8 shows that nearly three-fourths, or 74 percent, of respondents know organic food cannot contain hormones.

## Organic food cannot contain hormones



*Figure 8: Respondents' knowledge of whether organic food can contain hormones*

## Reasons for purchasing organic food

Table 3 shows the primary reasons respondents purchase organic food, with 59 percent saying “healthier for self” is “very important” and 57 percent saying “healthier for child” is “very important.”

*Table 3: Reasons respondents purchase organic food*

|                        | Very unimportant | Unimportant | Not applicable | Important  | Very important |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|------------|----------------|
| Better taste           | 5%               | 12%         | 17%            | <b>53%</b> | 13%            |
| Healthier for self     | 4%               | 2%          | 3%             | 32%        | <b>59%</b>     |
| Healthier for child    | 4%               | 1%          | 29%            | 9%         | <b>57%</b>     |
| Better for environment | 5%               | 12%         | 8%             | <b>43%</b> | 32%            |
| Food allergy           | 16%              | 8%          | <b>55%</b>     | 11%        | 11%            |
| Safer for farmers      | 7%               | 23%         | 16%            | <b>42%</b> | 12%            |
| Convenient location    | 5%               | 14%         | 18%            | <b>45%</b> | 18%            |

In an open-ended question about why consumers purchase organic food, respondents explained some reasons for choosing organic over conventional food and some reasons for choosing certain organic brands over other organic brands. Twenty-seven respondents indicate that a preference for locally grown food or for local farmers trumps preference for commercially produced organic food. Some responses include: “Rather than a specific organic brand, I would prefer to support small and local companies” and “I actually prefer to purchase more locally from farmers that use organic methods.” Four respondents actually grow or product organic food for themselves: one respondent notes, “I am a small scale farmer, most my organic food comes from me, and bulk items of organic dried beans, corn, and wheat. However, I do occasionally buy Eden

Foods canned tomatoes when I run out of my own in late winter” while another respondent says, “I grow or raise most of our organic food. I raise cows, chickens and gardens. I don't really buy prepackaged food. Even my husband makes crackers with organic ingredients.”

Twenty-three respondents discuss cost being a major factor. Some responses include: “I pay more attention to price than brand” and “I try to shop the least expensive brand as long as I trust the quality of the product.” Two respondents make specific comments about Organic Valley, a farmer-owned cooperative within a company: “Organic Valley is farmer-owned and gives an alternative to all the other big dairy companies that don't care about the consumer's health or the environment” and “Organic Valley. Many other ‘organic’ companies compromise ingredients. We prefer to buy local and straight from the farm.”

Finally, some respondents indicate distrust for brands. One respondent says, “I am leery of organic brands such as Nature's Promise, Earthbound Farm or Cascadian Farm because I do not believe they can produce that much food truly organically.” More responses on this topic include: “No favorite as ‘organic’ is now just a marketing term. Many so-called organic foods contain MSG and other toxins and are right on the label” and “Any brand not backed by a major corporation. It is easier to list what not to buy...Cascadian Farms, Back to Nature, Horizon, eg.”

