

Engaging Consumers in the Dynamic Local Foods Marketplace

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This theme is the second in a *Choices* series examining local food coming of age. While the first theme focused largely on policy, rhetoric, and economic impacts, this theme focuses on the consumer viewpoint. Where, how, and even why people make their food purchase decisions has direct implications for local food system engagement opportunities for producers.

Many of the recent and disruptive changes that have been observed in the U.S. food system include major food retailer mergers, last mile distribution strategies, consumer search and procurement technology, and consumer demand for better communication and assurances about the credence attributes associated with their food. These have each in their own way created currents that impact the direction of local food systems.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Ag Marketing Service has monitored growth in farm markets—in terms of number, sales, and influence—since the mid-1990s. During this time, various economists have studied shopper trends at these markets (e.g., Brown, 2001; Brown and Miller, 2008; Nie and Zepeda, 2011; Zepeda, 2009; Zepeda and Li, 2006). As market numbers have leveled off and veteran markets have themselves adapted to changing patron preferences and behavior, these markets benefit from continued examination.

Zepeda and Carroll look at the Dade County Farmers' Market in Madison, WI, one of the oldest and most established farm markets in Wisconsin, in an effort to provide current insights into consumer shopping patterns, product preferences, and market experiences. This article offers a useful insight into a mature market. Their results suggest that the quality of the market experience and loyalty factors that have always been a trademark of farm markets still drive expenditures per visit. Expected factors (income, value-added products, nutrition awareness, and others) also play an important role explaining expenditures. As consumer purchasing approaches evolve, however, farm market vendors will benefit from knowing how to keep their engagement with these buyers relevant.

Consumer demand for clarity and objectivity in local branding, a task picked up by many state departments of agriculture, has evolved along with the changing local foods landscape. Naasz, Jablonski, and Thilmany examine Colorado Proud purchase patterns in an effort to characterize dimensions of value (experience, credence, and search) that may influence the value placed on state brands procured through traditional market channels relative to direct purchases from producers. This article considers the public/private roles of branding, as the authors propose and examine an array of private and public attributes often bundled in local food products that may inform state program managers on how to frame and promote their state brands.

The final article explores grocers' newer entry into the local food marketing space, a strategy that may align with the state brands also considered in this issue. This growth is in tandem with the USDA's observation of the increasing importance of intermediated partners in local food distribution (Low et al., 2015; Low and Vogel, 2011). Woods, Asgari, and Rossi extend a framework of legitimacy out of the business school literature for grocers and other retailers to consider in order to better engage those who value locally sourced products. They argue that trust is particularly important within this consumer group and that some retailers may weaken overall

opportunities for local products through this channel if they implement practices with weak transparency regarding what they are actually selling as local. The authors draw on a national survey to explore what they identify as core consumer preferences and find that retailers can potentially draw on improving signaling strategies that include better certification and support of related values reflected through partnerships and conducted across the local supply chain. Potential strategies include emphasizing quality aspects of locally sourced products as well as adapting in-store shopper engagement to emphasize the relational and community aspects of local products.

For More Information

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