

Farmer Consumer Partnerships - FCP

Annual Abstract template:

Project title and acronym:	Farmer Consumer Partnerships (FCP)
Contact details of coordinator:	Prof. Dr. Ulrich Hamm and Dr. Katrin Zander University of Kassel, Agricultural and Food Marketing Steinstrasse 19, D-37213 Witzenhausen Phone: +49-(0)5542-98-1285 or -1282 Fax: +49-(0)5542-98-1286 e-mail: hamm@uni-kassel.de or k.zander@uni-kassel.de www.uni-kassel.de/fb11cms/alm
Period Covered:	January to December 2009

Popular description of project progress and summary of results (1-2 pages).

The main objective of the CORE Organic project 'Farmer Consumer Partnerships' is to determine how the commitment of small and medium sized organic enterprises to ethical values can be communicated to customers in order to strengthen the companies positioning in the market. This will be achieved by developing and testing different ethical communication arguments. The project is run by six universities and research institutes that have a strong involvement in the organic sector in five partner countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the UK). The project is coordinated by Prof Ulrich Hamm from the University of Kassel, Witzenhausen and is funded by the CORE Organic ERA-net partnership (<http://www.coreorganic.org/>). For further details see <http://fcp.coreportal.org/>.

The main activities in this reporting period belong to work packages (WP) 4 and 5. The aim of WP 4 (responsible partner 'Università Politecnica delle Marche', Ancona) was to elaborate and to test new communication concepts based on the outcome of previous work packages. According to the results of WP3 the most important attributes from the consumers' perspective are 'animal welfare', 'local production' and 'fair prices'. For each of these attributes two different arguments were framed in WP4. The attributes and arguments were to be tested by focus group discussions in all five partner countries. It was decided to test the attributes with the product 'eggs'. An advertising company designed six different egg labels expressing the ethical arguments in words (slogan and body text) and symbols. The labels had a relatively strong emotional character with a heart in the centre of the ethical messages. In all study countries the same labels and texts were used (the facts were translated to the respective country language). All labels featured the respective national organic logos.

The new product labels were tested in three focus group discussions (FGD) in each of the study countries Austria, Germany, Switzerland and United Kingdom. In Italy a total of six FGD was conducted. Participants of the FGD were recruited according to socio-demographic criteria reflecting the distribution of men and women and age groups among food shoppers. Only organic eggs buyers, either regular or occasional buyers, were asked to participate.

The participants discussed the labels extensively under the headings of perception, evaluation and effectiveness of each label. When finishing the FGD the participants were asked to fill in individual questionnaires. These were aimed to measure participants' reactions and responses to the labels arguments and their general attitude towards advertising. Five different measures were used in the questionnaires to evaluate participants attitudes towards the eggs labels: emotional quotient (label liking), believability and effectiveness (willingness to buy). A general measure of attitude towards advertising was used. Ten days after the FGD took place, participants' recall of the labels was tested by structured telephone interviews.

In general, UK, DE and CH consumers did not like the emotional character of the labels. The participants of the FGD predominantly felt this strong emotional perspective not to comply with their culture. Indeed, even in the remaining countries (AT and IT) the overall impression on some of the label headlines and text was that the advertising was excessive, pushing and somewhat overblown. However, it is noteworthy that a minority of consumers in all countries except DE and CH expressed real appreciation for a new emotional approach to communicate 'animal welfare' by interpreting 'animal welfare' as 'animal rights'. The extreme view on the labels and their rejection by many of the participants might be the reason for rather high recall measures.

Among the tested attributes, 'animal welfare' and 'local/regional production' were by far the most popular among the respondents in all countries. 'Animal welfare' was well understood in terms of better living conditions for the hens. Outdoor roaming was a well accepted argument by consumers. This also holds true for pasturing which is already claimed by some egg producers in AT and CH.

Regarding the local/regional attribute, it turned out that both expressions were understood differently by consumers. The term 'regional' did not work well in UK. Instead, county (e.g. Berkshire, Devon, etc.) is a more meaningful geographic division. 'Local' usually means very close to the consumer, the village or town dimension, but in some cases also is extended to the county or province. Overall, the regional/local dimension appears to be very appealing to consumers and both regional/local arguments were widely accepted. Properties participants attributed to local/regional products were qualitative and health aspects ('freshness', 'safety') as well as environmental concerns ('food miles', 'minimum transport and pollution'). Some consumers would have liked to know the name and address of the farmer.

The 'fair price' concepts were rejected in all countries by a vast majority of respondents. In general, consumers did not like the idea to 'support' domestic organic farmers. They related the 'fair price' arguments with 'Fair Trade' and had some difficulties when comparing the situation of domestic farmers with the situation of the very poor farmers in developing countries. In general, participants were not willing to pay extra prices to farmers. However, they would pay 'fair prices' if these prices are just ordinary prices with no extra moral connotations.

National organic logos proved to be very important, particularly in CH, DE and AT, mainly because they are perceived to warrant organic production.

The results support the use of a green label for organic egg packaging, while the yellow and, especially, the pink elements (the hearts) were more controversially discussed and mainly rejected in CH, DE and UK. The egg picture is generally accepted – except by DE consumers – while many consumers claimed to feel more comfortable seeing (also) a photograph of real hens. However, care should be taken in communicating ethical aspects since strong emotional dimensions are not accepted in many countries.

Based on the FGD results Consumer Choice Experiments (CCE) were conducted in all five partner countries. This step is coordinated by 'Forschungsinstitut für biologischen Landbau', Frick. Because of the predominantly negative feedback on the labels in the FGD, new labels had to be designed. The emotional dimension was skipped. The aim of this research step was to identify consumers' buying behaviour and willingness to pay in a quantitative approach. In each country sales experiments with 80 consumers were conducted in laboratory settings in a near-by buying situation. The CCE were accompanied by a questionnaire on general purchase behaviour and socio-demographic variables. The CCE took place in November and December 2009 and data analysis is scheduled for early next year.

References and links to papers/reports which have been published in the period:

For a complete and updated list of publications please see: http://fcp.coreportal.org/?page_id=8.