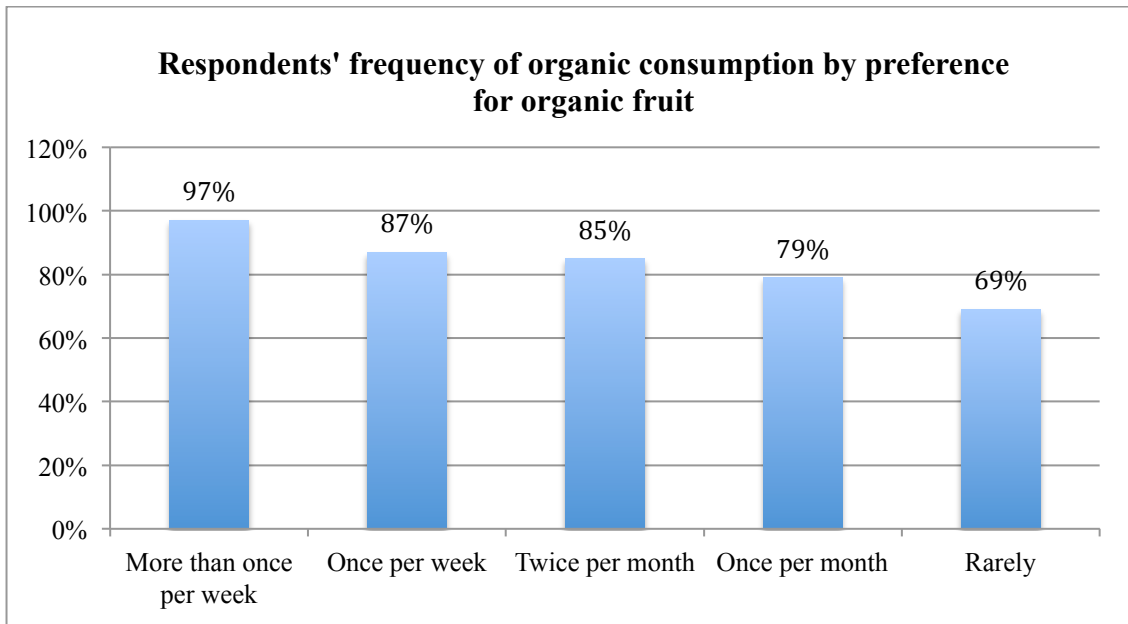
**Hypothesis 1: It is expected that consumers of fresh organic food are more likely to be consistent organic food consumers.**

In an in-depth interview with Whole Foods manager Kristen Molnar, this researcher learned that more of the stores' customers purchased organic produce over all

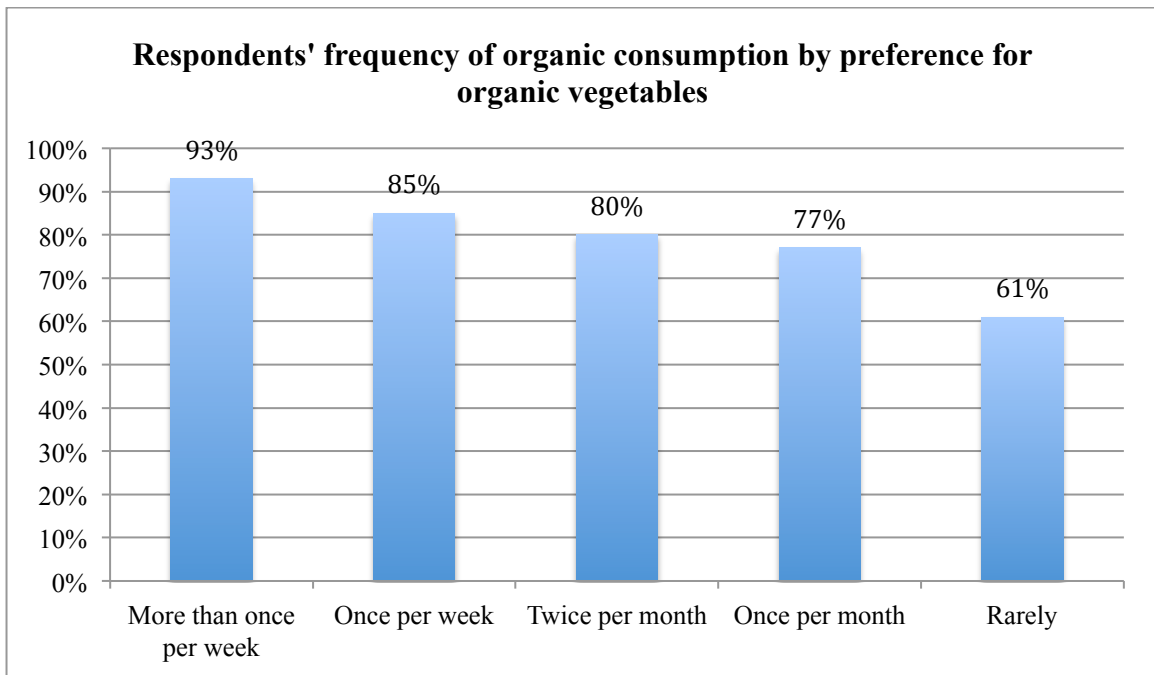
other types of food. This trend of organic produce preference is so widespread that Whole Foods stores display the number of organic products and the number of organic produce products in the store at any given time. Whole Foods does not display the number of any other specific type of organic product, such as meat, dairy or packaged goods. Molnar points out that because the media tends to promote eating organic produce more than most other types of foods, most consistent organic consumers are aware of the “dirty dozen”: the twelve fruits that are thin-skinned or especially prone to containing more chemicals and hormones than other fruits.

