Project *brief*

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How can trust in "organic" be strengthened in a targeted way?

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- **Demand for organic products has risen sharply in Germany. At the same time, however, there is a loss of trust in these products and in the organic value chain.**
- **Consumers differ greatly in their trust in organic food and perceive various aspects that undermine trust.**
- **The organic sector must respond to this loss of trust by implementing appropriate communication measures tailored to the target groups.**

Background and objective

Due to the increasing demand for organic products, a decreasing proportion of these foods is sold through direct marketing, but instead through general food retailers, especially discounters. Although this allows for more consumers to be reached, there is also a risk of a loss of trust due to the growing distance between consumers and producers.
However, trust is important because organic products have characteristics that cannot be verified by consumers themselves (e. g. the absence of chemical synthetic pesticides). This trust can be among other things established through information. Labels are often used for this purpose. However, as consumers are often not only sceptical about labels but also often do not know what the different labels mean, further target group-specific communication channels are needed.
The aim of this project is to develop recommendations for trust-building consumer communication for the organic sector. To this end the following and other research questions were investigated:

RQ1. How do consumers perceive organic food? Why do they buy organic food and why not?
RQ2. Which aspects increase trust, which reduce it, and what is crucial for consumers in order to have trust in organic food?
RQ3. What communication media do consumers prefer to use in order to obtain information about organic food, and which media should be used to convey this information?
RQ4. What type of consumers can be identified with regard to organic food and trust in it?

Approach

In the first step, semi-structured interviews were conducted with consumers (n=61) in Göttingen (March 2020) and Duisburg (May 2020). The interviews in Duisburg had to be conducted by telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was followed by ten group discussions with consumers (n=60), which also had to take place online.
Finally, based on the results of the qualitative studies, a Germany-wide online survey of consumers (n=1546) was conducted. Respondents were recruited in advance based on their frequency of purchasing organic food (self-assessment), resulting in 493 non-purchasers, 516 occasional purchasers and 537 frequent purchasers participating. The survey answered the fourth research question (RQ4) and also quantified the results of the previous questions. The data was evaluated using factor, cluster and discriminant analysis, among other methods, in order to segment consumers and analyse the groups further.

Results

RQ 1: Organic products are often perceived as too expensive and organic labels as untrustworthy. Consumers often have doubts about the organic quality of food and misconceptions about organic production due to a lack of knowledge.
The most important reasons for purchasing organic products are the absence of antibiotics in animal husbandry and the absence of synthetic chemical pesticides in crop cultivation. The highest price of organic food and the fact that it is often unclear where the price difference compared to conventional food comes from and how organic food differs from the conventional alternative are cited as the biggest barriers for a purchase. In addition, regionality is often more important to respondents than organic.

RQ 2: Factors that reduce trust are:

- Doubts about actual organic production. These are reinforced by the fact that there are too many different organic labels.
- Too many organic labels. There are too many labels and consumers do not know which guidelines the labels represent and which labels are trustworthy. The EU organic label in particular is not trusted.

Factors that increase trust:

- Trust in well-known producers/retailers. This can be explained, on the one hand, by greater transparency (compared to supermarkets or discounters). On the other hand, shopping at farm shops or weekly markets is characterised by personal contact and the opportunity to ask questions.
- Trust in organic farmer associations such as Demeter or Bioland. These are trusted more than, for example, the German or EU organic labels.
- Transparency regarding the origin of food, how it is produced and how animals are kept.

In order to have trust, consumers particularly want a uniform label, information about the meaning of organic labels, the origin of the product and animal welfare, and the opportunity to check these aspects. These checks could be made possible through open days, websites or QR codes.

RQ 3: Product packaging, QR codes and the internet in general are particularly preferred as means of communication. Consumers want to be informed about the above-mentioned aspects directly at *the point of sale*. The information should be limited to the most necessary and important details and communicated in an easily understandable way.
It is also important to consumers who provides this information: they say that they have the most trust in research institutions, producers and farmers associations.

RQ 4: The online survey identified three consumer segments:

1. "People who trust organic" (31.5%):
These consumers are slightly older than those in the third segment but younger than those in the second, are predominantly employed (77%) and have a higher income than consumers in the other segments. Their level of education and vocational training is also higher overall. Here, most people live in households of two to four people, but the proportion of households with children under 18 is highest (30.4%). This segment includes 39.2% occasional buyers and 53.2% intensive buyers. These respondents have a positive attitude towards and trust in organic food and possible sources of information. They perceive the potential risks, such as the use of synthetic chemical pesticides in the production of organic food or inadequate controls as low and assume that organic food is produced with significantly more care.

2. "People who are sceptical" (19%):
This group includes 61.8% of non-buyers. They are very aware of the risks associated with organic food and are very critical of it. Compared to the other segments, these consumers are older, least likely to be employed (64.5%), have lower incomes and a lower level of education. Here, too, most people live in households with two to four people (62.8%), but only 17.7% of households have children under the age of 18.

3. "Ambivalent" (49.5%):
Compared to the other segments, this segment includes slightly younger consumers, 74.8% of whom are employed, with incomes ranging mainly between €1,300 and €5,000, and more than half (56.3%) have a university or technical college degree. The majority have a high or medium level of vocational training and live in households with two to four people (67.2%). However, only 25.2% of households have children under the age of 18. Intensive, occasional and non-buyers of organic food are each represented by approximately one third. These consumers are characterised by their unspecific attitude towards organic food, i. e. they are neither particularly positive nor particularly sceptical about it. On the other hand, they perceive the potential risks of buying organic food as relatively high. However, they are characterised by their trust: this group has a particularly strong trust in personal sources such as family and friends or farmers.

Conclusion

In order to increase consumer trust in organic food, we recommend communication tailored to the various segments. The focus should be on the people who trust organic and those who are ambivalent. The latter group in particular offers potential for the organic sector: on the one hand, almost half of those surveyed can be assigned to this group and, on the other hand, appropriate marketing measures can encourage currently ambivalent (occasional) buyers to increase their purchases of organic food. The people who trust organic should also be further encouraged in their (purchasing) behaviour.
These consumers can be successfully targeted through appropriate communication, which should primarily be carried out by research institutions, producers and farmers associations.
Product packaging, QR codes and the internet in general are particularly suitable communication media.
Simply having access to information can increase consumer trust.

Further information

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