

Organic Food Demand: A Focus Group Study Involving Caucasian and African-American Shoppers

Abstract. A focus group study using four groups of food shoppers provides insights to consumers' knowledge, beliefs and behaviors regarding organic foods. Two focus groups consisted of shoppers who regularly bought organic foods and two focus groups who predominantly purchased conventional foods. Participants in one of the conventional groups were Caucasian and in the other were African-American. While familiarity with organic foods was much lower among the African-American group than the Caucasian group, the former was more receptive and positive towards organic foods. The African-American group was also more accepting of price premiums for organics foods. In comparing the two organic shopper groups with the two conventional shopper groups, it was found that the former was generally much more knowledgeable about organic foods. They were also more likely to be following a special diet than the Caucasian conventional shoppers. However, the organic shoppers' behavior varied widely; for example, several purchased only a few organic items, and many purchased numerous organic items, but just one participant purchased only organic food.

Key words: African-Americans, Consumer Demand, Focus Group Study, Organic Food.

Introduction

While less than one percent (0.3%) of US cropland and pasture in 2002 was devoted to certified organic crops and livestock (Economic Research Service, 2002, p 31), organic production is growing rapidly and sales of organic products in 2001 reached US\$ 9 billion or

Organic Food Demand

2%¹ of retail sales of food eaten at home (Economic Research Service, 2002, p 31; Economic Research Service, 2003, p 1). Between 1990 and 2001, sales have increased nine-fold, while certified organic acreage has more than doubled (Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 2; Economic Research Service, 2002, p 31; Organic Trade Association, 2003, p 1). The number of certified organic operations also doubled, to just under 7,000 operations in 2001 or about 0.3% of all US farms and ranches (Economic Research Service, 2002, p 31, 33). Growth has also occurred in Europe, where organic sales totaled approximately US\$9 billion in 2001 (Kortbech-Olesen, 2003, p 23).

Along with a dramatic increase in the production and sales of organic foods, the organic industry is changing in three significant ways. First, the types of organic products available to consumers are expanding. As of 2000, produce remained the most prevalent item purchased by consumers (42% of sales), however, other items, such as nondairy beverages, grains, processed foods and dairy products were growing in sales (Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 3; Organic Trade Association, 2003, p 1). The last decade has also witnessed twenty-fold and greater growth in the production of organic eggs and dairy, with organic meat expected to rise similarly after labeling standards for meat went into effect in 1999 (Economic Research Service, 2002, p 33, Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 5). Second, organic foods are becoming increasingly available to a broad range of consumers. While health food stores (48%) and direct marketing (3%) continue to provide important outlets, more organic foods are now sold in conventional stores (49%) than any other outlet (Packaged Facts, 2000, in Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 2). Seventy-three percent of conventional grocery stores also now carry organics (Food Marketing Institute, 2001, in Dimitri and Greene, 2001, p 1). Third, there are new federal regulations that provide a uniform standard

Organic Food Demand

for how organic foods can be grown, processed and marketed, and how the USDA organic labels can be applied.

The literature on the demand for organic food is not particularly deep and given the dramatic changes in organic food availability over the past decade, it should not be surprising that some of the findings have been somewhat contradictory. Most studies have focused on a few demographic correlates and a consistent pattern has not been found. This may be because demographic characteristics are imperfect proxies for what motivates people's food choices. Therefore, the goals of this paper are to examine what factors may affect the purchase of organic foods and to explore the attitudes, knowledge and behavior regarding organic purchases.

A focus group study, which is an appropriate method of investigating motivations and attitudes that affect behavior is conducted to investigate why some people buy organic food and to understand what may cause others not to buy it. The study investigated people's attitudes about food in general and organic food in particular. The study consisted of four (4) focus groups, two (2) of which were organic food shoppers and two (2) of which were conventional food shoppers. In order to investigate how race might interact with attitudes towards organic food by conventional shoppers, one all Caucasian and one all African-American focus group were conducted². Each of the four groups was asked a series of structured questions that differed between the conventional and organic shoppers only to reflect their different shopping behavior (see appendix for questions and the data section for details about the focus groups).

The advantage of a focus group is that it permits investigating what people do as well as why they do it. While focus group findings should not be extrapolated to the general population, they do provide a means of identifying fruitful areas for the collection of data, for example in survey designs, that can be used for generalization and prediction. The information from these focus

Organic Food Demand

groups can help guide directions for research on motivations, attitudes, knowledge and behavior regarding organic foods. This seems worthwhile given that existing findings about organic demand are limited.

Background

There appear to be some gaps in understanding which shoppers are buying organic food and why. This may stem from how organic purchasers are defined; studies reveal a wide range in who purchases such foods depending upon how the questions are asked. When asked if they purchase any organic foods “some of the time,” two different consumers surveys found 63 and 66 percent of consumers responded affirmatively (Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 6). When asked if they had purchased organic foods on their last shopping trip, 17% indicated that they had (The Packer, 2003, p 23), while the Hartman group found 3% of respondents were “regular” purchasers of organic foods (Hartman Group, 2000, in Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 6).