In open-ended survey questions about brand preference, many respondents who purchase organic food once per week or more than once per week explained a preference for fruits and vegetables: comments include, “Most of the foods I buy are fresh/unlabeled organic such as produce,” and “Don't have a really favorite since we try to buy whole foods (i.e. fruits veggies and grains) and not packaged/processed.”

The following figures (9 through 13) show crosstabulations of two questions: How often a respondent purchases organic food by respondent's preference for a specific type of food to be organic. These five food types include fruit, vegetables, meat, dairy and packaged products. As seen in Figures 9 and 10, consistent organic consumers (defined as consumers who purchase organic food once per week or more frequently) indicate the highest preference for purchasing organic fruits and vegetables, with respondents who purchase organic food more than once a week having the highest preference by about ten percent higher than those who purchase organic food once per week.



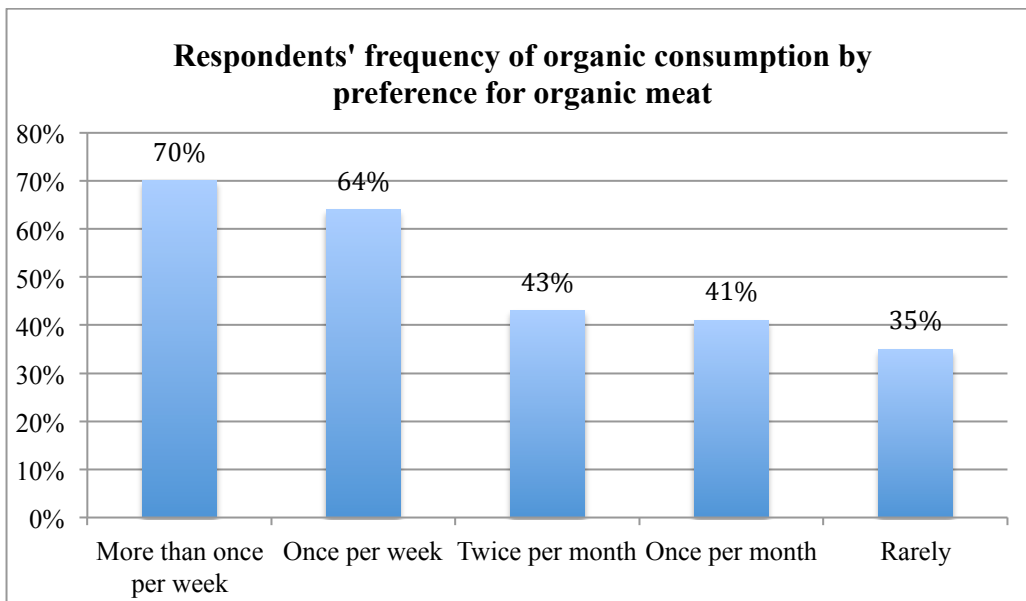
*Figure 9: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by preference for purchasing organic fruit*



*Figure 10: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by preference for purchasing organic vegetables*

Figures 11 through 13 show how frequently organic consumers purchase other types of food, including dairy, meat and packaged products. Respondents prefer organic dairy slightly more than organic meat. In both cases, the more frequent organic food consumers have a higher preference for purchasing organic versions of each product. Respondents' preferences for packaged food is dramatically lower than respondents' preferences for organic produce.

This research supports the first hypothesis.



