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Avoiding Asda? Exploring consumer motivations in local organic food networks

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ABSTRACT Supermarkets such as Asda (owned by Wal-Mart) have responded to the growth in direct marketing and alternative agri-food networks by promoting local produce ranges, and increasingly sourcing organic produce from the UK. Thus consumers now have a choice of outlets for local and organic produce. This paper examines the implications of that choice for direct marketing in particular, and sustainable consumption in general. The paper tests the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels, and that they are deliberately avoiding mainstream supermarkets. Research findings are presented from a survey of customers of a local organic food cooperative in Norfolk, UK which examines consumer motivations and perceptions of alternative and mainstream food provisioning. The hypothesis is confirmed: consumers expressed wide-ranging preferences for participation in the alternative food system, though there is some concern that the convenience and accessibility of supermarket provision of local and organic food threaten to erode the wider social and community benefits achieved by direct marketing initiatives.

1. Introduction

In its efforts towards a sustainable food and farming system, the UK government has pledged to support the growth of organic farming by promoting organic food in schools and hospitals, providing cash for farmers to help them transfer to the new organic farming system, recognising and valuing the social and economic benefits of organic farming, as well as environmental gains, and encouraging supermarkets (such as Asda, owned by US retail giant Wal-Mart) to source more organic food from the UK (Department for the Environmental, Farming and Rural Affairs

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[DEFRA] 2002). In addition, attention has been turned to “food supply chains” as a way of understanding the implications for agriculture, employment, rural development and land use of the various links between food production and consumption which emerge as a result of agro-industrial restructuring (see for example Ilbery and Maye 2005). These chains comprise production, marketing, distribution, retail and consumption activities in various social and cultural contexts, and can also be conceptualised as “systems of provision” which link patterns of production and consumption (Fine and Leopold 1993).

Re-localising food chains has been put forward as a strategy for sustainable consumption due to the apparent benefits to local economies, communities and environments (Jones 2001, Taylor *et al.* 2005). Consequently, the recent revival of localised food supply chains and the rise in demand for specifically local organic produce have been described as a move towards a more sustainable food and farming system in the UK (Pretty *et al.* 2005, Saltmarsh 2004, Norberg-Hodge *et al.* 2000, La Trobe 2002). Furthermore, these trends have driven the explosion of direct marketing outlets (farmers’ markets, farm shops and veggie box subscription schemes) where consumers buy directly from the growers: the first UK farmers’ market took place in 1998, and by 2006 there were an estimated 550 locations around the UK holding 9500 markets a year (National Farmers Retail and Markets Association [FARMA] 2006). It has been argued that consumers in these direct marketing initiatives and alternative food networks are actively engaged in creating new food supply chains based upon alternative values to the mainstream to achieve a range of goals: rural regeneration, livelihood security, cutting food miles and carbon dioxide emissions from transport, social embedding, community-building, increasing connection to the land and, most importantly, sustainable consumption (Seyfang 2006, Stagl 2002, Allen and Kovach 2000, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Whatmore and Thorne 1997). These benefits are placed in opposition to supermarket supply chains, which, it is argued, squeeze local producers financially, import most of their produce, remove money from the locality and impose social, economic and environmental costs on local economies (Corporate Watch n.d., Ward and Rose 2002, Taylor *et al.* 2005).

However, faced with the growth of alternative agri-food networks, the supermarkets have responded by marketing their own local produce ranges, and increasingly sourcing organic produce from the UK (Padbury 2006, Soil Association 2005b). Thus consumers now have a choice of outlets for local and organic produce. This paper examines the implications of that choice for alternative agri-food networks and direct marketing in particular, and for sustainable consumption in general. It tests the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels, and that they are deliberately avoiding Asda, Tesco and the other mainstream supermarkets in the UK by doing so, for political reasons. In order to test this hypothesis, research was carried out with customers of a local organic food cooperative, a direct marketing initiative in Norfolk, UK, and the empirical findings are presented here. This study aimed to uncover the motivations and values that customers held around ideas of local and organic food, and how these relate to direct marketing and supermarket channels of

supply. The paper identifies the opportunities for and potential threats to these nascent agri-food networks.