Previous studies found that people purchase organic food because they prefer to consume fewer chemicals in their food (63%) (The Packer, 2003, p 23) and for health or nutritional reasons (Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 6). Other reasons cited for purchasing organic foods were beliefs that organic food was better for them, better for the environment, that it tasted better, had a better appearance, and because it was increasingly available or convenient to purchase (The Packer, 2003, p 23; Dimitri and Greene, 2002, p 6). Factors that may affect demand for organic foods are: physical attributes of the food (appearance, availability, nutritional value, as well as where produced); lifestyle and attitudes of the purchaser (health concerns or views about the environment, choice of retail store, other activities), perceptions about organic food, and attitudes towards food labeling. Research from Denmark sheds some light on how all these variables

Organic Food Demand

interact to affect behavior. Wier and Andersen (2003, p. 2) divided motivations into those that directly affect the purchaser (health, taste and freshness attributes) and those that were external (environmental or animal welfare attributes). They found that the highest propensity to purchase organic foods were by the group that believed there were both direct and external benefits to organic foods.

Many investigations have looked only at basic demographic correlates, but these studies have not produced consistent findings. For example, the Packer (2002, p 34) found that male food shoppers were somewhat more likely to purchase organic foods than females (39 versus 33%). However, an earlier study by Byrne et al. (1991, p 56) found that male shoppers were 5% less likely to purchase organic foods than females, while other researchers found no gender difference (Thompson and Kidwell, 1998, p 283; Swanson and Lewis, 1993, p 143). This may reflect the different points in time in which the studies were made or simply that demographics are imperfect proxies for behavioral motivations.

Swanson and Lewis (1993, p 143) found no relationship with household size, while Thompson and Kidwell (1998, p 283) concluded that the presence of children under 18 years increased the likelihood of organic purchases. The Packer (2002, p 34) found that households without children were slightly more likely to purchase organic foods than those with children (35% versus 33%).

Goldman and Clancy (1991, p 92) found that middle age (30 to 49) consumers were most likely to purchase organic foods. The Packer (2002, p 33) found young people to be more likely to purchase organic food than old (44% of those aged 18 to 34 years as compared to 26% of those 65 or older); while Thompson and Kidwell (1998, p 283), Swanson and Lewis (1993, p 143) and Byrne et al. (1991, p 53) did not find age to be a significant factor in organic purchases.

Organic Food Demand

Research from Germany found that there were in fact two age groups that were most interested in organic; those being youth and seniors. Youth were motivated by concerns about the conventional food system, while the older shoppers were health-focused (Alvensleben and Altman, 1987, in Thompson, 2000, p 668).

The Packer (2002, p 33) also found that region was a strong factor associated with organic purchasers; 50% of those living in the West as opposed to approximately 30% in other regions of the US purchased organic foods.

Goldman and Clancy (1991, p. 92) did not find that household income was correlated significantly with organic purchases, though other researchers found it did play a role in consumers' willingness to pay for organic foods (Misra et al., 1991, p 225; Govindasamy and Italia, 1999, p 50; Wang and Sun 2003, p 12). Contradictions are also apparent when one compares research across countries. For example, studies in Scotland and Ireland found that households with higher incomes bought more organic foods (Davies et. al., 1995, p 21; Tregear et. al., 1994, p 25), while a Norwegian study found no relationship (Storstad and Bjørkhaug, 2003, p 155). How income is defined could affect the results; for example, Wier and Anderson (2003, p 2) defined income using food expenditures rather than full income and not surprisingly found that food expenditures were correlated with (generally more expensive) organic purchases.

Education also has not been clearly linked with organic purchases. Byrne et al. (1991, p 56) and Thompson and Kidwell (1998, p 284) found education to be inversely related to organic purchases, while Swanson and Lewis (1993, p 143) found the opposite and Wilkins and Hillers (1994, p 32) found no significant relationship between education and organic purchases among members of a food cooperative.

Organic Food Demand

Other types of studies are ones that investigate shoppers' willingness to pay more for organic food. They have mostly focused on demographic and income factors and have found that age, household income, and formal education are linked to willingness to pay more. Misra et al. (1991, p 224-225) found that gender was not a factor, but that people over 60 were more willing to pay more for organic food, as were people without a college education. Govindasamy and Italia (1999, p 51), Underhill and Figueroa (1996, p 65) and Wang and Sun (2003, p 10) found that younger consumers were more willing to pay than their older counterparts. Govindasamy and Italia (1999, p 48) also found that women and those with higher incomes were more willing to pay. Underhill and Figueroa (1996, p 65) also found those with higher incomes were more willing to pay for non-conventional foods.

