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# CONSCIOUS CONSUMER RESISTANCE? LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD NETWORKS VERSUS THE SUPERMARKETS

by

Gill Seyfang

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**Conscious Consumer Resistance?**
**Local Organic Food Networks Versus The Supermarkets**

**by**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Supermarkets have responded to the growth in direct marketing and alternative agri-food networks by promoting local produce ranges, and increasingly sourcing organic produce from the UK. Thus consumers now have a choice of outlets for local and organic produce. This paper examines the implications of that choice for direct marketing in particular, and sustainable consumption in general. Mainstream and alternative models of sustainable consumption are described. The paper tests the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels, and that they are deliberately avoiding mainstream supermarkets. Research findings are presented from a survey of customers of a local organic food cooperative in Norfolk, UK which examines consumer motivations and perceptions of alternative and mainstream food provisioning. The hypothesis is confirmed: consumers expressed wide-ranging preferences for participation in the alternative food system, but the convenience and accessibility of supermarket provisioning of local and organic food threatens to erode the wider social and community benefits achieved by direct marketing initiatives.

**KEYWORDS:** Food, localism, organics, sustainable consumption

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In its efforts towards a sustainable food and farming system, the UK government has pledged to support the growth of organic farming by promoting organic food in schools and hospitals, providing cash for organic farmers to help them transfer to the new farming system, recognising and valuing the social and economic benefits of organic farming, as well as environmental gains, and encouraging supermarkets to source more organic food from the UK. (DEFRA, 2002). In addition, re-localising food chains has been put forward as a strategy for sustainable consumption due to the apparent benefits to local economies, communities, and environments (Jones, 2001; Taylor et al, 2005). Consequently, the recent revival of localised food supply chains and the rise in demand for specifically local organic produce has been described as a move towards a more sustainable food and farming system in the UK (Pretty, et al, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; La Trobe, 2002). Furthermore, these trends have driven the explosion of direct marketing outlets - farmers markets, farm shops, and veggie box subscription schemes – where consumers buy directly from the growers - and in turn supermarkets have responded by stocking more local and organic produce (Soil Association, 2005b; Padbury, 2006). Does it matter where consumers buy their food?

It has been argued that consumers in these direct marketing initiatives and alternative food networks are actively engaged in political activity to create new systems of provision, based upon alternative values to the mainstream. 'Systems of provision' are vertical commodity chains (comprising production, marketing, distribution, retail and consumption in social and cultural context) which mediate between and link 'a particular pattern of production with a particular pattern of consumption' (Fine and Leopold, 1993:4). Within the 'new economics' literature, sustainable consumption is understood to require fundamental changes in lifestyles, economic and social systems to seek increases in quality of life rather than material consumption (Jackson, 2004). It therefore demands a deeper understanding of the systems of provision which mediate consumption patterns, in order to transform these elements of social infrastructure at a fundamental level (Van Vliet et al, 2005; Southerton et al, 2004). This new social infrastructure around food provisioning – direct marketing - is associated with a range of goals: rural regeneration, livelihood security, cutting food miles and carbon dioxide emissions from transport, social embedding, community-building, increasing connection to the land, and most importantly (and for all these reasons), sustainable consumption (Seyfang, 2006; Stagl, 2002; Allen and Kovach, 2000; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997; Taylor et al, 2005). These benefits are placed in opposition to supermarket supply chains which, it is argued, squeeze local producers financially, import most of their produce, remove money from the locality, and impose social, economic and environmental costs on local economies (CorporateWatch, n.d.; Ward and Rose, 2002; Taylor et al, 2005).

However, faced with the growth of alternative agri-food networks, the supermarkets have responded by marketing their own local produce ranges, and increasingly sourcing organic produce from the UK (Padbury, 2006; Soil Association, 2005b). Thus consumers now have a choice of outlets for local and organic produce. This paper examines the implications of that choice for alternative agri-food networks and direct marketing in particular, and for sustainable consumption in general. It tests the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels, and that they are deliberately avoiding Asda, Tesco and the other mainstream supermarkets by doing so, for political reasons. In order to test this hypothesis, survey research was carried out with customers of a local organic food cooperative, a direct marketing initiative in Norfolk, UK. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected, and the new empirical findings are presented here. This study aimed to uncover the motivations and values which customers held around ideas of local and organic food, and how these related to direct marketing and supermarket channels of supply. Specifically, the paper examines the perceived advantages and disadvantages of direct marketing versus supermarket provisioning for organic and local produce. By examining the responses and stated consumption patterns of direct marketing customers, the paper is able to identify the opportunities for, and potential threats to these nascent agri-food networks.