*Figure 11: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by preference for purchasing organic meat*

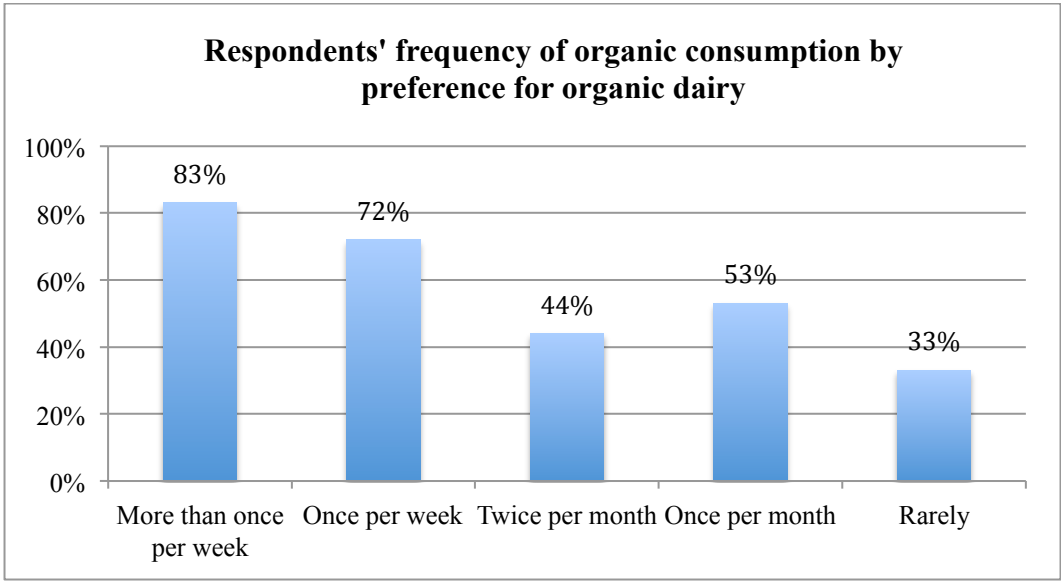


Figure 12: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by preference for purchasing organic dairy

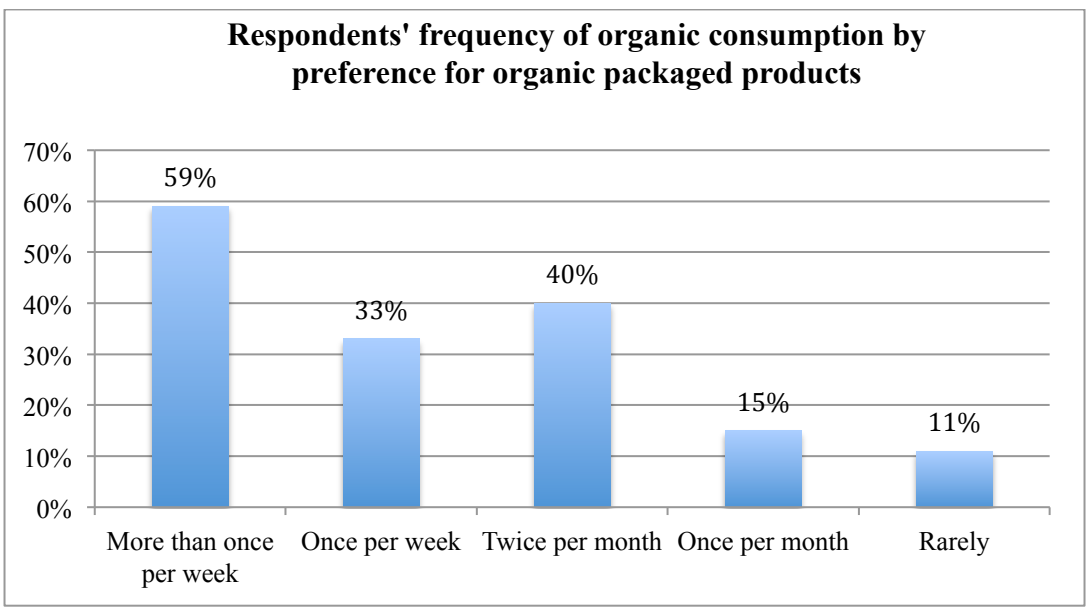


Figure 13: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by preference for purchasing organic packaged products

**H2. It is expected that consumers of packaged organic food are more likely to be occasional organic food consumers.**

Molnar says that Whole Foods has a small frozen food section compared to the rest of the store, and that most food stores are the same way. There is a higher emphasis on organic produce and less physical frozen or packed organic products available.