2. Local organic food and sustainable consumption

In 2003, the UK government announced its strategy for sustainable consumption and production – which it defines as “continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth’s ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come” (DEFRA 2003, p. 10). In practice, this emphasises decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation, to be achieved through consumer-led market transformation – an individualistic mainstream approach to sustainable consumption, within which the supermarket “system of provision” sits comfortably. Critics of this approach emphasise the political economy of, and richer sociological meanings attached to, consumption and point to collective institutions as the source of potential change (Maniates 2002, Fine and Leopold 1993, Burgess *et al.* 2003). Given that current systems of provision prevent significant changes in consumption patterns, what can be done to overcome this limitation? Alternative systems of provision, based upon different conceptions of wealth, progress and value and with associated social and economic institutions and infrastructure, allow people to behave as ecological citizens and express their pro-sustainability values (Leyshon *et al.* 2003, Seyfang 2004, 2005, Southerton *et al.* 2004, Jackson and Michaelis 2003).¹ This section examines the rationale and development of mainstream and alternative systems of food provision.

Consumer demand for organic produce has risen enormously over the last 15 years in the UK, growing from a niche activity to a mainstream consumption choice (Smith 2006). Sales of organic products in the UK amounted to £1.213 billion in 2004, a rise of 11% on the previous year (Soil Association 2005b). Simultaneously the area of land within the UK certified (or in conversion) for organic production has risen dramatically: in 1998 there were under 100,000 hectares and by 2005 this had risen to 690,000 hectares (DEFRA 2005). The sustainable consumption rationale for organic food is that it is a production method more in harmony with the environment and local ecosystems. Proponents claim that by working with nature rather than against it, and replenishing the soil with organic material, rather than denuding it and relying upon artificial fertilisers, then soil quality and hence food quality will be improved and biodiversity will be enhanced. A second rationale is to protect individual’s health by avoiding ingestion of chemical pesticides (Reed 2001). Additionally there are increased economic and employment benefits from organic farms compared with conventional farms (Maynard and Green 2006).

One consequence of the growth in organic farming as a mainstream system of production, highlighted by Smith and Marsden (2004), is the “farm-gate price squeeze” common within conventional agriculture, which limits future growth and potential for rural development. Farmers keen to diversify into organic production as a means of securing more sustainable livelihoods in the face of declining incomes within the conventional sector are confronted with an increasingly

efficient supermarket-driven supply chain that sources the majority of its organic produce from overseas. Currently 56% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported, and 75% is sold through supermarkets (Soil Association 2005a), which represent an overwhelmingly mainstream distribution channel. A key challenge for small organic producers is therefore to create new systems of provision to bypass the supermarket supply chain, and to organise in such a way as to wield sufficient power in the marketplace.

Direct marketing of local and/or organic produce through farm shops, farmers' markets and box schemes has been proposed as a more sustainable, alternative infrastructure of food provision, for economic, social and environmental reasons (FARMA 2006, Taylor *et al.* 2005). One study of food supply chains in Norfolk found that direct marketing was adopted as a means for growers "taking more control of their market and [becoming] less dependent on large customers and open to the risk of sudden loss of business" (Saltmarsh 2004, ch. 3). Many of these growers had previously supplied to supermarkets and for these farmers direct marketing was a means of stabilising incomes and reducing vulnerability. Further evidence of this move towards alternative systems of food provision is reported by a study finding that 51% of organic growers in the UK were planning to work cooperatively with other farmers, to increase their market share and improve resilience against external economic shocks (ADAS Consulting 2004).

