

Lorek, Agnieszka

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Economic and Environmental Studies (E&ES)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Opole University

Suggested Citation: Lorek, Agnieszka (2015) : Current trends in the consumer behaviour towards eco-friendly products, Economic and Environmental Studies (E&ES), ISSN 2081-8319, Opole University, Faculty of Economics, Opole, Vol. 15, Iss. 2, pp. 115-129

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/178880>

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Current trends in the consumer behaviour towards eco-friendly products

Agnieszka LOREK
University of Economics in Katowice, Poland

Abstract: Research on environmental liability issues were already taken in the 70s and 80s, when relatively few consumers were aware of the impact of products and services on the environment. Currently, "green consumption" (sustainable consumption) is a term commonly known and an important element of the "green consumerism" has become creating environmentally friendly consumption patterns.

The main purpose of the article is to identification of current trends in the consumer behaviour towards "green" products on example of Silesian Voivodeship. In the first part of the article are presented trends in consumer behaviour on a green market in developed countries. The second part relates to the identification of consumer behaviour in relation to environmental goods and services in the Silesian province on the basis of surveys. Surveys were conducted among residents of the region in 1999/2000 and 2012/2014. The above analyses indicate that the trend to make purchase decisions based on ecological criteria is diminishing. The price is still the main criterion the respondents consider when shopping (above 80% of survey participants). An important motive for buying eco-friendly products are savings associated with using energy-efficient appliances. Currently, 37% of respondents declares buying organic food and the most important criterion in all rounds of the survey are health benefits. A positive tendency was observed with regard to the post-consumer waste management (according to the survey, waste is currently segregated in most households in Silesian Voivodeship) but significantly decreased the number of people repairing broken electronic equipment and appliances which contributes to increasing the quantity of such waste.

Keywords: consumer behavior, green consumption, eco-friendly products, green market, Silesian Voivodeship

JEL codes: Q01

1. Introduction

During the second half of the 20th the society began to acknowledge and take into consideration the increasing threat posed by the environmental pollution and shortages of resources. The issue of sustainable consumption and production was raised for the first time at the global political level during a United Nations conference on environment and development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Ten years later, during a summit in Johannesburg, the global community

appealed for intensification of efforts that are made to improve the living conditions and for implementation of the principles of sustainable development in consumption and manufacturing processes. Despite the many years of talks, the current consumption patterns are far from sustainable. Consumption patterns on a global scale are determined mainly by: the rapid population growth (mainly in developing countries); increasing global private wealth – surging buying power of the middle and lower class; as well as the culture of “consumerism” in the groups characterized by the greatest buying power. Even though the consumption tendencies are unsustainable, it is currently noticeable that environmental awareness and eco-friendly behaviours among consumers are ever more often becoming one of the major criteria used in market segmentation. The popularity of “green” products among consumers is on the rise, which in turn affects the way companies operate and their products portfolios.

The main purpose of the article is to identification of current trends in the consumer behaviour towards “green” products on example of Silesian Voivodeship. The research methods used in this study include literature review, as well as analyses of available data and results of research surveys conducted by institutions that deal with the study subject, including the results obtained by the author in research surveys conducted in the years 1999/2000 and 2012/14 as part of the research carried out by the Department of Environmental Protection of the University of Economics in Katowice and concerning the development of the eco-friendly goods and services market in the SilesianVoivodeship.

In the first part of the article are presented trends in consumer behavior on the eco-friendly market in developed countries. The second part relates to the identification of consumer behavior in relation to environmental goods and services in the Silesian province on the basis of surveys.