As seen in figures 9 through 13, occasional organic consumer respondents (defined as respondents who purchase organic food less than once per week) tend to prefer organic produce over organic packaged foods. Figure 13 shows that even though consistent organic consumers have a higher preference for organic produce, consistent organic consumers also show a higher preference for packaged organic foods than occasional organic consumers show.

This research does not support the second thesis.

**H3. It is expected that organic food distributors rely on positive framing messages more than negative framing messages to entice consumers.**

In this research, respondents read two messages about organic food and select the message that would entice them to buy organic food. The figure below shows that respondents have only a slightly higher preference for the positively framed message.



## Consumer preference for message framing

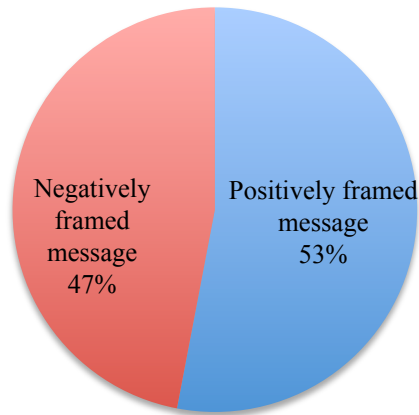


Figure 14: Respondents' preference for either positive or negative message framing

Respondents also answered questions about where they get information about organic food and listed some specific sources. As seen in Figure 14, the most popular channel for organic food information is food packaging.

