



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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Consumer Education Vs. Marketing: Which Is the Best Lever for Food System Change?

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The response to this question might well be, “We need both, of course!” That’s true, but it’s not the whole answer. In this concept paper, I want to explore how consumer education and marketing interweave, and which should take priority for fundraising and programmatic activities. There can be serious, even irreversible, opportunity costs of setting the wrong priorities: farms may go out of business, families go out of farming, farming communities die, farmland be lost permanently.

Before discussing education and marketing, I want to list the problems I think need to be fixed most urgently in the food system. Consumer education and marketing are considered as possible ways to address the following problem areas:

- 1) sociopolitical institutions affecting food production and consumption: concentration of power over the Northeast food supply and alienation of most people from it; lack of effective institutions for making democratic decisions about food supply.
- 2) access to and quality of environmental resources associated with food production and distribution: loss of prime farmland, declining

surface-water and groundwater quality, loss of biodiversity, declining accessibility or affordability of water and land.

- 3) food production and processing: loss of farms and farmers; decline of the productive base of rural communities (regardless of whether population is increasing, decreasing or stable).
- 4) marketing: failure to include the full costs of food production and distribution in the prices of most foods; lack of marketing alternatives which encourage cooperation rather than competition among producers and distributors.
- 5) food consumption: hunger; food insecurity (with and without hunger); lack of widespread access to high-quality, nutritious foods.

The problems on this list are interrelated. For example, critical factors in the loss of farms and farmers are the lack of marketing mechanisms which give farmers fair prices for their labor, and planning councils which are unable or unwilling to consider agriculture as a valuable land-use. Not considering such interrelationships in the food system exacerbates the problems with our food supply and leads to “fixes” which only create new problems. A better knowledge

of interrelationships can lead to “win-win” solutions, which address problems in different sectors or at different scales simultaneously. These are the primary justifications for dealing with food problems as systemic malfunctions, rather than as isolated issues.

The need for consumer education about agriculture has become a rallying point for diverse interests wanting to “fix” the Northeast food system. It is a deceptively easy and appealing solution: just convince people to buy local foods, produced in ways that benefit the environment and maybe even help poor people by providing jobs, subsidizing purchase prices, or giving them the surplus food. But consumer education, as it is currently construed and carried out in the Northeast, is ineffective in solving the five kinds of problems on my list. At best it can help augment sales for some farmers, but it cannot address systemic issues leading to resource degradation or inequitable access to high-quality food.

The first problem with consumer education is the multiplicity of meanings and diverse motives of the people calling for better “education”. Many farmers and agricultural support agencies bemoan the lack of basic understanding of agriculture among consumers. Farmers want their customers to understand why tomatoes can’t be harvested in New England in June, how produce grown organically or with IPM can reasonably be expected to look, why pesticides are necessary and additional regulations are unwise, and how farmers protect soil and water. They want public tolerance or support for their production practices, and they want customers to buy their produce at prices that allow a profit over operating costs---very understandable desires. Agricultural or consumer activists and state departments of agriculture also want

to change consumers’ awareness, attitudes and behavior, sometimes for similar reasons. The aim may be keeping all local farmers in business by selling more of their goods. The aim may be, rather, helping only certain farmers who use practices approved by the group. Or the aim may be more profound: changing consumers’ basic values to more closely approximate the values of activist organizations’ members.

The political motivations underlying these various pleas and efforts to educate consumers are variable: at one extreme, they appear driven by a libertarian, conservative motive to reduce the regulatory power of governmental agencies and liberate farmers from the fetters imposed by a society which tries to tell them what to do. In other words, “Just get the government off our backs! Tell consumers what good guys farmers are, and they will support us.” Another extreme is anarchic conspiracy theorists who suspect that food industries, in cahoots with the federal government, are poisoning the American people, trying to drive small farmers out of business, and willing to risk the environmental integrity of the earth just to make a quick buck. In other words, “Just tell the American public how they are being schnookered by Big Business, and they will be so outraged that they will refuse to support The System”. A more middle-ground position is represented by agrarian enthusiasts who want to preserve small businesses and rural America, or liberals who want to harmonize environmental and progressive farm interests. These groups might phrase their basic pleas as, “Farmers in the Northeast are in trouble, and you need to help”, or “Let farmers make a decent living, and they’ll be happy to protect environmental quality”. All of these messages cannot be carried by the same educational vehicle.