2. Segmentation and consumers’ behaviour on the eco-friendly market

Research concerning environmental responsibility was already carried out back in the 1970’s and 1980’s, when relatively few consumers were aware of how products and services purchased by them affect the natural environment. There were very few green products available on the market at that time. Research during that period focused on issues such as: energy saving, or eco-friendly actions taken by politicians. The 90’s could be described as an “environment-centred

decade.” Over those ten years social and ecological factors were gaining importance when it came to purchasing decisions made by consumers. Currently, “green consumption” (sustainable consumption) is a common term, but it still generates many disputes in the scientific world. There is an ongoing discussion in literature, on a national and global level, concerning the preferable forms and types of acquisitions and their classification. There are cases in which particular, most preferable, patterns of consumers’ behaviour are at the heart of the dispute. For example, some researchers claim that the most welcome signs of green consumption consist of buying local products from local producers. Others state that people should buy organic foods made in the poorest countries, thus supporting these economies. The most recent research concentrates to a large extent on relationships between consumers’ behaviour and the environment. Thus, the modelling of eco-friendly consumption patterns became an important element of the so called “green consumerism.” With the rise of ecological awareness, the eco-consumerism of the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s (which focused on avoiding environmentally harmful products) started to turn into “sustainable” or “green” consumerism, which took a holistic approach to humans and the way they affect the environment (focusing on the whole life cycle of the products).

After years of research it was concluded that there is a particular segment of ecological consumers, who can be classified as belonging to a homogeneous group based on certain common characteristics. Ecological consumers want to act in a rational manner by, for example, buying energy-saving products, saving water and minimizing waste. Similar segmentation is possible with regard to consumers led by ethical standards (respecting employees’ rights, not using child labour, fair-trade policy). Consumers’ ecological awareness and their adherence to ethical standards are crucial when choosing a relevant business strategy, as it is the customer who – through making certain decisions – can act directly on ecological or social premises. Managerial knowledge concerning consumers’ behaviour and attitudes forms an informative base for decision making when it comes to a company development plan. Market segmentation helps to better understand the specifics of customers’ behaviour, and thus to adjust the business offer to the needs voiced by potential purchasers within the market. The most important differentiating factor in the geographic sense is the income gap between the poor countries and the developed ones. In the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand over 80% of population can be classified as well-situated consumers (in countries such as India or China it

would be less than 20%). Many wealthy customers understand and try to implement the idea of sustainable development (LOHAS – Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability – consumers, i.e. people focused on healthy and sustainable lifestyle, LOVOS – a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity). They constitute a growing market for green products and services, especially in countries such as: Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Canada, or the USA. Around 20% of people living in these countries are prepared to pay extra for green products and services such as: ecological foods, energy-saving solutions, green energy sources, eco-friendly homes, ecological clothes and furniture (Belz, Peattie 2012: 153-155). There are many examples of green market segmentation. In this article they will be presented two of them, conducted by:

1. Roper Starch Worldwide. Roper Starch has been analyzing the green market and consumer behaviour patterns since 1990. Over the years there has been a major shift in consumer attitudes in the United States. The number of consumers labelled as True Blues (these are consumers with a strong pro-ecological system of values, they are politically active) has risen from 11% to 31%. At the same time the Apathetics group (they are not interested in environmental issues) shrunk from 35% in 1995 to 18% in 2007. The Grouzers (this consumer group does not believe they could change their behaviour patterns and they lack environmental education) share fell from 24% in 1990 to 15% in 2007, whereas Greenback Greens (concerned about the sustainable development, but they are not politically active) and (Sprouts these consumers appreciate the most crucial environmental issues, but it does not translate into decisions they make when it comes to buying) remained at a similar level (Dahlstrom 2011: 98-99).
2. Natural Marketing Institute (NMI) and the division of consumers into 5 groups.
 - LOHAS consumers (LOHAS being short for Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), i.e. those focused on a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. This term refers to a goods and services market which in the USA is valued at 209 billion dollars. The LOHAS consumers focus on health, natural environment, social justice, personal development, sustainable lifestyle, and social development prospects. Environment is what lies at the core of the LOHAS system of values. It is related to all spheres of life, for example food production techniques are as important as the treatment of farm workers (Dahlstrom, 2011: 99). The LOHAS consumers prefer the highest quality goods, but at the same time they want the products to be made in line with the highest ethical and ecological

standards. It is estimated that in 2012 this characteristic was met by approx. 19% of USA citizens (Natural Marketing Institute, 2014). Obviously, such tendencies are not limited to the US market but they refer to other developed countries as well. In Poland this movement is just starting.