The paper proceeds as follows: the first part deals with the subject of sustainable consumption and its agents of change, namely green and ethical consumers. Mainstream sustainable consumption strategy is described, and a number of criticisms are levelled against it, including its constraints within existing infrastructures of provision. An alternative approach is outlined which seeks to construct new systems of provision, and the third section sets out the arguments in favour of direct marketing as a more sustainable infrastructure of food provision than mainstream supermarkets, discussing recent trends in supermarket provision. Then the case study findings are presented, considering the motivations of consumers to uncover the extent to which participation in direct marketing is a deliberate act of supermarket-avoidance, and if so, on what grounds. Research and policy implications are presented in a concluding section.

## 2. MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Over the last 15 years, 'sustainable consumption' has become a core issue on the international environmental agenda (UNCED, 1992; OECD, 2002), and in 2003, the UK Government announced its strategy for sustainable consumption and production – which it defines as "continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come" (DEFRA, 2003:10). In practice, this emphasises decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation, to be achieved through a range of market-based measures, and calling on informed and motivated citizens to use their consumer sovereignty to transform markets by demanding improved environmental and social aspects of production and product design (ibid; see also HM Government, 2005). This definition of sustainable consumption and the ecological modernisation assumptions it is based upon (individual consumers' choices driving market transformation), are the subject of much criticism from proponents of a more radical conception of the changes required in consumer behaviour to deliver sustainability. Not least of these is the UK government's own Sustainable Development Commission's assertion that linking sustainable consumption with economic growth is mistaken because it ties it to the framework responsible for *un*sustainable consumption (Porritt, 2003).

The Commission is joined by a number of commentators, academics, practitioners and policymakers in arguing for significant changes to the lifestyles of developed countries in the interest of equitable, sustainable livelihoods, and for policies to support these goals (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Levett et al, 2003). The major criticisms of the mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption from the new economics perspective are fivefold. First, that it relies upon a market which externalises environmental and social costs, and so sends the wrong price signals. Second, it ignores the range of psychological and sociological motivations and other factors influencing consumption behaviour such as affordability, availability, convenience, aspiration, empowerment, self-esteem, need for belongingness and identity, etc. Third, it pits individual atomistic consumers against global corporations and political structures, in a bid to solve global environmental problems, when collective effort would be more appropriate. Fourth, it is only applicable in relation to consumer goods, rendering the vast quantity of institutional consumption – both of governments and of infrastructure – out of the reach of consumer pressure. And fifth, it cannot encompass action to reduce consumption and seek alternative channels of provision such as informal exchange networks by consumers eager to create institutions representative of their values (Maniates, 2003; Sanne, 2002; Seyfang, 2004, 2005; Southerton et al, 2004; Levett et al, 2003; Holdsworth, 2003; Burgess et al, 2003).

Critics of the mainstream approach to sustainable consumption draw out the political economy of, and richer sociological meanings attached to, consumption and point to collective institutions as the source of potential change (Maniates, 2003; Fine and Leopold, 1993). Given that current systems of provision prevent significant changes in consumption patterns, what can be done to overcome this limitation? Alternative systems of provision, based upon different conceptions of wealth, progress, value and with associated social and economic institutions and infrastructure which allow people to behave as ecological citizens and express their pro-sustainability values, require a foundation in alternative values, development goals, motivations and definitions of wealth (Leyshon et al, 2004). Such an alternative theoretical approach to sustainable consumption is proposed by a broad body of thought known collectively as the ‘new economics’, founded on a belief that economics cannot be divorced from its foundations in environmental and social contexts, and that sustainability requires a realigning of development priorities away from the primary goal of economic growth (Jackson, 2004). This alternative approach to sustainable consumption emphasises localisation (to increase resilience and protect local economies against external shocks), community-building (to create cohesive, inclusive communities), reducing material consumption (to reduce the environmental and social impacts of inequitably high resource use in the developed world), collective action (to overcome the limitations of individualism in solving collective problems) and the creation of new social infrastructure (to embody these values and enable people to express them in everyday life) (Seyfang, forthcoming; Robertson, 1999; Schumacher, 1993; Ekins, 1986; Daly and Cobb, 1990).