These differences in findings could be due to differences in sampling methods, changes in attitudes or behavior over time, where and when the studies took place, or how questions were asked, but they do point to the need for further investigation. In addition, the expanding variety and availability of organic products, as well as changes in organic regulations and labeling, support continued exploration into consumer demand for organic food.

Description of the Focus Groups

The focus group study consisted of four focus groups with a total of 43 participants conducted in Madison, Wisconsin, in November 2002 and January 2003. Madison is a city of 200,000 people located in the middle of an agricultural county in a Mid-western state. The city has a four food cooperatives and four health food stores that feature organic foods. There are approximately 20 conventional grocery stores, some of which sell organic food items. There are also 14 grocery stores that specialize in Asian and/or Latino foods, more than 15

Organic Food Demand

convenience/liquor stores that sell food, and several other specialty stores including a *halal* butcher store. During the growing season there are also four farmers' markets located in the city, and some of the farmers' stands feature organic foods. Further, approximately 20 community supported agriculture initiatives cater to city residents, many of which offer organic produce (Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, 2004).

In terms of demographic and socio-economic characteristics, 2000 Census data revealed that 84% of the population is Caucasian, while 6% is African American, 6% is Asian, and 2% of Census respondents self-identified as being two or more races. The median income among city residents is approximately \$42,000, although this figure drops to \$29,000 for African Americans, a minority group important in this focus group study. Further, 78% of African Americans living in this urban center had a high school diploma or higher. This number rises to 92% for the general population. (US Census Bureau, 2004)

The subjects were all primary food shoppers or shared the responsibility of food shopping for the household. The study consisted of two groups of shoppers who regularly shop for organic foods ("Organic Food Shoppers") and two groups of shoppers who do not regularly shop for organic foods ("Conventional Food Shoppers"). All 43 participants were recruited from pre-existing groups or events. This is recommended in focus group methodology to facilitate candor and comfort among participants (Kreuger, 1994).

The organic food shoppers were recruited through the following channels: approaching participants in a local/organic food festival and at a Slow Food event, by posting an announcement in the newsletter of a natural foods cooperative and by sending an electronic invitation to members of a Slow Food convivium and to subscribers of a list serve on sustainability. They were screened to ensure that they were regular organic food purchasers.

Organic Food Demand

There were ten participants in one of the organic focus groups (Organic Group 1) and twelve in another (Organic Group 2). Participants were reminded by phone or email several days prior to the event. The focus groups were both conducted in the community room of a natural foods cooperative. Although it was hoped that among the organic food shoppers, there would be some minority participants, all the participants in the two organic focus groups were Caucasian. Given that one of the selection criteria for participating was being a primary food shopper, it is not surprising that the majority of the participants were women: Organic Group 1 included seven females and three males, ranging in age from 26 to 76 years, while Organic Group 2 included nine females and three males ranging in age from 22 to 47 years. Both groups had an average household size of 2.1 persons. In OG1, three participants were single, five were married or in a life relationship, and two were divorced or widowed; three households had incomes under \$30,000, four between \$30,000 and \$59,999, one between \$60,000 and \$89,999, and two above \$90,000. Two were in college, five had a bachelor's degree, and three had a graduate degree. In OG2, eight participants were single, two were married or in a life relationship, and two were divorced or widowed; seven households had incomes under \$30,000, four between \$30,000 and \$59,999, and one between \$60,000 and \$89,999. Nine had a bachelor's degree and three had a graduate degree.

The two conventional food shopper groups were both recruited from pre-established organizations. The members of one group were associated with a home economics alumni association that was holding a meeting at a retirement center. Participants were recruited through an announcement placed in the registration form for the meeting and were reminded of their commitment by phone the day before the event. The focus group was conducted prior to the beginning of the association's meeting. Although it was once again hoped that some participants

Organic Food Demand

would be from minority groups, all eleven were Caucasian. Participants were also all female, ranging in age from 21 to 79 (Conventional Group 1). Average household size was 2.3 persons. Four participants were single, four were married or in a life relationship, and three were divorced or widowed; five households had incomes under \$30,000, one between \$30,000 and \$59,999, three between \$60,000 and \$89,999, one above \$90,000, and one person declined to answer the income question. One person had a high school degree, two were in college, two had a bachelor's degree, and six had a graduate degree.

The question of how to recruit minorities to participate in this study was a crucial one. It was clear that it could not be left to chance; the study site is predominantly Caucasian and none of the participants in OG1, OG2 or Conventional Group 1 were minorities. Identifying an existing group of shoppers that was predominantly minority seemed to be the most efficient strategy. We were unable to identify a group that met regularly that included a mix of minority food shoppers, therefore we investigated groups along ethnic lines. An examination of Latino and Asian community organizations brought up issues of language and identity. To avoid the need for interpretation and fragmentation that would clearly inhibit the focus group process, it was decided to focus on African-Americans.