- Naturalites – this segment refers mainly to consumers who are focused on their personal health and fitness. Product selection in this group is driven not by environmental concerns but by the health-related ones. Even though these consumers believe that companies should be environmentally friendly, it does not translate into buying “green” durables (Dahlstrom, 2011: 100). In 2012, naturalites represented 21% of all American households (Natural Marketing Institute, 2014).
- Conventionals – it is a segment which, in the NMI analysis, encompassed 17% of adult population in 2012 (Natural Marketing Institute, 2014). These consumers adopt a highly practical approach. They are usually interested in practical outcomes of their actions, which is why activities such as recycling or energy-saving are hugely popular with this group. People who belong to this category are eager to buy products which save them money in a long term, but they do not consider environmental issues to be a key factor when making their purchase decisions.
- Drifters – this group includes consumers who are not too focused on environmental issues. Their interest lies mainly with those environmental issues that affect them directly. Because they perceive sustainable development as a popular trend, they would like to be seen and associated with venues that offer “green” products, even though they rarely actually buy them. They pay a lot of attention to cost and can provide many arguments to justify their not buying “green” products (Dahlstrom, 2011: 100-101). In 2012, 22% of USA adults belonged to the drifters category (Natural Marketing Institute, 2014).
- Unconcerned – this last group is composed of people who have other priorities than the environment or the society. These consumers do not buy “green” products and they are not interested in learning about them. The majority of their purchase choices are based on habits, price, quality, or value (their decisions are also to a certain degree influenced by advertising campaigns for individual products) (Dahlstrom, 2011: 101). In 2012 they accounted for 21% of population (Natural Marketing Institute, 2014).

The issues of ecological marketing and pro-ecological behaviour in consumers were also discussed in the Boston Consulting Group Report “Capturing the Green Advantage for Consumer Companies” (2009). The report was based on a survey answered by nine thousand people aged between 18 and 65. The surveyed consumers came from nine countries: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, Great Britain, United States and China. The analysis demonstrated that the emphasis people place on particular pro-ecological behaviours varies greatly depending on where they live. For Italians, for instance, exclusion of animal testing constitutes an important element of “acting green.” This issue, however, does not affect so strongly the way in which Japanese look at companies. When it came to using recyclable materials, the issue was crucial for Americans, but hardly mattered among Germans. The survey also checked what actions the respondents take to protect the environment. The most frequently listed examples of everyday ecological behaviour included:

- turning off household appliances when not in use,
- waste recycling,
- using multiple-use products,
- reducing the amount of water used,
- purchasing energy-saving appliances and light bulbs.

A large number of respondents declared that they were going to intensify their pro-ecological efforts in the future. Nearly half of them stated that they buy ecological products regularly or occasionally. The largest proportion of people willing to buy green products was found in Europe, which scored a leading 54%. The most popular products in this category include:

- ecological food products,
- paper and packaged products, such as paper towels,
- cleaning products, bin bags and disposable products necessary in a household.

Depending on a country, the extent to which given products appeal to consumers differed. It can be demonstrated with the example of organic chocolate – in Italy it was bought by 4% more people than indicated by the average interest in “green products” in that country, whereas in Canada, compared to the average popularity of organic products – it scored 11% less (Manget et al, 2009).

Similar tendencies were indicated by the survey concerning “Attitudes of Europeans

Towards Building the Single Market for Green Products” (2013). That survey included 28 European Union member states. It was carried out in the form of telephone interviews conducted on behalf of the European Commission and involved 25,568 respondents with different social and demographic backgrounds. Among European consumers, 80% considered the impact of products on the environment to be an important issue and they declared readiness to change their habits and to purchase more environmentally-friendly products. However, many respondents stated that they were not sufficiently informed and that they did not trust manufacturers’ declarations concerning the organic nature of their products. The survey showed that over three quarters of all the respondents were prepared to pay more for environmentally-friendly products, providing that they could be certain that producers’ self-claims were true (77%) (European Commission, 2013).