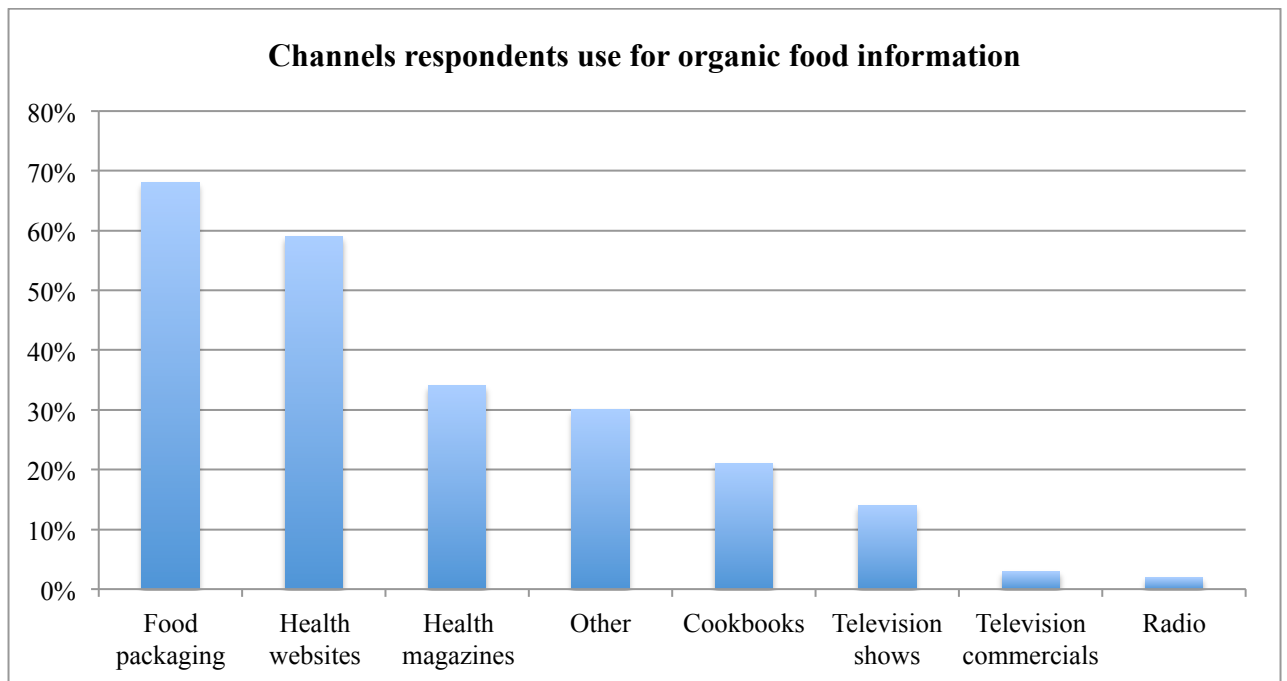


Figure 15: Channels respondents use for organic food information

In another survey question, respondents listed their favorite organic food brands. The three most popular brands as chosen by respondents are Trader Joe’s, Amy’s Kitchen and Stonyfield Farm. The researcher performed a content analysis on two food products from all three brands, as seen in Tables 4 and 5 below. The six products’ names: Amy’s Pesto Pizza, Amy’s Rice Macaroni, Stonyfield Organic Fat Free Milk, Stonyfield Blueberry Yogurt, Trader Joe’s Chicken Broth and Trader Joe’s Vegetable Broth. Table 4 shows the actual components of the packages. All three brands included an item name, organic certification, organic explanation, product history, nutrition facts and an ingredients list. The other items, highlighted in red, only appear on some of the products analyzed.

*Table 4: Content analysis of package components*

|                                 | <b>Amy’s<br/>Pizza</b> | <b>Amy’s<br/>Macaroni</b> | <b>Stonyfield<br/>Milk</b> | <b>Stonyfield<br/>Yogurt</b> | <b>Trader Joe’s<br/>Chicken<br/>Broth</b> | <b>Trader Joe’s<br/>Vegetable<br/>Broth</b> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Item name</b>                | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Organic certification</b>    | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Organic explanation</b>      | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Company history</b>          | X                      | X                         | X                          |                              |   |   |
| <b>Product history</b>          | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Nutrition facts</b>          | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Allergy information</b>      | X                      | X                         |                            |                              | X   | X   |
| <b>Ingredients list</b>         | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            | X   | X   |
| <b>Directions</b>               | X                      | X                         |                            |                              | X   | X   |
| <b>Additional recipes</b>       |                        |                           |                            |                              | X   | X   |
| <b>Contest/promotion</b>        |                        |                           |                            | X                            |   |   |
| <b>Other product references</b> | X                      |                           | X                          |                              |   |   |
| <b>Contact info</b>             | X                      | X                         | X                          | X                            |   |   |
| <b>Recycling info</b>           | X                      | X                         |                            |                              |   |   |
| <b>Cause-related marketing</b>  |                        |                           | X                          | X                            |   |   |

Table 5 shows the type of messages used and whether the messages have a positive or negative frame. As defined by Gifford (2005), a positively framed message shows the benefit of using a product while a negatively framed message shows the risks associated with not using a product.

*Table 5: Content analysis of package messages*

| Message type            |     | Amy's Pizza | Amy's Macaroni | Stonyfield Milk | Stonyfield Yogurt | Trader Joe's Chicken Broth | Trader Joe's Vegetable Broth |
|-------------------------|-----|-------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Environmental           | Pos |             |                | 1               |                   |                            |                              |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Health                  | Pos | 2           | 1              | 2               | 1                 |                            | 1                            |
|                         | Neg |             |                | 1               |                   |                            |                              |
| Farmer/local            | Pos | 2           | 2              | 2               |                   |                            |                              |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Animal                  | Pos |             |                |                 |                   | 1                          |                              |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Taste                   | Pos | 2           | 1              | 2               | 1                 | 1                          | 1                            |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Cause-related marketing | Pos |             |                | 2               | 1                 |                            |                              |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Other org. endorsement  | Pos |             |                | 1               |                   |                            |                              |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |
| Organic information     | Pos | 3           | 3              | 3               | 1                 | 1                          | 1                            |
|                         | Neg |             |                |                 |                   |                            |                              |

Nearly all of the messages used on the organic food packaging are positively framed, showing the benefits of consuming organic food rather than risks associated with consuming conventionally produced food.