The search for a predominantly African-American preexisting group of shoppers led us to identify churches as important institutions and meeting places for African-American families. Therefore, the second conventional group was recruited from a bible study group that met weekly and the focus group was held prior to a midweek church service in the library of the organization's church. The ten participants, ranged in age from 26 to 60, were all female, and all were African American (Conventional Group 2). Average household size was 3.4 persons. Four participants were single and six were married; two households had incomes under \$30,000, four

Organic Food Demand

between \$30,000 and \$59,999, three between \$60,000 and \$89,999, and one participant did not answer the income question. Four had a high school degree or less, four had a two-year college degree, one had a bachelor's degree, and one had a graduate degree.

CG2 had a larger average household size than the other three groups and more children. Of the ten CG2 participants, six lived with a spouse and children, three were single parents and only one lived alone. Contrast this with CG1 in which five of the eleven participants lived alone, one lived with husband, children and grandchildren, and the rest lived with a spouse or roommate(s). Among the two organic groups, four out of the 22 lived alone, three had children, and the rest lived with a spouse or roommate.

Prior to beginning each of the four focus groups, the purpose of the study was explained and participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form. Participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their household composition and were given an honorarium. After these formalities, the lead author facilitated the sessions. Each question was read out loud as well as posted on a large flip chart. Participants were instructed that each person would have an opportunity to respond and that a consensus was not being sought. The participants sat around a large table and the direction of the responses was switched after each question. Each focus group lasted about two hours in which participants were asked to respond to the structured, open-ended questions. The questions were modified slightly between the conventional and organic groups to reflect different shopping behaviors regarding organic foods (see appendix for list of questions). In order to track responses, the sessions were recorded and transcripts were coded with numbers assigned to each participant. The demographic information collected in the questionnaire was also coded with each participant's number. This permitted an analysis of responses by household characteristics and also allowed for confidentiality.

Findings

All four groups were asked a series of structured, open-ended questions about their motivations, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors regarding organic foods. It should be noted that use of numbers should not give the impression that the results are generalizable; focus group studies are not intended to generate inferences about the wider population (Kreuger, 1994, p 108). In this case, the focus groups were conducted to explore motivations, knowledge, attitudes and behavior to identify potentially fruitful areas of investigation. In addition, focus group participants often chose not to mention an idea or concern if it was already addressed by another participant; so caution should be used about interpreting frequency of response.

In general, the differences in responses between the two organic focus groups were relatively minor. There were much greater differences in the responses between the conventional groups, with the African-American Conventional Group 2 (CG2) having some similarities with the Caucasian Conventional Group 1 (CG1), some similarities with the Organic Groups (OGs or OG1 and OG2) and some differences from all three other groups. Race appears to be an important factor and will be discussed further in the results.

Motivations

In order to understand the motivation for buying organic foods, all four focus groups were first asked what they thought were the most important characteristics of food in general. The purpose of this question was to investigate whether there were differences in the important characteristics identified by conventional (CG1 and CG2) and organic (OG1 and OG2) shoppers

Organic Food Demand

and between Caucasian and African-American shoppers. Taste was the most important factor for all four groups (26 out of 43 participants). One notable difference between the conventional and organic shoppers was that price was not mentioned as an important factor by any organic shoppers while about half of both conventional groups mentioned price as one of the most important characteristics after taste.

The concern about price does not appear to be tied directly to household income since OG1, CG1 and CG2 all had the same average household income, which was above the average income of OG2. Nor does per capita income appear directly linked to concern about price since CG2 had the highest average household size and CG1 had the smallest. However, CG1 also had the largest spread or variance in income, so it may be that low-income participants in CG1 and low per capita income in CG2 could be behind price concerns among the conventional shoppers. A closer look at the responses reveals that income does appear to be somewhat related in CG1, but not in CG2. Most (four out of five) of the low-income participants in CG1 spontaneously mentioned price as a barrier, while none of the low-income participants in CG2 did. A few (two out of seven) of the middle-income participants in CG2 mentioned price spontaneously, yet all in CG2 felt that the price premium for organic food was justified.

Among the participants in OG1 and OG2, the origin of food was the second most important aspect. After this, health or nutrition were mentioned followed by whether the food was organic. Other considerations mentioned less frequently were: whether food was non-GMO, fresh, safe, or what ingredients or labor practices were involved, or whether it was produced on small farms. Important food characteristics mentioned by only one person were: appearance, value, quality, animal welfare, whether food was vegan, whether food was ethnic (viewed as a positive characteristic), and the impact on the environment.

Organic Food Demand

The two conventional shopper focus groups (CG1 and CG2) were not as similar as the two organic shopper groups (OG1 and OG2). For the African-American group (CG2) nutrition/health/wholesomeness of food was equally as important as taste and this characteristic was not mentioned directly by any of the Caucasians (CG1). In contrast, about half of those in CG1 mentioned texture, which was not mentioned by any of the African-American participants. Appearance of food was also more important for the Caucasians than the African Americans, while freshness was more important to the African Americans than for the Caucasians. Concerns about fat, sugar, or calories were mentioned by fewer than a third of the participants in both groups, while quality was mentioned by a third of the African Americans and only one Caucasian participant. Two CG1 respondents also mentioned that convenience, serving size, and how they used food were important. Serving size and convenience were each mentioned by only one CG2 respondent.

