

Consumer Choice within Fresh Produce Documentary Project

A Senior Project

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Abstract/Intro

As the U.S. becomes more health and environmentally conscious, organic produce sales rise exponentially. North America has the most consumers of organic products in the world. Infact, the U.S. has a higher demand for organic products than domestic supply can even reach. Retail sales totaled 17.3 billion US dollars in 2006. However, the question is, whether consumers are getting what they signed up for.

Many consumers assume organic ensures a healthier and more environmentally sound product. However, the only promise organic labels can truly make is to be non-synthetic. The USDA's Organic certified label simply means, "foods are grown and processed according to federal guidelines that address soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and use of additives. Organic producers rely on natural substances and physical, mechanical, or biologically based farming methods to the fullest extent possible."

For these reasons, this project will interview professionals within the agricultural and nutrition realm, to shed light on whether specific labeling of environmental impacts and inputs affecting human health, are necessary for consumers to make educated purchases.

Pew Research Center reported that documentaries and other science video programs were the second most relied on sources for Americans to get their science based information. With this information in mind, this project will be documentary style video explaining what's behind the organic label to help solve consumer confusion. The content of the documentary will cover pesticide residues, soil health impacts, meanings behind varying organic labels, and the effect organic production has had on the industry since the USDA started certifying farms in 2002.

Background

Currently, consumer choice in the produce aisle is limited between labels of organic, local, and conventional. But these three labels may not provide all the information customers need before consuming fresh produce.

Although customers are aware of the general differences between organic and conventional, when it comes to environmental and health impacts, there is no guarantee that their purchases follow those correlations.

In a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 76% of the individuals who bought organic in the past month did so to get healthier products. This was followed by 33% of individuals who purchased organic labeled produce for environmental concerns.

First, it's important to consider if these assumptions hold any weight. In the 2016 USDA Pesticide Data Program organic produce had a smaller number of pesticides present in residue. Conventional was reported as having 3.1 different pesticides present in the average product, whereas, only 0.8 pesticides were present on organic produce. Similarly, the book, "Soil Organic Matter and Biological Soil Quality Indicators After 21 Years of Organic and Conventional Farming," found that microbial biomass and activity were enhanced in organic systems.

Even with some correlation that supports consumers assumptions regarding the organic label, it does not insure consumers their individual purchase will follow these trends. Organic products can be worse for both the environment and health, depending on growing practices. Consumers have no way of knowing what impacts are associated with their purchase in grocery stores today.

Methodology

After realizing the lack of information consumers are offered on produce inputs, the author began researching differences between labels, like organic and conventional, present in most grocery stores. The author then interviewed Ashraf Tubele, director of organic research at Cal Poly University, for more information regarding organic farming distinctions. She gathered anecdotes from consumers to evaluate if input information is a concern to the average consumer.

The author used a DSLR camera to interview former FDA pesticide researcher, Robert Kravets, to speak on how food input labels could potentially be implemented. His interview gave the author a sense of whether input labeling would significantly affect human health enough that consumers are entitled to know. The researchers then went back to Dr. Tubele to learn if organically grown produce could significantly change the plant's pathology enough to affect nutritional content like antioxidant and mineral levels. The author also interviewed Mike Chew, produce manager at Vons in San Luis Obispo, to get a grocer's opinion if it is practical for consumers to be given more information on growing inputs. To finish the social science research project, the author conducted an informal dinner party at her apartment complex to survey what her friends value while buying groceries and what assumptions they had about organic and conventional produce. The author edited the video interviews using Adobe Premiere Pro. Many of the copyright free B-roll videos came from Coverr.com and the graphic animations were from adobe stock.

Results

After various interviews with grocers, food scientists, organic researchers, and the general public the project had an understanding of what people felt was the answer from a variety of different backgrounds. Dr. Ashraf offered information on what can be expected out of organic produce, expressed the confusion caused by varying organic labels, and the potential of lobbying group's power in determining what practices are legal in the US. Dr. Kravets expressed his concern over the public being swayed by fear mentality if produce were to be labeled with specific chemicals. He believed the public wouldn't do their own research and be persuaded by sensationalized media. Instead, Dr. Kravets felt we should trust the FDA, as they have public interest in mind. However, the grocer at Vons felt labeling would differentiate them and be considered value added. Although the grocer felt only "1% of customers would seek that information," they could stand out to the customers that sought out those facts. Statistics and professional's opinions shined through when it came to the general public's opinion. Mothers often said they buy conventional produce when it is more financially feasible, since they buy in larger quantities for their families. College students said they would be scared by "chemical sounding" labels. However, like the grocer predicted there were a few customers buying organic that understood their purchases were based off generalities and would highly appreciate more specific labeling.

Using the interviews and video footage gathered, the author created a 35 minute video depicting a collection of consumer concerns and reasonings to conclude that although the majority of consumers aren't seeking additional produce labels, the one percent that would appreciate additional information is entitled to access that information. However, the industry professionals interviewed cautioned that consumers would likely follow sensationalized media around the newly labeled chemicals.

Conclusion

This project set out to question whether fresh produce required more specific labeling of pesticides and fertilizer inputs on fresh produce. Like many questions regarding health, environmental science, agriculture, and politics, there is not one simple answer. After listening to professionals and interviewing customers outside grocery stores, it's clear that the majority of consumers are not pursuing additional information, but that there is a small group of customers who would appreciate it. It also became clear that although fear mentality is of concern to professionals in the food industry, consumers don't seem to understand the negative effects their participation in believing unsubstantiated science causes. Although the FDA is meant to keep consumer health at the forefront, and despite the looming threat of sensationalized media around "chemical sounding" labels, information is a right to those who seek it, especially when it comes to the food they put into their body. Through the research undertaken in this project, we found the first step in more specific labeling would be to prevent fear mongering by educating the public, to make a more transparent food system possible in the future.

Citations

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