Underpinning these shifts towards nascent alternative food systems is the growing trend for specifically *local* food consumption, reflecting a desire to bypass intensive agriculture and return to small-scale production, and grow a new sense of connection with the land, through a concern for the authenticity and provenance of the food we eat (Ricketts Hein *et al.* 2006, Holloway and Kneafsey 2000). It is a social as much as a technological innovation (Smith 2006). A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (New Economics Foundation [NEF] 2003). This movement towards the (re-)localisation or shortening of food supply chains explicitly challenges the industrial farming and global food transport model embodied in conventional food consumption channelled through supermarkets (Reed 2001, Allen and Kovach 2000). Localisation of food supply chains means simply that food should be consumed as close to the point of origin as possible. In practice, this will vary from produce to product, and the construction of "local" is both socially and culturally specific, and fluid over time and space (Hinrichs 2003, Feagan 2007); in the UK, consumers generally understand "local" to mean within a radius of 30 miles or from the same county (Padbury 2006). Cutting "food miles" is the principal environmental rationale for localising food supply chains. This refers to reducing the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed, and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. Much transportation of food is only economically rational due to environmental and social externalities being excluded from fuel pricing. This results in the sale of vegetables and fruit from across the globe, undercutting or replacing seasonal produce in the UK (Smith *et al.* 2005, Jones 2001, Pretty *et al.* 2005). Although some deeper examinations of the food miles idea exposes contradictions and counter-intuitive complexities in terms of life cycle energy use, food production and transport

(see for example Born and Purcell [2006] and Schlich and Fleissner [2005]), the food miles concept has nevertheless become an easily communicated idea to rally local food activists, and is here employed for its utility in capturing consumer motivations.

There are also social and economic rationales for re-localised food supply chains within a framework of sustainable consumption. In direct contrast to the globalised food system which divorces economic transactions from social and environmental contexts, the “new economics” favours “socially embedded” economies of place. This means developing connections between consumers and growers, boosting ethical capital and social capital around food supply chains, educating consumers about the source of their food and the impacts of different production methods, creating feedback mechanisms that are absent when food comes from distant origins, and strengthening local economies and markets against disruptive external forces of globalisation (Norberg-Hodge *et al.* 2000, Whatmore and Thorne 1997). Furthermore, localised food networks make a significant contribution to rural development, helping to mitigate the crisis of conventional intensive agriculture, building up the local economy by increasing the circulation of money locally (the economic multiplier) (Renting *et al.* 2003, Ward and Lewis 2002). Recent research by the New Economics Foundation found that street produce and farmers’ markets made a major contribution to local economies, and provided access to fresh fruit and vegetables at prices significantly lower than nearby supermarkets (Taylor *et al.* 2005).

Indeed, sales of organic and local produce through these alternative direct marketing channels have grown rapidly. The number of farmers markets in the UK has grown rapidly since the first was established in Bath in 1997, to over 500 in 2006 (FARMA 2006) and farmers’ markets sales in 2004 amounted to £200 million, of which about 10–15% of stallholders sold organic produce, accounting for £25 million of this, a 21% increase on the previous year. Total sales of organic produce through direct marketing rose by 33% in 2004 to 12% of the entire food market share, a total of £146 million. There are an estimated 379 vegetable-based organic box schemes in the UK, and a further 97 meat-based schemes, and the sales from organic box schemes in 2004 totalled £38.5 million. Reflecting this growth in market share, the supermarket share of the organic retail market has fell from 80% in 2003 to 75% in 2004 (Soil Association 2005b).

As noted already, supermarkets currently dominate the organic retail sector, and they have been quick to respond to the changing demand for local and organic produce. Between 2003 and 2005, the proportion of key organic staples sold in the eight main UK supermarkets which were UK sourced has risen from 72% to 82% (Soil Association 2005b). At the same time, the major supermarkets have increased the availability – and visibility – of local produce within their stores. Observation in a local store shows that regional produce such as beer, honey and preserves, biscuits, cheese and sweets are grouped into a separate “locally produced” section of the supermarket, and sold in folksy packaging in a clear attempt to win back customers who might otherwise buy from a farmers’ market or other direct marketing outlet. Asda supermarket (the second largest in the UK with 17% market share and 258 stores, and owned by US giant Wal-Mart) is emblematic of the major supermarket chains. In a response to the growing demand for local