Having reviewed and contrasted the mainstream and alternative approaches to sustainable consumption, and briefly introduced the idea of systems of provision, these concepts are now applied to the rationale for local and organic food consumption. Two systems of food provisioning encountered in the UK, namely direct marketing and supermarket systems of supply, are described, locating them within alternative and mainstream sustainable consumption models respectively.

## 3. LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Consumer demand for organic produce has risen enormously over the last 15 years, growing from a niche activity to a mainstream consumption choice (Smith, 2006). Sales of organic products in the UK amounted to £1.213 billion in 2004, a rise of 11% on the previous year (Soil Association, 2005b). Simultaneously the area of land within the UK certified (or in conversion) for organic production has risen dramatically: in 1998 there were under 100,000 hectares and by 2005 this had risen to 690,000 hectares (DEFRA, 2005). The sustainable consumption rationale for organic food is that it is a production method more in harmony with the environment and local ecosystems. By working with nature rather than against it, and replenishing the soil with organic material, rather than denuding it and relying upon artificial fertilisers, proponents claim that soil quality and hence food quality will be improved, biodiversity will be enhanced; a second urge is to protect individual’s health by avoiding ingestion of chemical pesticides (Reed, 2001). Additionally there are increased economic and employment benefits from organic farms compared to conventional farms (Maynard and Green, 2006).

One consequence of the growth in organic farming as a mainstream system of production, highlighted by Smith and Marsden (2004), is the ‘farm-gate price squeeze’ common within conventional agriculture, which limits future growth and potential for rural development. Farmers keen to diversify into organic production as a means of securing more sustainable livelihoods in the face of declining incomes within the conventional sector are confronted with an increasingly efficient supermarket-driven supply chain which sources the majority of its organic produce from overseas. Currently 56% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported, and 75% is sold through supermarkets (Soil Association, 2005a), representing an overwhelmingly mainstream distribution channel. A key challenge for small organic producers is therefore to create new systems of provision to bypass the supermarket supply chain, and organise in such a way as to wield sufficient power in the marketplace.

Responding to these negative impacts of supermarket supply chains, direct marketing of local and/or organic produce through farm shops, farmers markets and box schemes has been proposed as a more sustainable, alternative infrastructure of food provision, for economic, social and environmental reasons (FARMA, 2006; Taylor et al, 2005). One study of food supply chains in Norfolk found that direct marketing was adopted as a means for growers "taking more control of their market and [becoming] less dependent on large customers and open to the risk of sudden loss of business" (Saltmarsh, 2004: ch3). Many of these growers had previously supplied to supermarkets and for these farmers, direct marketing was a means of stabilising incomes and reducing vulnerability. Further evidence of this move towards alternative systems of food provision is reported by a study finding that 51% of organic growers in the UK were planning to work cooperatively with other farmers, to increase their market share and improve resilience against external economic shocks (ADAS, 2004).

Underpinning these shifts towards nascent alternative food systems is the growing trend for specifically *local* food consumption, reflecting a desire to bypass intensive agriculture and return to small-scale production, and grow a new sense of connection with the land, through a concern for the authenticity and provenance of the food we eat (Ricketts Hein et al, 2006; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000). It is a social as much as a technological innovation (Smith, 2006). A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally-grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (NEF, 2003). This movement towards the (re)localisation or shortening of food supply chains explicitly challenges the industrial farming and global food transport model embodied in conventional food consumption channelled through supermarkets (Reed, 2001; Allen and Kovach, 2000). Localisation of food supply chains means simply that food should be consumed as close to the point of origin as possible. In practice, this will vary from produce to product, and the construction of 'local' is both socially and culturally specific, and fluid over time and space (Hinrichs, 2003); in the UK, consumers generally understand 'local' to mean within a radius of 30 miles or from the same county (Padbury, 2006). Cutting 'food miles' is the principal environmental rationale for localising food supply chains, in other words reducing the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed, and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. Much transportation of food is only economically rational due to environmental and social externalities being excluded from fuel pricing. This results in the sale of vegetables and fruit from across the globe, undercutting or replacing seasonal produce in the UK (Smith et al, 2005; Jones, 2001; Pretty et al, 2005).