3. Consumer behaviour on eco - market in Poland and the Silesian province

In the conditions created by the Polish economy the segment consisting of the ecologically driven consumers is considerably smaller. To provide an example, one could review the results obtained by the Institute for Sustainable Development, which analysed ecological awareness in Poland in the years 1992-2011. The results obtained by the Institute demonstrated that the pro-environmental values are deeply rooted in the world view of the respondents, but the self-declared readiness to bear the economic and social costs (implementation of renewable energy solutions regardless of the costs; priority to environment protection over work places; using eco-innovative solutions) diminished when confronted with the issues of everyday life - products price as the main criterion in making purchase decisions; protection of workplaces at a local level; hostile attitude towards lifestyle change (Strumińska-Kutra, 2011). Similar results were obtained from the cyclical analysis of awareness and ecological behaviour carried out in Poland as part of a research programme run by the Ministry of the Environment. The programme was launched in 2011. The study ordered by the Ministry of the Environmental Protection in 2013 indicated that the behaviours supporting environmental protection among consumers have recently become less popular. The most common environmentally friendly measure mentioned by the respondents was the use of reusable shopping bags (65%). For the good of the environment, half of the respondents (51%) tried to avoid durable and disposable products. It was less

common, however, to choose products based on their eco-friendly packaging (e.g. on its recyclability) (42%). The similar level of popularity applied to supporting local goods and products (declared by 41% of the respondents). Every third citizen of Poland answering the survey (33%) chose eco-friendly solutions, in spite of the associated higher costs. The percentage of such people decreased compared to previously collected data. There was, however, an increase with regard to people who decided to accept the extra cost of ecological solutions (43% in 2011, 60% in 2013). Poles choose such solutions mainly for economic reasons and sometimes, having tried the eco-friendly solutions, revert to old habits in order to save money. It is likely that – even if they could afford the more expensive option – they spend their savings on more urgent matters. Opting for ecological solutions regardless of higher costs is, however, most common among the people who always pay attention to the labels related to ecology and environment (69%).

These tendencies were also supported by studies analyzing the households of the Silesian Voivodeship in the years 1999/2000 (research funded by the State Committee for Scientific Research with grant no. 1H02C03615) and 2012/2014 (research conducted as part of statutory research carried out by the Department of Environmental Protection of the University of Economics in Katowice). The above analyses indicate that the trend to make purchase decisions based on ecological criteria is diminishing. In the years 1999/2000, over 20% of the respondents were driven by those criteria, whereas the last edition of the research in the years 2012/14 showed a drop to 12%. The price is still the main criterion the respondents consider when shopping (above 80% of survey participants). An important motive for buying eco-friendly products are savings associated with using energy-efficient appliances. 91% of respondents in the survey 2012/14 equips their apartments in the energy-efficient light bulbs, appliances and electronics. Significant downward trend also applies to the declaration of the driving while shopping by:

- a) the product brand (down from approx. 60% in 1999/2000 ranking to 44% in the period 2012/14),
- b) the experience of the first purchase (decrease of 65-70% in the 51%).

Upward trend can be seen on an opinion of family and friends about the products they purchase. Such opinions are taken into account by 25% of respondents in 1999, 35% in 2000 and 39% in a study conducted in the years 2012/14. New phenomenon, worthy of further analysis, are purchases decisions guided by the opinions on online forums, which declared about 20% of the participants of research in the years 2012/14. The table 1 illustrates these trends.

