Extension

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WHY DO (OR DON'T) NEW ENGLANDERS BUY LOCAL PRODUCE?

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In northern New England, local agriculture is a growing industry — no pun intended. Legislation that aims to enhance and expand local agriculture production[1] exists in Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire. In order to ensure the success of expansion efforts, it is important to recognize consumer values and perspectives pertaining to local foods.

What Do Consumers Want?

In a regional survey, we asked consumers what they think about local agriculture. As a result, the attributes that consumers consider to be "very important" when purchasing any type of fresh produce are (Figure 1):

- That the produce supports maintaining local farmland (54% of respondents)
- That the produce supports the local economy (46% of respondents)
- That the produce is grown without pesticides (45% of respondents)

1 McCabe, M.S. and Burke, J., 2012. The New England Food System in 2060: Envisioning Tomorrow's Policy Through Today's Assessments. Me. L. Rev., 65, p.549.

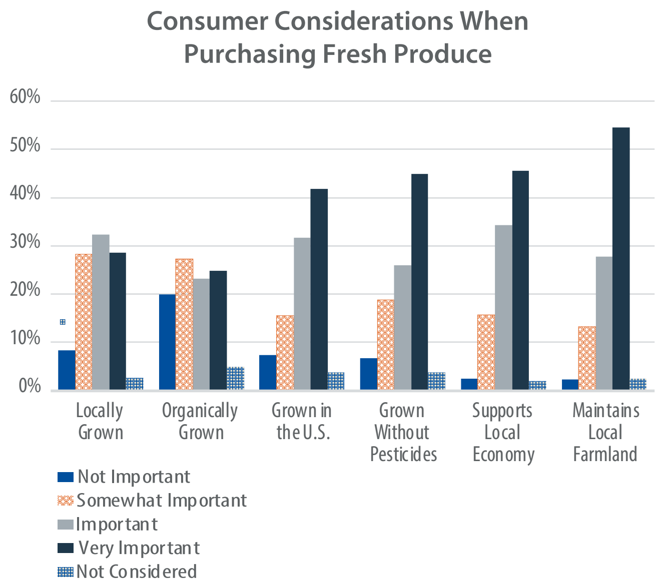

Figure 1. Factors that are most important to consumers when purchasing fresh produce (n = 630). Percent of respondents on the vertical axis and the statement on the horizontal axis.

Surprisingly, consumers consider "locally grown" to be only "somewhat important" or just "important." Additionally, organically grown produce had the highest percent of "not important" responses (20%).

Participants who purchased local or organic fresh produce over the past year were asked why they made these purchases. The respondents suggest that healthy eating, supporting local farms and the quality of produce are their top motivations for purchasing (Figure 2). Specifically, organic buyers suggest that supporting local farms (78%), healthy eating (71%) and the quality of produce (52%) are their most important motivators. Local buyers are similar in their top motivations with 85% of participants stating that supporting their local farmer is a top consideration when purchasing, followed by the quality of produce (76%) and healthy eating (74%). Organic buyers are motivated more by environmental quality and food safety concerns, while the local produce purchasers are more motivated by the sense of community, environmental quality, "knowing their farmer" and lastly, food safety concerns.

The survey also prompted those who have not purchased organic or locally grown produce in the past year to explain their reasons for not purchasing.[2] For both organic and local produce, the top reason for not purchasing is the price of the produce, with 93% of the non-organic buyers and 67% of non-local buyers choosing this as their top deterrent (Figure 3). When identifying barriers to purchasing locally grown produce, 12% of non-local buyers find the hours of operation of farmers markets and farm stands to be their main reason for not buying local produce. Additionally, 11% of non-local buyers are unaware of the local vendors in their area. Lastly, the lack of produce variety deterred 7% of consumers from purchasing local options.

2 A "local buyer" in this survey is someone who claimed to buy produce grown within 50 miles from where it was purchased, including CSAs, farm stands, and grocery stores, if applicable.