produce, Asda introduced a local produce section in 2001 and now sells 2500 regionally produced items from 300 local producers in its stores (for instance Norfolk beers and ales in its Norfolk stores), with an aim to achieve 2% annual turnover from local produce by 2008 (Mesure 2005). The supermarket won the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Food and Farming award for best retailer in 2005, on the basis of its policy for supporting local speciality producers (AMS 2005). Asda said it is “actively encouraging local growers and farmers to deliver produce directly to their local store instead of supplying via a regional depot, ensuring it is fresher, has travelled far fewer food miles, and has a longer shelf life” (AMS 2006). This move is tapping directly into shoppers’ concerns about supporting local economies and farmers, as well as offering improvements in freshness and taste and a perceived local authenticity (Padbury 2006) that many have criticised the supermarkets for eroding (Corporate Watch n.d.). Furthermore, it represents the adoption of green niche practices by the mainstream system of provision, resulting in both a gradual shift in the composition of the mainstream towards more sustainable practices, but also a reinvigoration of radical alternatives within this niche, seen in direct marketing and small-scale local organic production, for example (Smith 2006).

3. Direct marketing: a case study

Empirical case study research was carried out with a local organic food supplier, namely Eostre Organics (pronounced “easter” and named after the Anglo-Saxon goddess of regeneration and growth).² The research took place in Norwich during April and May 2004, and consisted of semi-structured interviews with the organisers; site visits to the organisation’s headquarters and box-packing site, as well as their main market stall; document analysis of literature published by and about Eostre; and a self-completed customer survey. Surveys asking customers about their motivations and attitudes to organic and local food were sent to 252 customers of three veggie-box schemes that are supplied by Eostre. Of these, 79 were returned, representing a response rate of 31.3%. In addition, all customers of the Norwich market stall were invited to take a survey; 110 did so, and of these 65 were returned (59.1% response rate). Market stall staff reported that while not every customer took a survey during the two-week period when they were available, most of their regular customers had done so. The high response rate perhaps reflects the fact that customers *chose* to take a survey, and so the population sampled is doubtless biased towards those with greater interest in Eostre and food supply issues. Although there is some overlap between the two categories (box scheme customers use the stall to top up their supplies), responses will only be considered separately where appropriate. The survey asked open- and closed-ended questions in order to elicit respondents’ own meanings of local organic food and food systems.

Eostre Organics: origins and development

Eostre is a producer cooperative based in Norfolk, East Anglia, comprising nine local organic growers. Eostre members sell their produce through box schemes,

shops and farmers' markets, and are supplying to local schools and a hospital. Eostre follows a localisation policy, only sourcing from outside the region when local produce is unavailable. Eostre's vision includes the creation of an alternative food system, or infrastructure of food provisioning. Its charter states,

Eostre believes that a fair, ecological and co-operative food system is vital for the future of farming, the environment and a healthy society. Direct, open relationships between producers and consumers build bridges between communities in towns, rural areas and other countries, *creating a global network of communities, not a globalised food system of isolated individuals.* (Eostre Organics 2004, emphasis added)

The cooperative was formed as a grassroots response to the need for sustainable rural livelihoods, and as a protective measure to reduce vulnerability and increase resilience to economic shocks from the global economy. Many of the farmers in the cooperative had previously sold organic produce to supermarkets, and had suffered from a drop in sales and prices during the recession in the early 1990s, as well as the usual list of complaints – late payment, insecure sales, high wastage of produce on aesthetic grounds. This negative experience of dependency upon a single, distant buyer led some growers to seek greater control over their businesses by moving into direct marketing, and an informal inter-trading arrangement developed between a handful of small local organic growers, to serve local markets more effectively through box delivery schemes, farm-gate shops and farmers' markets. Inspired by the example of the El Tamiso cooperative in Padua, Italy, and other European alternative food supply chains, these farmers decided to formalise their existing network into a producer cooperative to complement existing businesses and develop new markets. Working with East Anglia Food Link (a not-for-profit cooperative to promote organic production and localism in the region), in April 2003 Eostre was established with £125,000 of financial support over three years from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme (Saltmarsh 2004).