Table 1. Trends in consumer behaviour regarding the purchase of eco- products

	Ranking 1999/2000		Ranking 2012/2014		Trend
Price	1	above 80%	1	above 80%	= no change
The ecological criteria	6	above 20%	7	12%	↓ a marked decline
Brand of products	3	about 60%	3	44%	↓ a marked decline
Advertising	7	6-9%	8	5%	= no change
Opinion of family and friends	4	25 – 35%	4	39%	↑ slight upward trend
The experience of the first purchase	2	65 – 70%	2	51%	↓ a marked decline
The opinion of experts	5	about 25%	6	about 16%	↓ downward trend
Opinions in online forums	no data	no data	5	about 20%	

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

In terms of packaging types preferred by consumers can distinguish the following trends:

- declining number of people who prefer to buy the product in plastic disposable (down from approx. 19% in 1999/2000 to 11% between 2012/14),
- gradually decreasing the number of people who prefer returnable packaging (down from 20% in 1999 to 16% in the studies 2012/14) and the glass and cardboard (approx. 43% in 1999, a decrease to approx. 30% in 2012 / 14);
- growing number of consumers who do not pay attention to product packaging (in 1999 due to the packaging of the product did not pay attention more than 33% of the buyers, in the years 2012/14 was already above 51% of the buyers).

These data are illustrated in detail in table 2.

Table 2. The preferred type of packaging purchased goods (% of survey participants)

	1999	2000	2012/14
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Plastic disposable	18.7%	18.7%	11.0%
Glass or plastic feedback	20.1%	18.0%	16.0%
Glass, cardboard	43.2%	42.1%	29.7%
I do not pay attention to the packaging	33.3%	36.8%	51.3%

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

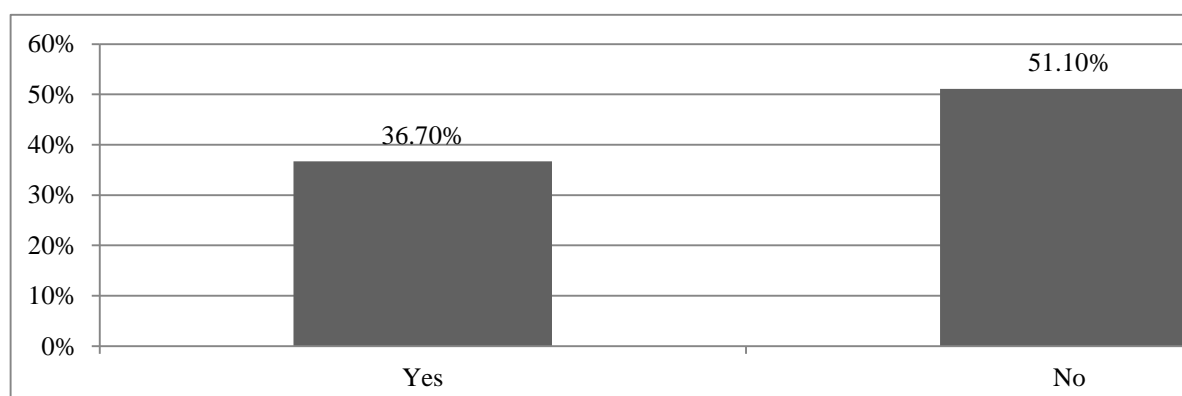
A positive trend can be seen on number of inconsiderate people on the eco-label. In 1999-2000, did not pay attention to the ecological labels placed on goods approximately 75% of the respondents. In the 2012/14 edition number of such answers dropped to approx. 65%, while the number of people taking into account environmental labels for product selection rise to 26% in the 2012/14 edition (see table 3).

Table 3. Ecolabel (% of survey participants)

	1999	2000	2012/14
I do not pay attention	74.4%	76.7%	65.3%
I pay attention	23.2%	19.6%	26.3%

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

Recent years have seen a growing number of farms producing organic food and its increasing availability. In the Silesia province number of certified organic farms increased from 23 in 2005 to 205 in 2013, with a further 37 farms preparing to gain a certificate. The area of organic cultivation increased in this period from 138 ha to 5661 ha (GUS 2014). Currently (2012/14 survey) buying organic food declares approx. 37% of respondents (Fig. 1). More than half of respondents still do not buy organic food, which is often associated with a financial motive (higher price of organic food, lower income of households).