There are also social and economic rationales for re-localised food supply chains within a framework of sustainable consumption. In direct contrast to the globalised food system which divorces economic transactions from social and environmental contexts, the 'new economics' favours 'socially embedded' economies of place. This means developing connections between consumers and growers, boosting ethical capital and social capital around food supply chains, educating consumers about the source of their food and the impacts of different production methods, creating feedback mechanisms which are absent when food comes from distant origins, and strengthening local economies and markets against disruptive external forces of globalisation (Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). Furthermore, localised food networks make a significant contribution to rural development, helping to mitigate the crisis of conventional intensive agriculture, building up the local economy by increasing the circulation of money locally (the economic multiplier) (Renting et al, 2003; Ward and Lewis, 2002). Recent research by the New Economics Foundation found that street produce and farmers' markets made a major contribution to local economies, and provided access to fresh fruit and vegetables at prices significantly lower than nearby supermarkets (Taylor et al, 2005).

Indeed, sales of organic and local produce through these alternative direct marketing channels have grown rapidly. The number of farmers markets in the UK has grown rapidly since the first was established in Bath in 1997, to over 500 in 2006 (FARMA, 2006) and farmers' markets sales in 2004 amounted to £200 million, of which about 10-15% of stallholders sold organic produce, accounting for £25 million, a 21% increase on the previous year. Total sales of organic produce through direct marketing rose by 33% in 2004 to 12% of the market share, a total of £146 million. There are an estimated 379 vegetable-based organic box schemes in the UK, and a further 97 meat-based schemes, and the sales from organic box schemes in 2004 was £38.5 million. Reflecting this growth in market share, the supermarket share of the organic retail market has fallen from 80% in 2003 to 75% in 2004 (Soil Association, 2005b).

As noted already, supermarkets currently dominate the organic retail sector, and they have been quick to respond to the changing demand for local and organic produce. Between 2003 and 2005, the proportion of key organic staples sold in the eight main UK supermarkets which were UK-sourced has risen from 72% to 82% (Soil Association, 2005b). At the same time, the major supermarkets have increased the availability – and visibility – of local produce within their stores. Observation in a local store shows that produce such as locally-brewed beer, honey and preserves, biscuits, cheese and sweets are grouped into a separate 'locally produced' section of the supermarket, and sold in folksy packaging in a clear attempt to win back customers who might otherwise buy from a farmers market or other direct marketing outlet. Asda supermarket (the second largest in the UK with 17% market share and 258 stores, and owned by US giant Wal-Mart) is emblematic of the major supermarket chains. In a response to the growing demand for local produce, Asda introduced a local produce section in 2001 and now sells 2500 regionally-produced items from 300 local producers in its stores, with an aim to achieve 2% annual turnover from local produce by 2008 (Mesure, 2005). The supermarket won the BBC Food and Farming award for best retailer in 2005, on the basis of its policy for supporting local speciality producers (AMS, 2005). Asda said it is "actively encouraging local growers and farmers to deliver produce directly to their local store instead of supplying via a regional depot, ensuring it is fresher, has travelled far fewer food miles, and has a longer shelf life" (AMS, 2006). This move is tapping directly into shoppers' concerns about supporting local economies and farmers, as well as offering improvements in freshness and taste and a perceived local authenticity (Padbury, 2006) which many have criticised the supermarkets for eroding (Corporate Watch, n.d.). Furthermore, it represents the adoption of green niche practices by the mainstream system of provision, resulting in both a gradual shift in the composition of the mainstream towards more sustainable practices, but also a reinvigoration of radical alternatives within the niche, seen in direct marketing and small-scale local organic production, for example (Smith, 2006).