Dot Bane, Eostre's Project and Development Manager, describes the growth in organic production in the region as significant – stating that 20 years ago there would not have been enough organic farmers in the region to form a cooperative, whereas now the cooperative is a successful business strategy and there is more scope for expanding supply among existing and new growers to meet the surge in demand for local organic produce. Eostre's members supply their produce through a variety of channels throughout East Anglia and London: between them they cover 13 box schemes and 15 market stalls (mostly these are monthly farmers' markets, but there is also a full-time market stall in the general provisions market in Norwich city centre, and weekly stalls in several market towns around Norfolk), and they also sell through 12 shops and nine cafés, pubs and restaurants. Furthermore, Eostre has made inroads into public sector catering by supplying the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS Trust staff and visitors canteen, and local schools. Eostre has been very successful so far – in its first 12 months of operation, sales have grown by 70%, and the market stall in Norwich provisions market (believed to be the only full-time, wholly organic market stall in the UK) has doubled in size and has provided access to fresh organic produce to new groups of consumers as well as dedicated organic customers. At time of

writing (Spring 2007), Eostre is still growing with new member producers, a revamped and much-improved market stall, and new outlets.

Direct marketing visions: producers and consumers

Eostre has a clear vision of its role in creating a fair, ecological and sustainable food system, as indicated above. Its mission statement elaborates on this and explains that it aims to supply consumers of all incomes high-quality seasonal produce; to encourage cooperative working among its members and between the coop and consumers; to encourage transparency about food supply chains; to source all produce from UK and European regions from socially responsible producers and coops promoting direct local marketing, and from fair trade producers outside Europe; to favour local (i.e. from Norfolk or at least East Anglia) seasonal produce and supplement (not replace) with imports; to minimise packaging, waste and food transport; to offer educational farm visits to raise awareness of the environmental and social aspects of local organic production (Eostre Organics 2004). These goals emphasise cooperative institutions, minimising environmental impact and strengthening local links between community and farmers as a response to globalisation, and form a coherent vision for sustainable food strongly differentiated from the produce available through conventional channels. Dot Bane explains how these values translate to daily practice: “we’re working on a very personal level with people . . . that is true of consumers as well as producers . . . I’m not sure that we are really aiming our produce at mainstream markets; as an ethical/environmental company it’s as important if not more important that we adhere to our beliefs in sustainability, both environmentally and financially. If these issues let us into mainstream outlets then that’s great; if not we will probably continue to seek out the more peripheral customers.” This research asks to what extent that vision is relevant to customers.

Turning to customers: the survey respondents reported a wide range of motivations for purchasing food from Eostre, covering social, economic and environmental issues, as well as concerns around food safety, as shown in Table 1. The single most important issue on the minds of consumers was the environment: 94% of respondents agreed that food from Eostre was “better for the environment” in general, and two more specific aspects of this, “cutting packaging waste” and “reducing food miles”, were motivational factors for 85% and 84% respectively. “Embedded” economic objectives were also of great interest to consumers: 84% wanted to “support local farmers”, 70% sought to “support a cooperative” business and 65% aimed to “keep money in the local economy”. This desire for localism was also reflected in the social benefits that Eostre’s customers identified. Three-quarters (76%) enjoyed “knowing where their food has come from” and how it was produced, and one-quarter (25%) enjoyed the “face-to-face contact with growers”. Over a third (36%) saw it was a way of “preserving local heritage and traditions”. Finally, two of the more significant motivations were to achieve personal benefits from eating locally produced organic food. Four-fifths (80%) of consumers felt that organic food is “more nutritious or tastes better” than conventional produce, and 77% felt “organic food was safer”.