The Amy's products focus on taste and health benefits. An example of a health message on the Amy's pizza reads, "After the birth of our daughter Amy in 1987 we found there was little time to prepare the wholesome nutritious food we normally ate. Realizing there were others like ourselves, we set up Amy's Kitchen to produce

delicious, nourishing frozen meals for health-conscious people too busy to cook.” A taste message says, “We’re sure you’ll enjoy this fresh-tasting delicious and satisfying pizza.”

Stonyfield focuses on health and includes environmental and farmer benefits: “We started as an organic farming school working to protect the environment and support family farms.” Stonyfield notes animal benefits as well: “Their cows graze on pasture every day throughout the growing season and eat only 100 percent organic feed, grown without persistent pesticides.” Of the three brands analyzed, Stonyfield products are the only brand using cause-related marketing: both the milk and the yogurt say, “We give 10 percent of our profits to efforts that help protect and restore the earth.”

The Trader Joe’s products have the least messaging, likely because they are sold in Trader Joe’s stores so less food packaging needs to be devoted to company history and similar topics. Both Trader Joe’s products include the taste message, “A natural way to season and enhance the flavor of your cooking.” The Trader Joe’s Chicken Broth also contains an animal message: “We start from scratch with organic chickens that are grown and nurtured without the use of added antibiotics, growth stimulants or other animal by-products. In addition, the chickens are raised on pesticide-free organic feed consisting of corn and soybean flakes.”

All three brands display UAI organic certification on the package, and the Stonyfield items also include a USDA Organic seal. In addition to these labels, all three products explain how they fulfill organic requirements somewhere on the package: Amy’s pizza reads, “No added MSG, no preservatives, no GMOs, no bioengineered ingredients, no trans fat,” Stonyfield yogurt reads, “Our Organic Promise: Made without the use of antibiotics, synthetic growth hormones, and persistent pesticides,” and Trader

Joe’s vegetable broth reads, “We start from scratch with vegetables that are planted, grown and nurtured without the use of chemicals, pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, adding only select spices and sea salt.”

This research supports the third hypothesis.

**H4. It is expected that consistent organic consumers use a more diverse selection of channels to research organic food.**

As seen in Table 6 below, consumers that purchase organic food once per week or less use food packaging as their main source of organic information. Consumers who purchase organic food more than once per week use health websites to find organic food information.

*Table 6: How frequently respondents purchase organic crossed by channels they use to learn about organic food*

|                  | Rarely     | Once per month | Twice per month | Once per week | More than once per week |
|------------------|------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Food packaging   | <b>60%</b> | <b>77%</b>     | <b>70%</b>      | <b>72%</b>    | 70%                     |
| Health magazines | 22%        | 30%            | 26%             | 41%           | 45%                     |
| TV shows         | 19%        | 18%            | 6%              | 10%           | 19%                     |
| TV commercials   | 2%         | 6%             | 7%              | 2%            | 0%                      |
| Radio            | 4%         | 0%             | 2%              | 1%            | 5%                      |
| Cookbooks        | 2%         | 15%            | 13%             | 31%           | 30%                     |
| Health websites  | 33%        | 44%            | 56%             | 70%           | <b>76%</b>              |
| Other            | 24%        | 18%            | 33%             | 28%           | 40%                     |

The three highest-ranked areas consumers use to learn about organic food are food packaging, health websites and health magazines. To learn more about where consumers get organic information, this survey includes an open-ended question about

specific sources respondents use. The researcher divided the responses by frequency of organic consumption: for example, the researcher made a list of sources used by consumers who purchase organic food more than once per week, a list of sources used by consumers who purchase organic food at least once per week, and so on.

