

## Local Markets Grow Roots

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[23-Aug-2004]

Organic branding has gained rapid success over the past few years in the United States as consumers become increasingly aware of their dietary health. For a certain segment of the consumer culture, skepticism about genetically modified foods and foods treated with chemicals has driven the rise in organic labeling. For others, it is the ethical treatment of animals or their strict adherence to diets that prohibit consumption of animal products for health or religious reasons.

Yet there is another social awareness factor that is becoming increasingly important in how certain consumers look at food branding—the terms “locally grown” and “family farm”—are growing in importance, especially in the Midwest.

Rich Pirog, of the [Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture](#) at Iowa State University, produced a marketing survey in November 2003 with cooperation from the ISU College of Business. The study examines the terms “locally grown” and “family farm” and finds consumers enthusiastic and yearning to purchase these types of foods from the small family farms that grow them.

“We found that these secondary label attributes attract people wanting to support the environment and local farmers,” says Pirog, referring to the survey, which sampled more than 1,600 consumers throughout the Midwest. “Consumers said that if price and appearance were equal, they would choose products with these features over organic options.”

Defining the terms “locally grown” and “family farm” was the first part of the process in formulating the Leopold Center study. For geographic area, regions were defined such as “grown in state” or “grown in the Midwest.” One odd populist twist in the survey shows a higher percentage of respondents that see local as “grown in your state” rather than “grown 25 miles or less from purchase.”

Part of the study, looking at ecolabels with one simplified tagline on locally grown strawberries, found that 70 percent of respondents say that third-party verification about freshness and other standards is important to them. More than 90 percent of respondents prefer the locally grown label with the “freshness” claim over the label simply stating that the product was grown in the US.

Pirog explains: “They want that guarantee. What we were hearing was—particularly for produce—is that the concept of how far food travels is of more concern. The four things consumers are looking for—taste, freshness, quality, and value—if those four weren’t being met consistently, if the product doesn’t taste good, consumers won’t buy those locally grown foods.”

The survey also finds that 12 to 18 percent of consumers are willing to pay 30 percent more on food items that combine locally grown verification and environmental stewardship. Consumer and producer groups such as Food Alliance, Organic Producers Alliance, and

Protected Harvest have certification programs which help improve market access to these foods.

“We feel that the idea of freshness dating is important and more consumer groups should be looking at ways to implement accurate recording of this,” says Pirog. “The organic label should continue to be a fast growing

segment as well, and there is also a large segment of folks who aren't your core consumers that will always go to the highest standard product. If the majority of consumers are looking at food as food, rather than food as fuel, they also start to question where the food comes from, and become more likely to support local efforts."

Jim Ennis, project director of Midwest Food Alliance, launched in 2000 in St. Paul, Minnesota, is one of those people working to develop guarantees in labeling for consumers to better identify organic and locally grown products. "Research has shown that consumers want to support environmentally-friendly growing practices and local farmers, but they can't always recognize those products in their supermarket," says Ennis.

These organizations have aimed their energies at promoting awareness of locally grown brands, and some, such as Local Harvest, even offer maps on their websites for consumers to find out where the nearest producers are located. Not surprisingly, most of these organic producers are located in the Midwest, Northeast and in the fertile valleys along the West Coast. Other campaigns such as "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" coordinated by the Food Routes Network have been connecting freshness and locally grown labeling with freshness dating. While most perishable products have a "use by" date on them, the study shows consumers would also like to know when the product arrived in the store, and from how far away the food has traveled. The survey indicates that phrases such as "from farm to your store's door in 24 hours" or that the farm is "within an hour's drive from your store" evoke perceptions of local and fresh products that originate from nearby farms.

"We often don't give consumers enough credit," Pirog says. "We found that consumers had a basic understanding of where their food comes from. Seasonality is more and more important. Combine that with 'freshness' labeling. People wanted another way of using freshness dating than what we have now, which basically gives you a date you need to consume the product by. We're wanting to go beyond [that] concept, to show the time from harvest to time to store. This could have some potential to those producers who are looking for more regional products."