Table 1. Consumers' motivations for purchasing from Eostre

	Ranking	% of customers ($n = 144$)
<i>Environmental benefits</i>		
Better for the environment	1	94
To cut packaging waste	2	85
To cut food miles	^a 3 =	84
More diversity of produce varieties	11	33
<i>Economic benefits</i>		
Supporting local farmers	^a 3 =	84
Supporting a cooperative	8	70
Keeping money in the local economy	9	65
<i>Social benefits</i>		
To know where food has come from and how it was produced	7	76
Preserves local traditions and heritage	10	36
Enjoy face-to-face contact with growers	12	25
Demonstrates good taste and refinement	13	8
<i>Personal benefits</i>		
Organic food is more nutritious / tastes better	5	80
Organic food is safer	6	77

Source: Author's survey of Eostre customers.

^aThe equals sign means equal ranking of values.

These findings indicate that the motivations of Eostre's consumers resonate very strongly with those of the organisation, and that there is some support for the notion of constructing alternative systems of food provision, in addition to purchasing a specific type of produce. How conscious is that support? To what extent do Eostre's consumers actively choose and prefer the direct marketing infrastructure of provision as opposed to the supermarket? Statements made by survey respondents suggest that many consumers are actively motivated to avoid the supermarkets and choose an alternative food-provisioning system. For example:

[I like] that it's a local cooperative – I like that local organic farmers work together rather than competing against each other for profit.

I hate supermarkets and all they stand for, especially their restrictive buying policies. So I prefer to buy as directly from the producer as possible.

I think that supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food, and harming local economies. I try to use supermarkets as little as possible.

I like to put my money into businesses that are ethically sound and do not have a deleterious effect on the environment, people or animals.

Purchasing it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way than the wider economic community.

I don't want supermarket world domination, extra food miles, packaging, and middle people making money!

It might be supposed that the consumers who are concerned with the health and taste aspects of organic food would be more likely to source that food from supermarkets than those who actively seek to generate wider economic, social or environmental benefits. In order to examine whether this is the case, consumers were asked whether they also purchased organic or local food from supermarkets. Three-quarters (75%) of the survey respondents stated that they did. However, those who cited nutrition/taste and food safety as motivations for purchasing from Eostre were no more likely to patronise supermarkets than the average Eostre buyers, with 74% and 76% reporting that they used supermarkets for sourcing, respectively, local and organic produce. This finding indicates that customers seeking instrumental benefits of local organic food are no less motivated by wider social, economic and environmental goals.

Finally, local organic food is often dismissed as the preserve of an elite, on grounds of price, and claimed to be inaccessible to lower-income groups. In fact many of Eostre's customers are from lower-income brackets, broadly representative of the local populace. Among Eostre customers who responded to the survey, 14% had a gross weekly household income of less than £150 (£7800 a year), compared with 15% of the local population, and higher-income households were under-represented: only 17% of Eostre customers had household incomes of over £750 a week (£39,000 a year), compared with 23% of the local population (Office of National Statistics [ONS] 2003). This indicates that direct marketing through Eostre is an accessible provisioning option.

4. Direct marketing versus the supermarket

In order to uncover the underlying threats and opportunities for direct marketing as opposed to supermarket provisioning, the survey asked Eostre's customers open-ended questions about their views on direct marketing versus supermarket channels of food provisioning; these were grouped into categories and are shown in Tables 2 and 3, and some of the statements made are presented here to illustrate the points. The survey permits multiple responses, hence totals exceed 100%. In this section the views of box scheme customers and market stall customers are disaggregated in order to better understand the consumers' views about particular aspects of the type of direct marketing they engage with.