The conventional focus groups had similar responses for taste and price, but participants in CG2 were much more concerned about nutrition and freshness of food while those in CG1 were much more concerned about appearance and texture of food. The level of concern about nutrition in CG2 was similar to that of the OGs. This may reflect priorities similar to organic shoppers, or it may reflect greater interest in nutrition information by CG2 over CG1. In addition, several CG2 respondents highlighted concerns about freshness. They said they consistently check dates on food, indicating that it was common to find food close to or past its “use by” date. This did not appear to be an issue of concern among OGs or CG1.

The similarity between CG2 and the OGs may be grounded in health and diet concerns. All three groups had similar incidence of dietary restrictions in their households (two-thirds of the participants vs. less than a third for CG1). However, there were differences in the types of

Organic Food Demand

dietary restrictions between the OGs and CG2; many of the organic shoppers had vegetarian or vegans in their households, while CG2 participants tended to follow special diets based on health problems or because they did not eat pork.

Knowledge, Familiarity, and Trust

As expected, OG1 and OG2 were much more familiar and knowledgeable about organic foods than CG1 and CG2. However, what was surprising was that the participants in CG2 were more accepting or trusting group of organic labels than any of the other three groups. The OGs were able to accurately define the organic standards and provide all the major categories of production restrictions (no synthetic or petroleum based fertilizers or pesticides, no GMOs, no antibiotics, no irradiation, no hormones, as well as identify the Californian and Oregon standards for organic certification). There was less knowledge among conventional food shoppers (CGs) and nearly all participants stopped after saying “no chemicals.” There was only one response in the CG1 that organic meant no GMOs, no hormones, or no antibiotics, and three in the CG2 indicating there were no preservatives. While the OGs were able to provide more precise and detailed information about the definition of organic, all four groups generally defined organic as meaning “no chemicals.” In OG1 there were some who recognized that certain chemicals were permissible.

Respondents also associated organic food with other factors that are not required in the USDA standards. Among the OGs, one respondent interpreted organic to mean fresh from the farm. Two others talked about the importance of the food being locally produced or knowing the farmer. Two defined organic to mean more care was taken in production; one that it was a

Organic Food Demand

regenerative production process; one that it generally required smaller farms; and one mentioned that it was more expensive.

Among the conventional shoppers, organic food was viewed much more positively by CG2 than CG1. Among the CG2 participants, the most frequently cited definition of organic was that it was expensive and nearly half said that it meant the food was “home grown”. Two felt it was better for you. While one each indicated that it was higher quality and natural. Two of the CG1 participants indicated that organic food was “good for you” in a tone of derision, two associated it with small and unattractive produce, two indicated spontaneously that it was more expensive, and two indicated that they associated it with different cultures that they did not identify with (one associated it with wealthy, older yuppies and another with young hippies). One perceived it as fresher, while another as more perishable.

There was skepticism among some in OG1 and OG2 about whether one could trust that a product was indeed organic, but this skepticism was almost universal among CG1 and largely absent from CG2. In defining organic foods, CG1 shoppers were much more familiar with, opinionated about, and skeptical of organic foods than the CG2 shoppers. Over half of CG1 indicated some level of ambiguity or lack of confidence in whether one could trust that food labeled as organic was actually organic:

When you have cattle in the pasture, how do you know that the grass in that pasture isn't contaminated? You know that the seed at various times of the year is coming from all places, so it could be coming from—I keep calling it contaminated, but what I'm trying to say is something that could have a pesticide.

Organic Food Demand

I would never seek it [organic food] out....How do you know that those beans or whatever [are organic], I mean what about groundwater? There are so many ifs ands and buts. How do you know?

Among CG2, there was less distrust (only one person) and there was also less familiarity with organic; most associated organic food with produce only.

In OG1 and OG2 many (15 out of 22) people talked about cheating and trust. For some it was important to know the person who grew their food in order to trust that it was organic. While many respondents were negative towards corporations, one person indicated that getting to know the stores or companies and their policies was a way of finding out how food is produced. Two people mentioned growing their own food to reassure themselves about what is used, while another expressed concern that even if one grew their own, it would be impossible to know the entire history of the soil the crops were grown in. While some people felt it was sufficient to know who produced the food, others felt that individuals could be dishonest. Therefore, one needed to know more than simply who produced the food; one needed to get to know the farmer. There were varying degrees of trust in certification. Several indicated that they relied on certification simply because it was too time consuming to personally verify the source of all their food. Three indicated they put their trust in their food cooperatives because they did not have time to check on the source of every food item.

