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Promising ethical arguments for product differentiation in the organic food sector. A mixed methods research approach.

Zander K, Stolz H, Hamm U.

Department of Agricultural and Food Marketing at the University of Kassel, Steinstrasse 19, D-37213 Witzenhausen, Germany; Institute of Market Analysis and Agricultural Trade Policy, Johann Heinrich von Thünen-Institute, Bundesallee 50, D-38116 Braunschweig, Germany(1). Electronic address: katrin.zander@vti.bund.de.

Abstract

Ethical consumerism is a growing trend worldwide. Ethical consumers' expectations are increasing and neither the Fairtrade nor the organic farming concept covers all the ethical concerns of consumers. Against this background the aim of this research is to elicit consumers' preferences regarding organic food with additional ethical attributes and their relevance at the market place. A mixed methods research approach was applied by combining an Information Display Matrix, Focus Group Discussions and Choice Experiments in five European countries. According to the results of the Information Display Matrix, 'higher animal welfare', 'local production' and 'fair producer prices' were preferred in all countries. These three attributes were discussed with Focus Groups in depth, using rather emotive ways of labelling. While the ranking of the attributes was the same, the emotive way of communicating these attributes was, for the most part, disliked by participants. The same attributes were then used in Choice Experiments, but with completely revised communication arguments. According to the results of the Focus Groups, the arguments were presented in a factual manner, using short and concise statements. In this research step, consumers in all countries except Austria gave priority to 'local production'. 'Higher animal welfare' and 'fair producer prices' turned out to be relevant for buying decisions only in Germany and Switzerland. According to our results, there is substantial potential for product differentiation in the organic sector through making use of production standards that exceed existing minimum regulations. The combination of different research methods in a mixed methods approach proved to be very helpful. The results of earlier research steps provided the basis from which to learn - findings could be applied in subsequent steps, and used to adjust and deepen the research design.

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