Table 2. Consumers' perceptions of the advantages of direct marketing compared with supermarket provisioning

Box scheme customers (<i>n</i> = 74)	%	Market stall customers (<i>n</i> = 63)	%
Supporting a local business	54	Supporting a local business	51
Better-quality produce	42	Ethical shopping / not a supermarket	38
Convenience	31	Reduced packaging	35
Reduced packaging	30	Reduces food miles	22
Ethical shopping / not a supermarket	24	Friendly atmosphere	21
Reduces food miles	23	Better-quality produce	21

Source: Author's survey of Eostre customers.

Table 3. Consumers' perceptions of the disadvantages of direct marketing compared with supermarket provisioning

Box scheme customers (<i>n</i> = 50)	%	Market stall customers (<i>n</i> = 50)	%
Limited or no choice	50	Less convenient/accessible	56
Higher price	20	Higher price	26
Limited range	18	Lower-quality produce	20
Lower-quality produce	6	Limited range	10

Source: Author's survey of Eostre customers.

When asked to list the advantages of purchasing from Eostre compared with through supermarkets, customers responded to the survey with a set of issues which bore a striking similarity between stall and box scheme customers. For stall customers, the main ones are: supporting local businesses (51% of respondents); ethical consumerism and avoiding supermarkets on principle (38%); reduced packaging waste (35%); and cutting food miles (22%). For box scheme customers, the principal factors are: again, supporting local businesses (54%); better-quality produce (42%); convenience (31%); and cutting packaging (30%). So consumers are making a strong statement that purchasing from a supermarket was not equivalent to buying from Eostre, as it meant losing some of the qualities they cherished – and the most important of these was localism. Of the top six advantages mentioned by each user group, the only issues specific to each direct marketing route were the convenience of getting a weekly delivery for box scheme customers, and the friendly atmosphere on the market stall.

When asked to list the disadvantages of purchasing through Eostre when compared with through a supermarket, there were fewer responses, and a much narrower range of factors was suggested by survey respondents, and there were again major overlaps. Interestingly, the most commonly cited disadvantage for each group of customers was directly related to the provisioning route chosen. Eostre's market-stall customers felt that the principal drawbacks of sourcing organic food through Eostre compared with supermarkets were related to convenience and accessibility (56% of stall customer respondents cited this problem). This included limited opening hours (the stall is open from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m., six days a week), and the difficulty of carrying heavy shopping bags back from the city centre. Higher prices was the second most often reported disadvantage of Eostre over supermarkets (26%), followed by poorer quality of produce (20%). In contrast, box scheme customers felt that the limited choice and inability to select produce was the biggest drawback compared with using a supermarket (50% gave this response) although many said that they personally did not find it a problem. Price was again the second most cited disadvantage (20%), followed by an acknowledgement that the range of produce available was more limited than a supermarket would offer (10%).

These preferences reveal the strengths and weaknesses of direct marketing compared with supermarkets for a specific group of committed direct marketing consumers. While the major reason to choose direct marketing over supermarkets is related to supporting local businesses and strengthening the local economy, and

could not easily be challenged by international supermarket chains, there are other preferences that might be incorporated into the mainstream food supply chain. These might include measures to reduce the packaging in supermarket food, or to source more produce locally, and might win the custom of less ideologically committed consumers. Conversely, by addressing the stated disadvantages that Eostre's customers report, it is conceivable that supermarkets might capture some of Eostre's market share (or, indeed, prevent it from expanding to a broader customer base) if they can provide fresh organic or local produce that is cheaper, more diverse, better in quality and/or more conveniently available.

If this happens, and current developments in supermarket provisioning suggest that it is a goal of the mainstream suppliers, the implication is that alternative food networks may be no more than a transitory phase in the adaptation of mainstream systems of provision to the demands of green and ethical consumers, but that this adaptation process results in a dilution of the radical transformative aims of those innovative system-builders. This process has been observed within the organics movement, as mainstream incorporation of organics has concentrated on the technical specifications of production systems while neglecting the deeper social change inherent in the organics movement's original aims. However, this transition of organics from niche to mainstream food production system has been accompanied by a splintering of the organic movement, ensuring that a renewed radical niche exists to continue to push for system-wide change (Smith 2006). This research finds that some of the motivations given for purchasing from a direct marketing initiative could, conceivably, be expressed through purchasing from supermarkets: certainly if organic certification of produce is the principal concern, then supermarket provisioning meets that need more than adequately. However, other issues are not so easily transferred into the mainstream supply chain: supporting a cooperative, keeping money in the local economy, having face-to-face contact with growers, increasing one's connection with the source of one's food and avoidance of big retailers on ethical or ideological ground are all aspects that appear to be the antithesis of the supermarket model.

