

## **Sustainability trend stable**

*Survey tracks changing desires for 'responsible' brands, economic concerns*

**Mateusz Perkowski**  
Capital Press

Roughly one in four consumers plans to buy fewer "sustainable" food products due to the economic crisis, according to a consumer research firm.

About two out of three consumers will not change their sustainable food buying habits, and about one in eight will actually increase their purchases of such products, according to the Hartman Group, which tracks food trends.

The company found that consumers usually do not have a clear idea of what the term "sustainable" actually means, but tend to associate it with social and environmental responsibility, said Alison Worthington, a managing director at Hartman Group.

Consumers want to align themselves with companies that behave in a responsible manner and increasingly base their purchases on "value-laden" judgments, such as how a product makes them feel about themselves, she said.

"Today's marketing model is more about relationships than brands," Worthington said at a recent forum hosted by the Food Alliance certification group in Portland.

Even so, about 48 percent of consumers expect recent economic events to worsen their quality of life, up from only 6 percent a year earlier, she said.

For that reason, food companies can expect consumers to shift their food buying channels, Worthington said.

Those who shop at higher-end sustainable-oriented stores will buy more of their food from mainstream grocers, while those who already shop at mainstream grocers will increasingly buy food from bulk discount stores, she said.

Most consumers don't correlate higher prices and sustainability, and will orient themselves toward products they perceive as both responsible and affordable, she said.

"They want to do something, but don't they still don't want to give up that price and convenience," Worthington said.

Consumers are increasingly drawn to sustainable food from a sense of responsibility, but they're often initially attracted by such products for personal reasons, such as pesticide avoidance, she said.

"Try to link personal benefits to everything you communicate," Worthington said.

Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, said the Hartman Group's findings indicate sustainability is one of a set of tools that can add value to a company's brand or increase its market share.

"If we only define it in terms of price premiums, we're being naive and missing the greater point," Exo said. "We're defining success too narrowly."