Participants in both OG1 and OG2 discussed the expansion of organic production and most comments reflected a negative reaction to this expansion. Several mentioned concerns about the entry of large corporations and whether the national USDA standards were less stringent than the state standards had been. Two mentioned that they preferred small, local producers rather than

Organic Food Demand

large corporations producing organic; another mentioned that standards might be different for a small-scale producer versus a large corporation. Local production was viewed positively as it was assumed that less energy was used for transportation, although on a per unit basis this may not always be the case.

Something can be labeled organic that has been shipped halfway across the world, that's very unsustainable.

However, two mentioned that larger production meant more access for consumers. Another comment was that certification provided assurance to consumers anywhere in the country that a product was organic. Many agreed.

OG1 and OG2 were much more familiar with the range of organic foods available than CG1 and CG2, though it was clear that the primary foods that all respondents associated with organic were produce. However, CG2 participants were completely unfamiliar with organic milk and most were unfamiliar with organic meat, eggs, or processed foods.

Purchasing Behavior: Organic Food Shoppers

Among the OGs, all the participants purchased organic produce. However, there was a wide variation in other types of organic food purchased and in the overall amount of organic food purchased. Only one of the 22 organic shoppers purchased exclusively organic food. Two more purchased all organic except bread and fish. A few (three out of 22) participants mentioned a couple of items of organic produce as the only items they purchased regularly. When asked if

Organic Food Demand

there were certain items that they would only purchase if organic, participants mentioned the following: bananas, strawberries, coffee, eggs, soy, dairy, meat, and lettuce. Most (16 out of 22) participants bought (mostly) organic produce as well as some other items such as eggs, chicken, soy products, grains, pulses, and/or bread. One person mentioned they preferred local to organic foods.

When asked about organic products they would not buy, generally OG respondents would buy everything organic if it were available, however, cost was mentioned by more than half as being a limiting factor. One person specifically mentioned that they would not buy organic foods out of season because of price. One person mentioned organic wines as being of inferior quality until recently. Two people mentioned that specific candies or snack foods might not be as good if they were organic. Another mentioned that their children would only eat conventional breakfast cereal.

The participants in the OGs regularly purchased organic food at an average of three types of outlets. Most (82%) purchased organic food at a food cooperative. The second most prevalent source was at a farmers' market (59%). A conventional grocery store was used by 41%; 41% also used a natural foods chain store, 23% purchased from a local health food store, 23% from a CSA, 18% directly from a farmer, and 5% from a neighborhood market.

All those in OG1 and OG2 perceived organic food to be more expensive than conventional food. Some said it was as high as two to three times the price of conventional counterparts. Among OG2, several respondents mentioned that the price differential seemed to be declining over time and that occasionally organic items could be as cheap or cheaper than conventional items. Most respondents had no specific estimate of the difference. Some saw the differential as opportunistic rent seeking, while others acknowledged that the cost of production might be

Organic Food Demand

higher, or that farmers may be faced with lower and/or greater variation in yield. One person recognized that low demand for organic foods might mean supply was smaller and hence price higher. Another said that as demand increases the price should come down. One person expressed a sentiment many agreed with, "That's pretty strange, they are charging us more money to leave out one of the ingredients."

Many (13 out of 22) respondents pointed out that the current system subsidizes conventional agriculture and the price of conventional food does not reflect either the costs of the subsidies or the impacts of conventional production on the environment. One person added that the current system has an additional social cost of farmers going out of business or struggling to be financially viable. One person mentioned how cheap food was in the US compared to other countries; another pointed out that while food was cheap, people were not willing to pay more for food even though they were willing to pay large amounts for entertainment or a second home.

A few (three out of 22) individuals said they did not feel food in the US was cheap if one is poor. Two people said that fast food was often the best bargain and more should be done to make healthy foods affordable to the poor. This opened up a discussion of access to food and food as a basic human right. One person mentioned financial problems and how organic food was out of reach for those with low income, "With a food stamp allowance, a month's worth of food stamps won't buy you a month's worth of organic food."

Purchasing Behavior: Conventional Food Shoppers

The Caucasian (CG1) shoppers were somewhat more likely than the African-American group (CG2) to have purchased organic food at some time (55% versus 40%), despite the fact that their

Organic Food Demand

attitude towards organic foods was not as positive as CG2. Reasons given by the CG participants for buying organic food were: taste; appearance; it was featured in a demonstration; it was the only product available at the time; and in the case of a shopper who bought a side of beef directly from a farmer, the overriding factor was price. Indeed, the shopper found out that the beef was organic only after she bought it.

Among those who had not bought organic, cost was most frequently cited as the reason why. Among some in CG1, however, there was an aversion towards organic as being something that seemed to violate their value system. This came out stronger when asked about what organic products they would consider buying. Two different participants in CG1 made these comments:

I would never consider buying organic. Ever.