## 4. DIRECT MARKETING: A CASE STUDY

Empirical case study research was carried out with a local organic food supplier, namely Eostre Organics (pronounced 'easter' and named after the Anglo Saxon goddess of regeneration and growth). This case study was chosen as an exemplar of its type, an award-winning pioneer in local organic food networking, and a model of current best practice: in 2003 Eostre Organics won the Local Food Initiative of the Year award in the Soil

Association's Organic Food Awards, given to the business or venture considered to have shown most "innovation and commitment in making good food locally available" (Eostre Organics, 2004). The research took place during April and May 2004, and consisted of semi-structured interviews with the organisers; site visits to the organisation's headquarters and box-packing site, as well as their main market stall; document analysis of literature published by and about Eostre; and a self-completed customer survey. Surveys asking customers about their motivations and attitudes to organic and local food were sent to 252 customers of 3 veggie-box schemes which are supplied by Eostre. Of these, 79 were returned, representing a response rate of 31.3%. In addition, all customers of the Norwich market stall were invited to take a survey; 110 did so, and of these 65 were returned (59.1% response rate). Market stall staff reported that while not every customer took a survey during the two week period when they were available, most of their regular customers had done so. The high response rate perhaps reflects the fact that customers *chose* to take a survey, and so the population sampled is doubtless biased towards those with greater interest in Eostre and food supply issues. Although there is some overlap between the two categories (box scheme customers use the stall to top up their supplies), responses will only be considered separately where appropriate. The survey asked open- and closed-ended questions in order to elicit respondents' own meanings of local organic food and food systems.

**Eostre Organics: Origins and Development**

Eostre are a producer cooperative based in Norfolk, East Anglia, comprising nine local organic growers and a producer cooperative in Padua, Italy with over 50 members of its own. They sell their produce through box schemes, shops, farmers markets, and are supplying to local schools and a hospital. Eostre follow a localisation policy, only sourcing from outside the region when local produce is unavailable. Eostre's vision includes the creation of an alternative food system, or infrastructure of food provisioning. Its charter states:

> Eostre believes that a fair, ecological and co-operative food system is vital for the future of farming, the environment and a healthy society. Direct, open relationships between producers and consumers build bridges between communities in towns, rural areas and other countries, *creating a global network of communities, not a globalised food system of isolated individuals* (Eostre Organics, 2004, emphasis added).

The cooperative was formed as a grassroots response to the need for sustainable rural livelihoods, and as a protective measure to reduce vulnerability, and increase resilience to economic shocks from the global economy. Many of the farmers in the cooperative had previously sold organic produce to supermarkets, and had suffered from a drop in sales and prices during the recession in the early 1990s, as well as the usual list of complaints – late payment, insecure sales, high wastage of produce on aesthetic grounds. This negative experience of dependency upon a single, distant buyer led some growers to seek greater control over their businesses by moving into direct marketing, and an informal inter-trading arrangement developed between a handful of small local organic growers, to serve local markets more effectively through box delivery schemes, farm gate shops and farmers markets. Inspired by the example of the El Tamiso co-operative in Padua, Italy, and other European alternative food supply chains, these farmers decided to formalise their existing network into a producer co-operative to complement existing businesses and develop new markets. Working with East Anglia Food Link (a not-for-profit co-operative to promote organic production and localism in the region), in April 2003 Eostre was established with £125,000 of financial support over three years from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme (Saltmarsh, 2004).

Dot Bane, Eostre's Project and Development Manager, describes the growth in organic production in the region as significant – stating that twenty years ago, there would not have been enough organic farmers in the region to form a cooperative, whereas now it is a successful business strategy and there is more scope for expanding supply among existing and new growers to meet the surge in demand for local organic produce. Eostre's members supply their produce through a variety of channels throughout East Anglia and London: between them they cover 13 box schemes, 15 market stalls (mostly these are monthly farmers markets, but there is also a full-time market stall on the general provisions market in Norwich city centre, and weekly stalls in several market towns around Norfolk), and they also sell through 12 shops and 9 cafés, pubs or restaurants. Furthermore, Eostre has made inroads into public sector catering by supplying the Norfolk and Norwich hospital staff and visitors canteen, and local schools. Eostre has been very successful so far – in its first 12 months of operation, sales have grown by 70%, and the market stall on Norwich provisions market (believed to be the only full time, wholly organic market stall in the UK) has doubled in size, and has provided access to fresh organic produce to new groups of consumers as well as dedicated organic customers.