The second big problem with current consumer education, related to the first, is fuzzy goals. Existing programs tend to have poorly defined goals and target audiences. For example, is a given program supposed to result in change in awareness or knowledge? attitudinal change? change in behavior? of whom? increased sales, or other behavioral changes? If the latter, how much of a behavioral change is enough to make a significant difference to the educator or the client supporting the education? Setting up education programs to achieve other goals, such as marketing or values-indoctrination, is patronizing and it scapegoats the “dumb consumer” for failures of the educator or others in the food system.

The third big problem is the strategies currently employed in consumer education. For instance, the most common deliverable for educational campaigns is a brochure to be distributed at point of purchase. These messages are lost in competition with hundreds of other messages consumers get from advertisements, packaging, and store lay-out. Furthermore, the kinds of messages that would accomplish the diverse goals summarized above cannot possibly be conveyed in sound-bites or simple brochures. They require very sophisticated marketing or propaganda, if attempted at point of purchase. Preferably, they involve the elicitation of thoughtful consideration of complex trade-offs and scenarios in places more amenable to reflection than a supermarket or farmers’ market. The controversy raised by the EPA’s information brochure about the Food Quality Protection Act, designed for use in supermarkets, exemplified both the problems inherent in using POP brochures to convey complex messages, and the problems of trying to combine messages from multiple stakeholders in one brochure:

no one was satisfied.

Other problems with consumer education strategies are that very few programs are evaluated, so there is no way to know if they succeeded or which strategies are most effective in different circumstances.

Meaningful evaluation requires clear objectives, and a way of collecting data to show whether they are met or not. It also requires some kind of comparison between before and after the educational campaign begins. These problems are compounded by the lack of coordination among programs: different agencies and organizations target overlapping audiences, or leave out some critical audiences altogether.

Consumer education programs pop up like fairy rings, unrelated to each other and leaving no trace when they run out of funds or volunteers. But consumer education can be prohibitively expensive, if it includes formative and summative evaluations, coordination with other efforts, and public dissemination of results. Given that few of the organizations trying to educate consumers about the problems on my list have deep pockets, it is small wonder that programs cut corners.

Stakeholders with divergent expectations, fuzzy goals, and poor tactics are all serious problems, but the biggest obstacles to changing food systems through consumer education are even more recalcitrant. I think that consumer education, even if done well, is unlikely to be effective in fixing the problems on my list because it tries to fix a problem at the end-point rather than in the middle. That is, consumer education tries to apply leverage at the wrong place in the food system. To make systemic changes that reinforce each other in positive ways, food supply mechanisms must be changed more than food purchasing behavior: we need to work on changing the system, not the

consumer.

Consumer education, at least relevant to my list of problems, now asks consumers to go against their self-interests to enhance the public good.

Individualism, one of the strongest cultural tenets in the United States, counters altruistic urges to protect local agriculture, farmers, and disadvantaged consumers. The individualist maximizes his or her own well-being, and expects others to take care of themselves. Consumer research tells us clearly, again and again, that consumers act logically and consistently as individualists, within the constraints of the food system. They buy foods of the highest quality by criteria which are innate or molded by advertisements. They look for the greatest convenience and the lowest cost. We may express sympathy for people who are less well off than we are, but few of us will make much of a sacrifice in the interests of sharing wealth and opportunity. In our society, people who do that are labeled suckers or saints---not exactly desirable company. So a large discrepancy exists between what people say they want to support in food systems (small farmers, local farms and preservation of open space, environmental quality, hungry people) and what they actually support with their votes and dollars: food imported from wherever labor and other operating costs are cheapest, and the increasing concentration of food profits by huge vertically-integrated operations which can sell at the lowest cost. The long history of subsidized overconsumption of resources and concentration of food-system control leaves a legacy of environmental and social destruction, and momentum to continue on this path. Globalization, with its homogenized food and megabusineses, has become a giant river sweeping up everything in its