5. Conclusions

This paper has considered the implications for direct marketing of the growing trend for supermarkets to promote locally sourced and organic produce. New research findings were presented from a study of the motivations of consumers of a local organic food cooperative, to examine customers' perceptions of direct marketing and supermarket systems of provision and test the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels. The hypothesis was confirmed: consumers expressed a wide range of economic, social, environmental and personal reasons for purchasing local organic food from the initiative, and many were quite deliberately avoiding supermarkets where possible and choosing to support the alternative food network instead. There was a strong sense of participation in an alternative infrastructure of provision based on different values to the mainstream, and consumers felt actively engaged in creating and supporting this system.

However, the customer group studied were highly motivated by sustainable consumption goals, and are not typical of average consumers. How would less committed consumers perceive the relative benefits of direct marketing and supermarket supply chains? Further research should investigate the responses of non-customers of the local organic food coop, to ascertain their values and priorities and reasons for choosing other food-provisioning systems. However, this study highlighted the specific strengths and weaknesses of direct marketing compared with supermarket provisioning, as perceived by the local organic coop's customers, in order to assess the opportunities and threats posed by supermarket supply chains. It suggests that direct marketers seeking to emphasise their unique advantages over supermarkets should focus on their beneficial local economic impacts, namely supporting local economies and growers. The biggest perceived weaknesses of direct marketing concern convenience and choice, for market stall and box scheme customers, respectively, and attention should be paid to improving these aspects for existing customers as well as to appeal to a wider market.

The implications of these findings for sustainable consumption are profound: while supermarkets offering organic and local produce may capture some of the consumer market for these goods, they remove support for other sustainability-related aspects of their production which are held as equally valuable by direct marketing consumers. Such developments attract customers with convenience and low price (Padbury 2006), but do not respond to consumers' expressed need for community-building, personal interactions between farmer and consumer, and for strengthening local economies and livelihoods against the negative impacts of globalisation. Consequently, the beneficial impacts of local and organic food consumption are reduced in scope, and the potential for alternative food networks such as local direct marketing initiatives to expand and increase their influence on food-provisioning systems is reduced. Therefore there is an urgent need for policymakers and analysts to recognise and demonstrate the wide-ranging benefits of direct marketing initiatives for sustainable consumption, to raise awareness of the interconnected social, economic and environmental issues surrounding food provisioning systems and to support initiatives seeking to construct alternative infrastructures of provision. These initiatives may never supersede the supermarkets, but they remain an important demonstration of an alternative – very practical – vision, one that is essential for the achievement of a sustainable food system.

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Notes

1. Such an alternative theoretical approach to sustainable consumption is proposed by a broad body of thought known collectively as the "new economics". This alternative approach to sustainable consumption emphasises localisation (to increase resilience and protect local economies against external shocks),

community-building (to create cohesive, inclusive communities), reducing material consumption (to reduce the environmental and social impacts of inequitably high resource use in the developed world), collective action (to overcome the limitations of individualism in solving collective problems) and the creation of new social infrastructure (to embody these values and enable people to express them in everyday life) (Robertson 1999, Schumacher 1993, Ekins 1986).

2. This case study was chosen as an exemplar of its type, an award-winning pioneer in local organic food networking, and a model of current best practice: in 2003 Eostre Organics won the Local Food Initiative of the Year award in the Soil Association's Organic Food Awards, given to the business or venture considered to have shown most "innovation and commitment in making good food locally available" (Eostre Organics 2004).

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