



Consumer information paradox: The evolution of consumer motivations and behaviours

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Increased interest in responsible and authentic food production and consumption results in more information appearing on food labels. At the same time, the basic principles of consumer food choice do not change: consumer decision-making is mostly simple, fast and based on habit. How can we reconcile the need to give more information on food products with consumers' reluctance to engage in deliberation when buying food?

Professor Klaus Grunert

The basics of consumer behaviour

Consumers buy food for many different reasons: for pleasure, for nutrition, to have new experiences, to show who they are.¹ Food products are plentiful and differ in the extent to which consumers believe they live up to each of these demands. Consumers thus have to make a lot of choices involving multiple trade-offs. In order to avoid information overload and cognitive stress, consumers therefore resort to making simplified decisions.

Human decision-making is often divided into two categories—the highly conscious, deliberate, high effort decisions, and the semi-conscious, spontaneous, simplified decisions.² Most food purchases are in the second category. Consumers don't spend a lot of time making food decisions, they ignore a lot of the information available, and they base their decisions on a few key criteria. Typical key criteria are price

and brand, but many choices are based on habit.³

The responsibility and authenticity trends

While consumers use relatively little information to make a food choice, we currently have more information on food labels than ever before.

Responsibility trend

Consumers are under pressure to take more responsibility for the consequences of their choices. Decades of discussion on healthy eating have resulted in pressure to make healthy choices, and more recently this has been expanded to include pressure to make sustainable choices. The food industry has responded to this trend by increasingly positioning food products in terms of their healthfulness and sustainable production. Healthfulness and sustainability, however, are intangible product characteristics; they need to be communicated. Hence, we have seen a proliferation of nutrition information, health logos, health claims, and eco labels on food products.⁴⁻⁶

Authenticity trend

There is also an increasing interest in food that is perceived as truthful, honest, and sincere, which has led to an increasing interest in the origins and production of food.⁷ Local foods, traditional foods, minimally processed foods are all facets of the authenticity trend. Just like responsibility, authenticity needs to be communicated.

The responsibility and authenticity trends have opened up for new ways of positioning food products in terms of intangible characteristics that need to be communicated to the consumer. But at the same time, the basic ways in which consumers choose food—by simplified, often habitual decisions, without use of a lot of information—have not changed. How can this paradox be solved?

Personalised technology: Paradox solution

Modern information technology can be the solution to this paradoxical problem. There is a wealth of mobile applications that aim to help consumers in choosing food. None of them has been a breakthrough success (a recent study on use of a decision-aid app showed that the major use of it was for making shopping lists⁸). The reason is that these technological aids mostly result in even more information being available. They increase the information load further instead of reducing it.

But technological aids have the potential to reduce the information load. They need to be personalised. A device filtering information using a personalised information profile could help consumers to reconcile simplified decision-making with the increased interest in responsibility and authenticity, as well as overall health.

Consumers or shoppers?

But if the food industry seriously wants to come into contact with consumers in order to inform them about their products, perhaps they should treat consumers indeed as consumers – and not only as shoppers. For consumers, buying food is a means, not a goal. They buy food in order to produce meals. They simplify their food choices in order to survive in a complex shopping environment, but that does

not imply that they are not interested in their meals. It may be difficult to communicate with consumers about their shopping, but it may be easier to communicate with them about their meals. A stronger focus on meal production as a supplement to the current focus on purchasing may open up for new possibilities in communicating with consumers.

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