Fig.1 Percentage of survey participants buying organic food

Source: own elaboration based on survey results

In the study also attempted to determine whether consumers accept a higher price of organic foods. The cost of organic food production is higher than that obtained by conventional methods of cultivation and breeding. Ecological production must meet certain conditions, incurred losses in crops are higher, additional costs include production control and the attestation, so the price of these items must be higher. Number of households reporting no desire to buy more expensive than conventional organic food is steadily growing in Silesian region - an increase from 23-25% of respondents who declare lack of willingness to buy in 1999-2000 to 37,7% in 2012/14 study. Also research results shows declining acceptance of higher prices for organic food. In the years 1999 - 2000 the price up to 10% higher accepts more than 50% of respondents. In the last round of the study, this percentage was below 35%. Organic food prices higher than conventional more than 20% were not accepted in all rounds of the survey. The table 4 shows acceptance of higher prices of organic food.

Table 4. Declarations of purchase organic food if its price is higher than the conventional food prices (% of survey participants)

	1999	2000	2012/14
I don't buy	22.9%	25.0%	37.7%
below 10%	54.7%	55.6%	34.5%
below 20%	17.9%	13.9%	16.7%
below 30%	2.0%	1.9%	2.8%
above 30%	0.9%	0.7%	2.6%

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

Consumers when buying organic food are mainly driven by health benefits. This criterion was chosen as the most important in all rounds of the survey. Environmental protection was the second choice in the years 1999 and 2000, while in the 2012/14 edition dropped to third place after support for organic agriculture and trade (see table 5). Motives of buying organic food by consumers should be used to promote the consumption of these products in the context of ecological lifestyle.

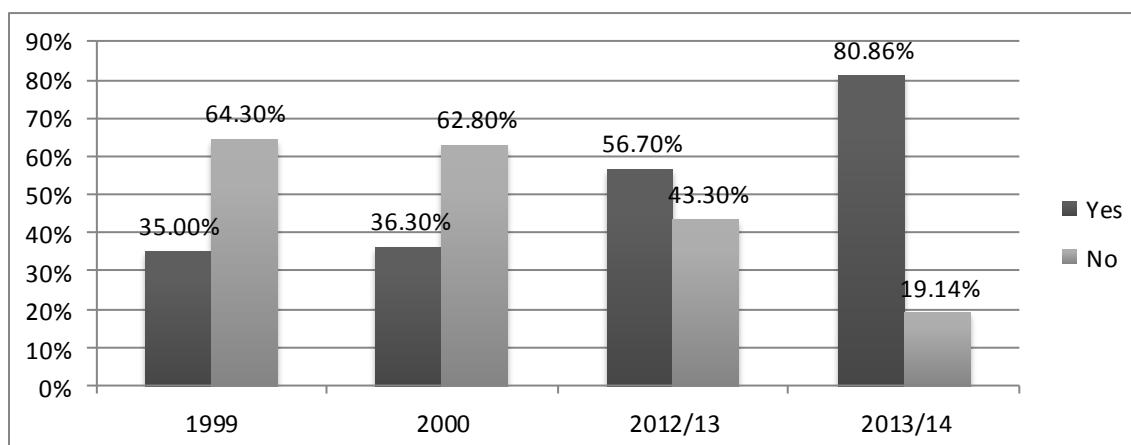
Table 5. Motives of buying organic food by consumers in the province of Silesia (% of survey participants)

	1999	2000	2012/14
Brand products	18.3%	20.9%	12.2%
Health considerations	87.9%	86.1%	78.4%
Environmental protection	26.0%	34.0%	16.2%
Support for organic agriculture and trade	20.2%	23.2%	18.0%

Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

A positive tendency was also observed with regard to the post-consumer waste management. According to the survey, waste is currently segregated in most households (80.86%). It is a considerable increase compared to the 1999/2000 results when waste segregation was practised by 35-36% of households (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Selection of waste by residents of Silesian province



Source: own elaboration based on survey results.