The people, in my mind, [who eat organic food] I picture as 'back to nature.' People who have been in communes or whatever, people growing their own food...It seems to be cultural.

About half of CG1 would consider buying organic produce, two would not consider buying any organic products, and two would not purposely seek out organic food. Among CG2 there was more varied interest in organic foods: produce was mentioned by 80% of the participants, but processed items, spices, tea, juice, desserts, nuts, and honey were also mentioned.

When asked what items they would not buy, about half of the CG1 participants said there were no products they would not buy, three mentioned meat and/or poultry due to concerns about food safety or price of the organic product, and two mentioned they would not buy organic food

Organic Food Demand

if it were not attractive. Among CG2, 60% said they would not buy organic milk. This seemed to arise from unfamiliarity with organic milk and how milk could be produced organically. The participants were surprised that milk could be produced organically and that it involved using organic feed but no hormones or antibiotics. One also indicated she would not eat organic meat, while 40% indicated that there was no food they would not buy that was organic.

All respondents in both CG1 and CG2, except one who declined to respond at all, indicated that they thought organic food was more expensive than conventional food. However, there were differences between the groups about why that was the case. In CG1 there was a strong and vocal minority (three out of 11) that felt that organic food was simply a con. Most (seven out of 11) of the participants in CG1 felt that the price difference was probably justified because it probably cost more to produce; however, they said little to articulate why this might be so.

Among the participants in CG2 however, all felt that the price differential was justified and the responses were far more detailed and richer as to why. Respondents spontaneously discussed production aspects such as lower yield, the need to use more labor to weed, potentially lower quality due to pest damage, the need for more management as well as labor. In addition, they identified marketing aspects, such as a low supply that would raise the price, low demand that meant low volume and, hence, a need for the farmer to receive a higher price, and higher marketing costs.

I think it is costly, but also I have to wonder that if everyone was buying organic, would it be as costly?

Organic Food Demand

CG2 also spontaneously brought up social justice and agricultural policy issues regarding organic foods:

Why is organic food in demand? And why is it being produced? If the answer is because there are concerns about pesticides, growth hormones, antibiotics, irradiation and all that type of stuff, why can't it be stopped and more effort put into producing organic food across the board, rather than having certain groups of farmers, when it is know that it's going to be more expensive and it's going to be out of the reach of a certain class...If organic is good, and the government knows it, and the USDA continues to subsidize some food, why can't they subsidize organic food in such a way so that when you go to the supermarket, across the board, it's the same price for the rich and the poor?

This led to a discussion about how wealth gives people many choices, from food to medicine, and there are simply no other options for the poor. The government was seen as providing subsidies for a variety of agricultural programs (and others) that do not provide benefits to the poor. There was strong support for redirecting government programs to benefit the poor rather than the rich:

The government should subsidize (organic) food so that it's more available and more affordable for more people.

The discussion also extended to talking about population growth and how the trend of younger generations leaving farming for better opportunities has led to increased reliance on

Organic Food Demand

machinery to ensure adequate yields. This was viewed as risky for both food security and for social justice:

Instead of one farmer feeding the whole village and then needing all the pesticides and growth hormones to catch up, why doesn't he bring in 300 farm hands and pay them a living wage? Pay them a living wage to feed other people.

This sensitivity regarding social justice and government policies, particularly regarding the poor, no doubt are influenced by their racial experiences in America. However, it should be noted that other important characteristics of the CG2 participants were that their household size was much larger and that they had more children than the other groups. This may heighten their social concerns by extending their focus beyond themselves, particularly to their children and future generations.

Conclusions

This focus group study provides some insights and directions for further investigations into the role of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of shoppers towards organic food purchases. Previous research has tried to capture demographic characteristics of organic purchasers, but has yielded inconclusive findings, perhaps because of differences in sampling methods, changes in attitudes or behavior over time, where and when the studies took place, how questions were asked, or that demographics are poor proxies for peoples' motivations to buy organic food.

Organic Food Demand

This focus group study confirms that looking at gender, income, education, and children may yield contradictory results because people's motivations are complex. This study suggests that more needs to be done to investigate how attitudes and experiences motivate organic food purchases in general as well as purchases of particular types of organic foods. The focus groups suggest that concerns about health and nutrition as well as dietary restrictions in the household would appear to be two very fruitful indicators linked to positive attitudes towards organic foods.

The organic shopper participants were, not surprisingly, more familiar with and knowledgeable about the range of organic foods, as well as certification and labeling issues. However, a larger number of the organic than the conventional shoppers had concerns about whether organic foods were really organic. Organic shoppers used various strategies of reassurance: knowing the farmer or the farm the food was from, trusting one's coop to ensure that the food was organic, or trusting third party certification. A common characteristic of the organic food shoppers was that they frequently had restricted diets, most often vegetarian. They also frequently brought up environmental and energy concerns as motivations for buying organic. Their purchasing behavior varied from buying a few organic items regularly to one person who bought all organic food. Most of the organic shoppers bought nearly all organic produce along with a few other organic items.