**Direct Marketing Visions: Producers and Consumers**

Eostre has a clear vision of its role in creating a fair, ecological and sustainable food system, as indicated above. Its mission statement elaborates on this and explains that it aims to supply consumers of all incomes high quality seasonal produce; to encourage co-operative working among its members and between the co-op and consumers; transparency about food supply chains; to source all produce from UK and European regions from socially responsible producers and co-ops promoting direct local marketing, and from fair trade producers outside Europe; to favour local seasonal produce and supplement (not replace) with imports; to minimise packaging, waste and food transport; to offer educational farm visits to raise awareness of the environmental and social aspects of local organic production (Eostre Organics, 2004). Considering these goals, it is clear that in its emphasis on co-operative institutions, minimising environmental impact, and strong local links between community and farmer as a response to globalisation. These form a coherent vision for sustainable food strongly differentiated from the produce available through conventional channels. Dot Bane explains how these values translate to daily practice: "we're working on a very personal level with people… that is true of consumers as well as producers … I'm not sure that we are really aiming our produce at mainstream markets, as an ethical/environmental company it's as important if not more important that we adhere to our beliefs in sustainability, both environmentally and financially. If these issues let us into mainstream outlets then that's great if not we will probably continue to seek out the more peripheral custom.". To what extent is that vision relevant to customers?

The survey respondents reported a wide range of motivations for purchasing food from Eostre, covering social, economic and environmental issues, as well as concerns around food safety, as shown in Table 1. The single most important issue on the minds of consumers was the environment: 94% of respondents agreed that food from Eostre was 'better for the environment' in general, and two more specific aspects of this, 'cutting packaging waste' and 'reducing food miles' were motivational factors for 85% and 84% respectively. Economic objectives were also of great interest to consumers: 84% wanted to 'support local farmers', 70% sought to 'support a cooperative' business, and 65% aimed to 'keep money in the local economy'. This desire for localism was also reflected in the social benefits which Eostre's customers identified. Three quarters (76%) enjoyed 'knowing where their food has come from' and how it was produced, and one quarter (25%) enjoyed the 'face-to-face contact with growers'. Over a third (36%) saw it was a way of 'preserving local heritage and traditions'. Finally, two of the more significant motivations were to achieve personal benefits from eating locally produced organic food. Four fifths (80%) of consumers felt that organic food is ‘more nutritious or tastes better’ than conventional produce, and 77% felt ‘organic food was safer’.

These findings indicate that the motivations of Eostre’s consumers resonate very strongly with that of the organisation, and that there is some support for the notion of constructing alternative systems of food provision, in addition to purchasing a specific type of produce. How conscious is that support? To what extent do Eostre’s consumers actively choose and prefer the direct marketing infrastructure of provision as opposed to the supermarket? Statements made by survey respondents suggest that many consumers are actively motivated to avoid the supermarkets and choose an alternative food provisioning system. For example:

> *“[I like] that it’s a local cooperative – I like that local organic farmers work together rather than competing against each other for profit”*
>
> *“I hate supermarkets and all they stand for, especially their restrictive buying policies. So I prefer to buy as directly from the producer as possible.”*
>
> *“I think that supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food, and harming local economies. I try to use supermarkets as little as possible.”*
>
> *“I like to put my money into businesses that are ethically sound and do not have a deleterious effect on the environment, people or animals”*
>
> *“Purchasing it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way that the wider economic community”*
>
> *“I don’t want supermarket world domination, extra food miles, packaging, and middle people making money!”*

Finally, it might be supposed that the consumers who are concerned with the health and taste aspects of organic food would be more likely to source that food from supermarkets than those who actively seek to generate wider economic, social or environmental benefits. In order to examine whether this is the case, consumers were asked whether they also purchased organic or local food from supermarkets. Three quarters (75%) of the survey respondents stated that they did. However, those who cited nutrition/taste and food safety as motivations for purchasing from Eostre were no more likely to patronise supermarkets than the average, with 74% and 76% reporting that they used supermarkets for sourcing local and organic produce. This finding indicates that customers seeking the personal benefits of local organic food are equally motivated by wider social, economic and environmental goals.