One hundred and eight consistent organic consumer respondents and 57 occasional organic consumer respondents answered the open-ended question about specific sources they use for organic food information. The consistent organic consumer responses are more diverse and lengthy than the occasional organic consumer responses. Consistent organic consumer respondents also listed more sources per respondent, while occasional organic consumers listed one or two sources.

Since this study defines a consistent organic consumer as one who purchases organic food at least once per week, this research does not provide enough information to support the hypothesis.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations**

An in-depth interview with a Whole Foods manager, survey of organic consumers and content analyses of organic food packaging have helped the researcher determine what types of food consumers prefer to buy organic, which messages most effectively encourage consumers to purchase organic food, and which channels consumers use to gain information about organic food.

This researcher first assessed respondents' level of knowledge about what constitutes organic food by asking four "true/false" questions about organic characteristics on the survey instrument. For the most part, respondents know that organic food cannot contain chemical fertilizers or pesticides, cannot be produced with radiation and cannot contain hormones. The only question that nearly 50 percent of respondents got wrong asked whether organic foods can contain GMOs. This finding aligns with Zepeda and Li's (2007) findings, which show consumers being less knowledgeable about whether organic foods can contain GMOs than about other organic characteristics.

According to this study, both consistent and occasional organic food consumers prefer to purchase fresh organic produce. Out of five food categories (fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy and packaged food), respondents ranked fruits and vegetables as the organic food they prefer the most and packaged products as the organic food they preferred the least. In an in-depth interview, Molnar explains the possible reason for this: Many supermarkets have limited frozen organic food sections and emphasize the fresh organic produce instead. Consumers that may be interested in purchasing organic packaged food might not know it exists or where to find it. Previous studies have attempted to profile the occasional organic consumer (Zepeda and Deal 2009, Stolz et al 2011), but a better

method might be to profile the packaged organic food consumer to see if such a consumer exists and to discover this type of consumer's knowledge and attitudes about packaged organic food.

When respondents were asked to rank reasons they purchase organic food by level of importance, a majority of respondents ranked "child health" and "personal health" as "very important" and ranked "taste," "convenient location," "environment" and "farmer safety" as "important." Organic food marketers and public relations practitioners need to keep these reasons in mind when creating plans and collateral aimed at convincing consumers to purchase more organic food.

This researcher found that positive messaging, defined as messaging that points out benefits of consuming a certain product, is both preferred by respondents and used more frequently on organic food packaging. However, only a slight percentage of respondents indicated a preference for the positive messaging included on the survey. This may have been due to the content of the messaging. On the survey, the positive messaging mentions environment, animal and taste benefits. The negative messaging mentions environment, child health and overall health risks. Since respondents ranked child health and personal health as "very important," they could have gravitated toward the negative messaging because it included these topics. In future studies, the researcher should make an effort to include the same types of benefits and risks in each of the framed messages.

This researcher discovered the wide range of organic food information channels in open-ended questions about where respondents learn about organic food. While the majority of respondents selected food packaging as the most commonly used channel,



respondents who purchase organic food more than once per week indicate using health websites as a primary information source. The findings indicate that consistent organic consumers do use a wider range of channels than occasional organic consumers. Organic food marketers and public relations practitioners need to assess which channels both groups are using and target each group through these channels with the appropriate messaging.

Overall, researchers have much to learn about the different types of organic consumers. Surveying a larger audience will help researchers better understand organic consumers, as will conducting in-depth interviews with more organic food salespeople, marketers and public relations practitioners. Future studies should focus on determining more information about organic consumers, including how healthy or how environmentally responsible these consumers are in areas of their lives not involving food. This researcher noticed that consistent organic consumers tended to be more health-conscious and environmentally conscious in general. In open-ended responses, consistent organic consumers mentioned doctors and nutritionists more frequently than occasional organic consumers. Furthermore, consistent organic consumers mentioned a preference for local food more frequently and cited preference for responsible farmers. Separating the organic consumers who are primarily health-minded from organic consumers who are primarily environmentally-minded and learning more about each group will help organic food marketers and public relations practitioners know which messages and channels to use when targeting each group.

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