The focus group study also found that familiarity and price are two key barriers to buying organic foods. While organic food is increasingly available in a wider venue of outlets, in Madison, Wisconsin, where the study took place, organic foods are largely available at food cooperatives, health food stores and in the grocery stores located in relatively more affluent, Caucasian neighborhoods. The lack of familiarity with organic foods by African-Americans in the focus group may be linked to their availability since organic foods are not widely available in

Organic Food Demand

the stores in African-American neighborhoods in the study site. Thus, it should not be surprising that in the focus groups, Caucasians were far more familiar with organic foods than African-Americans. Indeed, most research has found organic food shoppers to be Caucasian. However, this study suggests that this may be an effect of marketing strategies, rather than a cause. Although African-American participants were found to be the least familiar with organic foods, they were more positive about organic food than the Caucasian conventional shopper participants in terms: of willingness to try organic foods, trusting organic labels and believing that the price premium for organic foods was justified. African-Americans in this study also demonstrated more familiarity with food production, more awareness of economic forces and government policy, more concerned about nutrition, health, and social justice, and were more likely to read labels, as well as trust the federal agencies behind the labels. These characteristics were more similar to the Caucasian organic food shoppers than the conventional Caucasian shoppers. Further, the African-American shoppers had levels of dietary restrictions similar to organic shoppers, though they tended to be for health reasons rather than being vegetarian. Thus, if demand by African-Americans is indeed limited by access and familiarity, and the generally positive attitudes found in this study are widespread, African-Americans could represent a potential market for organic foods. Further investigation is needed to verify this.

Other findings that might be useful for producers and retailers to investigate further are the levels of familiarity with different types of organic foods. The greatest familiarity found in this study was with organic produce; there was much less knowledge about organic meat, milk, and processed products. This was linked to negative attitudes among Caucasian conventional shoppers towards organic meat and poultry and with negative attitudes towards organic milk among African-American conventional shoppers in the study. However, it is clear that among

Organic Food Demand

most conventional shoppers in this study, there is generally a positive attitude towards organic foods, especially produce that was more familiar to them.

The focus group study also identifies important directions for policy research. Despite being less familiar with organic foods as well as the group with the lowest level of formal education, the African-American participants were able to articulate more clearly than the organic shoppers and the Caucasian conventional shoppers why organic foods often cost more than conventional foods. While the two groups of organic shoppers spoke in generalities about organic food reflecting the real environmental costs of production, the African-American shoppers, though much less familiar with organic foods, identified additional labor costs, potentially lower yields, smaller scale operations and higher marketing costs associated with organic production as reasons for higher prices. They were the only group to specifically propose changing current agricultural and other government program policies to promote organic production and increase access to organics foods by the poor. The African-American focus group emphasized that federal agricultural policy has a responsibility to make organic food equally available to poor people. Further research is needed to identify whether these beliefs are widespread and hence whether African-Americans are a constituency that would support modifying US agricultural policy to promote organic agriculture. Further, the African Americans participants pointed to social justice as a motivation for policy change, a reason that has largely been overlooked by proponents of organic agriculture.

Another direction of future policy research is to identify how widespread the skepticism is among both organic and Caucasian conventional food shoppers regarding whether foods labeled as organic are really organic. Of particular interest is whether the USDA organic labels, recently implemented, will address these concerns.

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Appendix

Questions for conventional food buyers

1. What are the most important characteristics of food for you?
2. What does the term organic mean to you?
3. Have you ever bought organic food? If so describe why or why not? What would you need to be reassured that it is organic?
4. What organic foods would you consider buying or have you bought? Why or why not?
5. Are there foods you would never consider buying organic? Why?
6. Do you think there is a price differential between organic and conventional food, if so what is it? If there is a difference, is it justified?

Questions for organic food buyers

1. What are the most important characteristics of food for you?
2. What does the term organic mean to you?
3. What would you need to be reassured that it is organic? What does organic certification mean to you?
4. What organic foods do you buy on a regular basis? Why?
5. Where do you buy organic food and why?
6. Are there foods you would never consider buying organic? Why?
7. Do you think there is a price differential between organic and conventional food, if so what is it? If there is a difference, is it justified?

- 1 That sales are nearly ten times the proportion of land used to produce them is attributed to a higher cropping rate on organic land, price premiums for organic food and that most food labeled as organic does not contain 100% organic ingredients (Kuminoff and Wossink, 2001, p 2)
- 2 We were not able to recruit any minorities who were regular organic shoppers, which would have permitted us to examine whether there were differences by race between conventional and organic shoppers. The lack of regular organic shoppers among minorities appears to be linked to available shopping venues, among other factors. At the study site, organic foods tend to be concentrated in retail stores, food coops and health food stores that are located in predominately Caucasian neighborhoods and neighborhoods tend to be highly segregated in Wisconsin.