**Table 1: Consumers' motivations for purchasing from Eostre**

| | Ranking | % of customers (n=144) |
|---|---|---|
| **Environmental benefits** | | |
| Better for the environment | 1 | 94 |
| To cut packaging waste | 2 | 85 |
| To cut food miles | 3= | 84 |
| More diversity of produce varieties | 11 | 33 |
| **Economic benefits** | | |
| Supporting local farmers | 3= | 84 |
| Supporting a co-operative | 8 | 70 |
| Keeping money in the local economy | 9 | 65 |
| **Social benefits** | | |
| To know where food has come from and how it was produced | 7 | 76 |
| Preserves local traditions and heritage | 10 | 36 |
| Enjoy face-to-face contact with growers | 12 | 25 |
| Demonstrates good taste and refinement | 13 | 8 |
| **Personal benefits** | | |
| Organic food is more nutritious / tastes better | 5 | 80 |
| Organic food is safer | 6 | 77 |

Source: author's survey of Eostre customers

**Direct marketing versus the supermarket**

In order to uncover the underlying threats and opportunities for direct marketing as opposed to supermarket provisioning, the survey asked Eostre's customers open-ended questions about their views on direct marketing versus supermarket channels of food provisioning; these were grouped into categories and are shown in Tables 2 and 3, and some of the statements made are presented here to illustrate the points. In this section the views of box scheme customers and market stall customers are disaggregated in order to better understand the consumers' views about particular aspects of the type of direct marketing they engage with.

When asked to list the advantages of purchasing from Eostre compared to through supermarkets, customers responded to the survey with a set of issues which bore a striking similarity between stall and box scheme customers. For stall customers, the main ones are: supporting local businesses (51% of respondents); ethical consumerism and avoiding supermarkets on principle (38%); reduced packaging waste (35%) and cutting food miles (22%). For box scheme customers, the principal factors are: again, supporting local businesses (54%); better quality produce (42%); convenience (31%); and cutting packaging (30%). So consumers are making a strong statement that purchasing from a supermarket was not equivalent to buying from Eostre, as it meant losing some of the qualities they cherished – and the most important of these was localism. Of the top six advantages mentioned by each user group, the only issues specific to each direct marketing route were the convenience of getting a weekly delivery for box scheme customers, and the friendly atmosphere on the market stall.

When asked to list the disadvantages of purchasing through Eostre when compared to through a supermarket, there were fewer responses, and a much narrower range of factors was suggested by survey respondents, and there were again major overlaps. Interestingly, the most commonly-cited disadvantage for each group of customers was directly related to the provisioning route chosen. Eostre's market stall customers felt that the principal drawbacks of sourcing organic food through Eostre compared to supermarkets were related to convenience and accessibility (56% of stall customer respondents cited this problem). This included limited opening hours (the stall is open from 9am till 5pm, 6 days a week), and the difficulty of carrying heavy shopping bags back from the city centre. Higher prices was the second-most often reported disadvantage of Eostre over supermarkets (26%), followed by poorer quality of produce (20%). In contrast, box scheme customers felt that the limited choice and inability to select produce was the biggest drawback compared to using a supermarket (50% gave this response) although many said that they personally did not find it a problem. Price was again the second-most cited disadvantage (20%), followed by an acknowledgement that the range of produce available was more limited than a supermarket would offer (10%).

These preferences reveal the strengths and weaknesses of direct marketing compared to supermarkets for a specific group of committed direct marketing consumers. While the major reason to choose direct marketing over supermarkets is related to supporting local businesses and strengthening the local economy, and could not easily be challenged by international supermarket chains, there are other preferences which might be incorporated into the mainstream food supply chain. These might include measures to reduce the packaging in supermarket food, or to source more produce locally, and may win the custom of less ideologically-committed consumers. Conversely, by addressing the stated disadvantages that Eostre's customers report, it is conceivable that supermarkets might capture some of Eostre's market share (or indeed, prevent it from expanding to a broader customer base) if they can provide fresh organic or local produce that is cheaper or more conveniently available.

If this happens, and current developments in supermarket provisioning suggest that it is a goal of the mainstream suppliers to do so, it would imply that alternative food networks may be no more than a transitory phase in the adaptation of mainstream systems of provision to the demands of green and ethical consumers, but that this adaptation process results in a dilution of the radical transformative aims of those innovative system-builders. This process has been observed within the organics movement, as mainstream incorporation of organics has concentrated on the technical specifications of production systems, while neglecting the deeper social change inherent in the organics movement's original aims. However, this transition of organics from niche to mainstream food production system has been accompanied by a splintering of the organic movement, ensuring that a renewed radical niche exists to continue to push for system-wide change (Smith, 2006). This research finds that some of the motivations given for purchasing from a direct marketing initiative could, conceivably, be expressed through purchasing from supermarkets: certainly if organic certification of produce is the principal concern, then supermarket provisioning meets that need more than adequately. However, other issues are not so easily transferred into the mainstream supply chain: supporting a cooperative, keeping money in the local economy, having face-to-face contact with growers and increasing one's connection with the source of one's food are all aspects which appear to be the antithesis of the supermarket model.