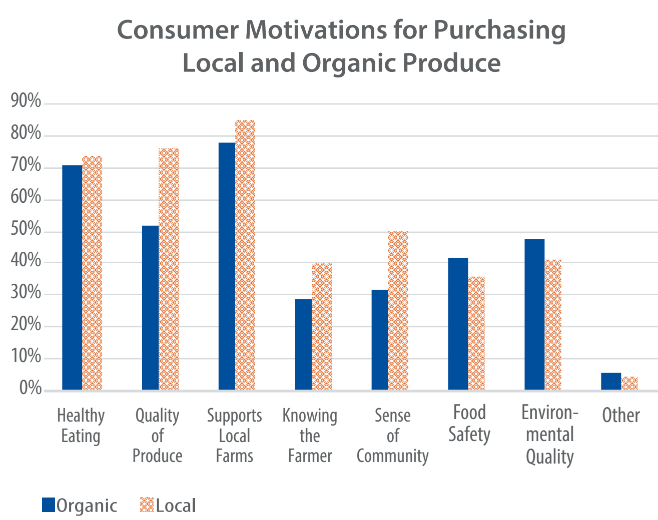

Figure 2. Participants indicate if any of the listed attributes are motivating factors for purchasing either organic or locally grown produce (n = 590 and 619, respectively).

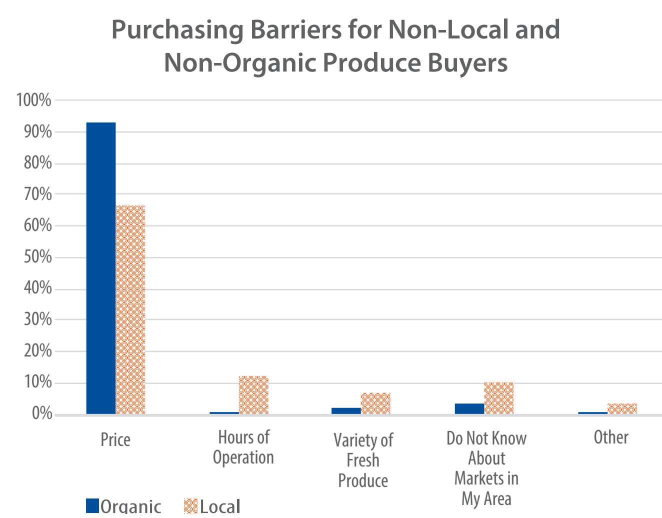

Figure 3. Participants that have not purchased fresh organic produce or fresh local produce in the past year indicate the top factors deterring them from making these purchases (n = 121 and 57, respectively).

Marketing Information

All participants were asked what might entice them to try a new fruit or vegetable from a local source. The list of methods was generated using input from local farmer focus groups. Sixty-four percent of respondents think that trying a new fruit or vegetable would be encouraged through taste-test stations (Figure 4). This is followed by discounted specials (49%), recipe cards (35%) and mixed bundles of produce (27%). Of those who chose the "other" option (8%), most recommend better displays of the new produce, better availability and/or accessibility to the new produce, and better advertising. Lastly, they are more likely to try a new fruit or vegetable if it is suggested by a friend.

Consumers' Preferred Method for Trying New Fresh Produce

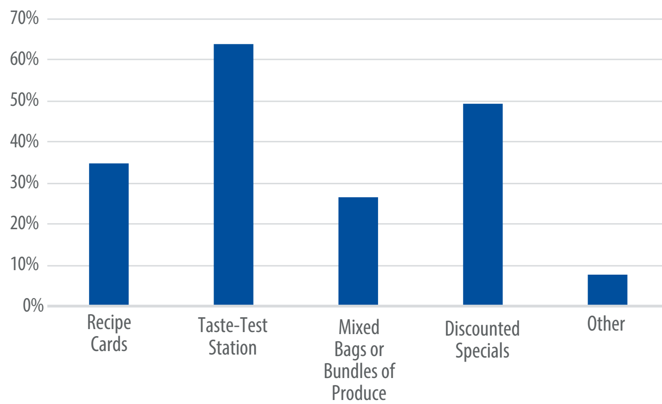

Figure 4. Participants suggest the methods that would most likely increase their probability of trying a new fresh local fruit or vegetable which they have not tried in the past (n = 630).