The waste which are produced by households characterize high proportion of organic waste. Based on the survey can be seen a clear trend:

- the reduction in the number of people declaring disposal of bio waste directly into the trash (a decrease of approx. 90% in 1999 to approx. 50% in the last edition of the survey),
- an increasing number of respondents who select and compost their organic waste (an increase of approx. 20% in 1999 to approx. 46% in the last edition of the survey).

The number of people repairing broken electronic equipment and appliances decreased significantly (37% of households in 1999, to 15.6% in the last edition of the study). Such trend is also confirmed by the data for other countries. The planned shortening of product lifecycle is problematic in many ways - reducing durability of consumer goods, increased resource consumption and the amount of waste to be processed.

4. Conclusion

Even though the consumption tendencies are far from homogenous the current level of ecological awareness and ecological behaviours of the consumers serve as one of the key criteria for market segmentation in developed countries. Today consumers on these markets are more and more frequently interested in “green” products, which affects the ways companies operate and their products portfolio. Companies that include ecology in their marketing strategy have achieved outstanding results on financial markets even during the economic slowdown. On the other hand, the level of consumers’ ecological awareness does not always translate directly into their market behaviour patterns, especially when it comes to decisions concerning product choice or purchase. It applies also to Polish economy. According to a study conducted in the Silesian province price remains the primary criterion for purchasing the product and ecological criteria being less important. Such behaviours are related to the wealth of a society (inability to afford more expensive, ecological products) and seemingly improving environmental situation due to which the respondents no longer feel they need to be concerned about ecological issues or to take action in this area. The main factors that make people buy pro-ecological products include health reasons (organic food is considered healthier than conventional food) and savings they can make thanks to using them (energy-saving products, benefits of post-consumer waste segregation). According to research, the main barrier to purchase organic food is its high price, and the

acceptance of higher prices for organic food decreases. Consumers often do not understand why these products are more expensive and they are unwilling to spend time to explore this issue.

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Aktualne trendy w zachowaniach konsumentów wobec produktów ekologicznych

Streszczenie

Badania nad problematyką odpowiedzialności środowiskowej były podejmowane już w latach 70. i 80. XX wieku, kiedy stosunkowo niewielu konsumentów miało świadomość jaki wpływ na środowisko wywierają produkty i usługi. Obecnie „zielona konsumpcja” (zrównoważona konsumpcja) jest terminem powszechnie znanym, a istotnym elementem tzw. „zielonego konsumeryzmu” stało się kształtowanie proekologicznych wzorców konsumpcji.

Podstawowym celem artykułu jest identyfikacja trendów w zachowaniach konsumentów w stosunku do dóbr i usług ekologicznych na przykładzie województwa śląskiego.

W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawiono tendencje w zachowaniach konsumentów na zielonym rynku w krajach wysoko rozwiniętych. Druga część dotyczy identyfikacji zachowań konsumentów w stosunku do dóbr i usług ekologicznych w województwie śląskim na podstawie badań ankietowych. Badania ankietowe były przeprowadzone wśród mieszkańców regionu w latach 1999/2000 i 2012/2014. Według wyników badań niezmiennie cena pozostaje głównym kryterium brany pod uwagę przy zakupach, maleje natomiast ilość osób kierujących się

kryteriami ekologicznymi. Istotnym motywem zakupu „zielonych” produktów są oszczędności związane np. z używaniem energooszczędnych sprzętów AGD i elektroniki. 37% ankietowanych deklaruje obecnie zakup żywności ekologicznej, a najistotniejszym motywem przy takich zakupach są względy zdrowotne. Pozytywny trend został zaobserwowany odnośnie postępowania z odpadami (według wyników badań ankietowych segregacja ma miejsce w większości gospodarstw domowych w regionie śląskim) lecz znacząco spadła ilość osób naprawiających zepsuty sprzęt elektroniczny i AGD co przyczynia się do wzrostu ilości takich odpadów.

Słowa kluczowe: zachowania konsumentów, „zielona” konsumpcja, eko-produkty, „zielony” rynek, województwo śląskie