**Table 2: Consumers' perceptions of the advantages of direct marketing compared to supermarket provisioning**

| Box scheme customers (n=74) | % | Market stall customers (n=63) | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Supporting a local business | 54 | Supporting a local business | 51 |
| Better quality produce | 42 | Ethical shopping / not a supermarket | 38 |
| Convenience | 31 | Reduced packaging | 35 |
| Reduced packaging | 30 | Reduces food miles | 22 |
| Ethical shopping / not a supermarket | 24 | Friendly atmosphere | 21 |
| Reduces food miles | 23 | Better quality produce | 21 |

Source: author's survey of Eostre customers

**Table 3: Consumers' perceptions of the disadvantages of direct marketing compared to supermarket provisioning**

| Box scheme customers (n=50) | % | Market stall customers (n=50) | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Limited or no choice | 50 | Less convenient / accessible | 56 |
| Higher price | 20 | Higher price | 26 |
| Limited range | 18 | Lower quality produce | 20 |
| Lower quality produce | 6 | Limited range | 10 |

Source: author's survey of Eostre customers

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has considered the implications for direct marketing of the growing trend for supermarkets to promote locally-sourced and organic produce. New research findings were presented from a study of the motivations of consumers of a local organic food cooperative, to examine customers' perceptions of direct marketing and supermarket systems of provision and test the hypothesis that consumers make a conscious choice to engage in an alternative food network when they purchase through direct marketing channels. The hypothesis was confirmed: consumers expressed a wide range of economic, social, environmental and personal reasons for purchasing local organic food from the initiative, and many were quite deliberately avoiding supermarkets where possible and choosing to support the alternative food network instead. There was a strong sense of participation in an alternative infrastructure of provision based on different values to the mainstream, and consumers felt actively engaged in creating and supporting this system.

However, the customer group studied were highly motivated by sustainable consumption goals, and are not typical of average consumers. How would less-committed consumers perceive the relative benefits of direct marketing and supermarket supply chains? Further research should investigate the responses of non-customers of the local organic food coop, to ascertain their values and priorities and reasons for choosing other food provisioning systems. However, this study highlighted the specific strengths and weaknesses of direct marketing compared to supermarket provisioning, as perceived by the local organic coop's customers, in order to assess the opportunities and threats posed by supermarket supply chains. It suggests that direct marketers seeking to emphasise their unique – and unassailable - advantages over supermarkets should focus on their beneficial local economic impacts, namely supporting local economies and growers. The biggest perceived weaknesses of direct marketing are convenience and choice, for market stall and box scheme customers respectively, and attention should be paid to improving these aspects for existing customers as well as to appeal to a wider market.

The implications for sustainable consumption of these findings are profound: while supermarkets offering organic and local produce may capture some of the consumer market for these goods, they remove support for other sustainability-related aspects of their production which are held as equally valuable by direct marketing consumers. Such developments attract customers with convenience and low price (Padbury, 2006), but do not respond to the need for community-building, personal interactions between farmer and consumer, and for strengthening local economies and livelihoods against the negative impacts of globalisation, which consumers also express. Consequently, the beneficial impacts of local and organic food consumption are reduced in scope, and the potential for alternative food networks such as direct marketing initiatives to expand and increase their influence on food provisioning systems is reduced. Therefore there is an urgent need for policymakers and analysts to recognise and demonstrate the wide-ranging benefits of direct marketing initiatives for sustainable consumption, to raise awareness of the interconnected social, economic and environmental issues surrounding food provisioning systems, and to support initiatives seeking to construct alternative infrastructures of provision. These initiatives may never supersede the supermarkets, but they remain an important demonstration of an alternative – very practical – vision, one which is essential for the achievement of sustainable development.

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