Additionally, all participants were asked to indicate the best method for receiving information about nearby local vendors. They indicated that the best method for receiving information about local vendors is through word-of-mouth (61%) (Figure 5). This is followed by road signs (59%), newspaper ads (47%) and local event calendars (46%). Electronic methods, such as email newsletters, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat), and town websites are all less popular. Some of the consumer-suggested methods are mailings, magazines, radio, store advertisements and community food festivals.

The preferred methods for receiving information from local vendors changes when the sample is divided into age groups. The two age groups, those younger than 50 years of age and those 50 years and older, are similar in their affinity for methods such as word-of-mouth, road signs, local event calendars, email newsletters and "other" methods, but differ in their preferences for town websites and are extremely different in their views of social media and newspaper ads. Those 50 years of age or older favor newspaper ads over social media, while those younger than 50 find social media to be a highly preferable method over newspaper ads when receiving information about their local vendors.

Preferred Methods for Receiving Information About Local Vendors by Age Group

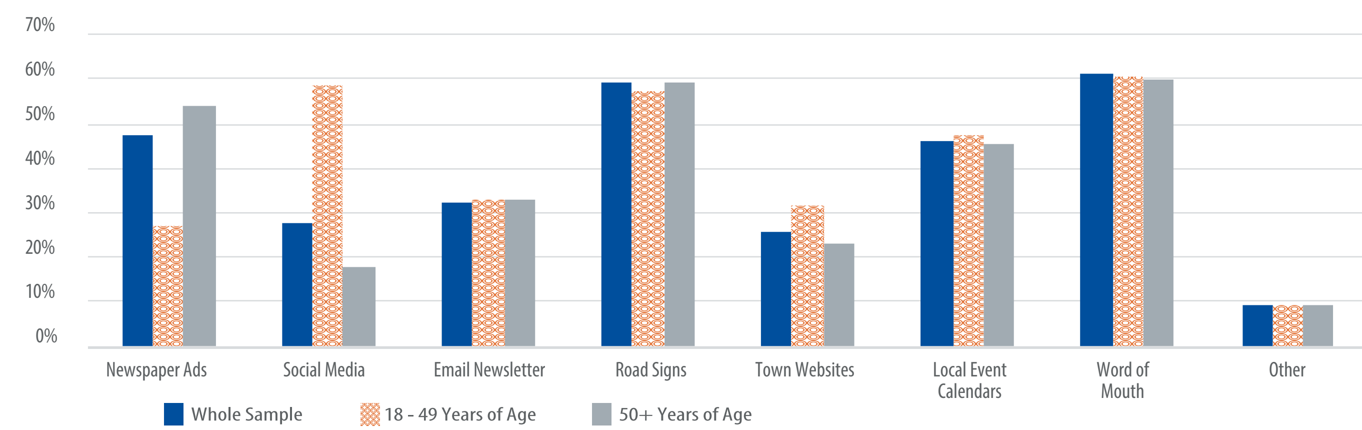

Figure 5. Participants indicate any and all methods which are considered the "best" for receiving information about local vendors. Results are sorted by the percent of responses according to age group, including the entire sample (n=634), those less than 50 years of age (n=148), and those 50 years of age or older (n= 435). Note: not all participants reported their age.

Summary

We highlighted the key findings from a 2016 consumer survey of Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire residents that investigated the consumer perspective of local agriculture. Results suggest northern New Englanders value maintaining local farmland, supporting the local economy and buying options produced without pesticides when purchasing any type of fresh produce. Consumers are motivated to purchase local and organic produce for similar reasons, such as supporting the local economy, healthy eating and buying high quality produce options. Price, however, is still the main deterrent for those who do not purchase local and organic produce. Consumers are most likely to try a new type of produce option if it is offered in a taste-test station. Additionally, consumers prefer different methods of communication depending on their age — older consumers are more interested in newspaper ads, while younger consumers prefer social media outlets. Both age groups find word-of-mouth and road signs to be preferable methods of receiving information about their local vendors.

Acknowledgements

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