path. Expecting changes to arise mainly through individual consumer choices is analogous to expecting a pile of rocks to organize itself into the Hoover Dam.

Fundamental changes in the ways food is produced, distributed and priced are necessary, to make producing foods with environmentally-sound methods, and purchasing foods grown and processed locally, the path of least resistance for growers and consumers. What would this mean specifically? It would require, first, acknowledging that both food and environmental quality are basic needs to which equitable access must be assured, comparable to housing, transportation, and public safety. If the focus is on just feeding people (i.e., the consumer sector), highest-yielding production methods are best and the solution becomes improving distribution of the food which is produced. But if the focus is on refusing to compromise environmental quality to supply food---i.e., the production, distribution, resource, and consumer sectors---the range of options shifts to environmentally-responsible production methods, more recycling, and greatly reduced transportation.

Acknowledging rights to food and environmental quality does not mean that we should create a new bureaucratic agency at the state or metropolitan level to handle food system planning and implementation. Control over food systems needs to rest in strong local decision-making bodies and policy-setting processes--local, because the work must be done at a smaller scale than large metropolitan areas or states to remain accountable to the deciders and policy makers, sensitive to negative feedback, and able to adjust quickly. "Bodies and "processes" are intentionally vague terms, to leave space to imagine institutions that can achieve broad consensus on food system goals,

set priorities among them, and figure out how we will know when the goals are met. No secular institutions have this authority or ability at present. The much-heralded "civil society" will need years of incubation, to become strong enough to combat years of public subsidies for increasing inequity of wealth and power, or "incivil society".

Recognition of the basic right to food and a clean environment, and local control over decisions, are not magic bullets. They will not result in people automatically making decisions which clean up the environment and reduce social inequities. This is why market forces must be harnessed to make food grown and distributed in ways which enhance or preserve the environment and provide decent incomes to growers and processors the cheapest, most convenient and most available. Consumers must be able to continue acting in their own best interests, while also supporting the common good. The most promising ways I can see to encourage this radical change in supply are to use cost accounting systems for food production and distribution which include the total costs of producing, processing, transporting, and disposing of all the products used in various farming systems. This would encourage producers to use least-damaging methods and encourage consumers to buy least-damaging products. Exotic foods and foods produced in ways that degrade the environment or exploit labor could still be available, but priced to reflect the costs of repairing environmental damage caused by their production and transport, providing for basic needs of laborers, and insuring against unintentional side-effects or public risks associated with production.

This pricing system would compensate farmers fairly for their produce, but it wouldn't compensate them for

the opportunity costs of farming where industrial or urban expansion competes fiercely for land. To assure continued public benefits from farms, such as the preservation of open space, scenic value, and watershed protection, farmers must be compensated for these, in addition to whatever income they earn from what they produce.

To make the changes in food supply sketched above, we must return to consumer education. Except let's call it "citizen education" instead: the problem isn't training people to be more savvy consumers, but training them to be better citizens and to recognize the roles that environmentally-sound food production, distribution and consumption play in ensuring the public good. This takes far more than point-of-purchase promotional materials. Changing a system by trying to force many decentralized components--- i.e., the consumers---to change their directions is about the hardest way to go. To change food systems for the public good, we should stop expecting people to go against the grain, and help make it possible for their purchasing power to serve the public interest instead of reinforcing existing inequities of power and wealth in society.