

Evaluation of Social Marketing Activities in the Context of Food Consumption

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Abstract. Lately, sustainable development has a special focus on population's life quality issues and welfare, which is closely connected with population's sustainable consumption. The paper provides an analysis of political, demographic, economic, social-cultural, and technological aspects of Latvia consumerism environment that directly affect food consumption. The aim of the paper was to evaluate the role of social marketing activities implemented in 2007-2012 to influence Latvia customers' food consumption habits. The purpose of the paper was to find out if there are differences in eating habits between those consumers who consider that their consumed food is healthy and that they support local food producers and those consumers to whom these issues are not essential.

The study is based on the review of literature and publications on food consumption and production sustainability problems; secondary data analysis, and public survey data analysis applying chi square method.

Key words: food, consumption, social marketing

Introduction

Food is not only a meal – the choice and consumption of it always was an issue of the system of complicated cultural and individual factors. Yet, nowadays, the consumer choice of food is more complicated than ever before. Consumers have established more dynamic, complicated, and different requirements for food (Tovey 1997). In Latvia, one of the most important factors affecting sustainable consumption is population's income. However, in the cities more and more households feel strong motivation to take up alternative life style, which could be characterized by two key concepts – “sustainable food” and “sustainable food consumption”. *Sustainable food* is a food that is traceable at all stages of the food chain, is produced and processed by efficiently exploiting local resources of production, by taking care of the environment, biodiversity, and animal welfare, and by ensuring fair and adequate incomes for employees engaged in the food chain, as well as is healthy and safe to consumers (Dzene 2012).

Sustainable food consumption is the result of deliberate actions of consumers focused on purchasing sustainable products to balance consumption and reduce waste, thereby affecting the environment as little as possible by their actions and contributing to the local economy and social responsibility by their choices (Dzene 2012).

During the economic growth period until 2007, the state significantly supported Latvia food market incentives in the form of subsidies for locally grown product promotion. Today it is important to find out, if currently, when economic growth has slowed and stabilized, Latvian consumers have become more farsighted and in circumstances of limited budget and abundant range of food products purposefully choose locally grown and produced food or on the contrary – national budget austerity have forced the population to behave more short-sighted and satisfy immediate needs instead of thinking about long-term needs of Latvia food production and consumption sustainability.

The research aim and methodology

The aim of the paper was to evaluate the role of social marketing activities implemented in 2007-2012 in influencing Latvia customers' food consumption habits. In scope of the research, the author has set the following tasks:

1. to analyze political, demographic, economic, social-cultural, and technological aspects of the environment that directly affect food consumption;
2. to describe the main accents of social marketing campaigns implemented in 2007-2012;

3. to find out if there are differences in eating habits between those consumers who consider that their consumed food is healthy and that they support local food producers and those consumers to whom these issues are not essential.

The study is based on the review of literature and publications on food consumption and production sustainability problems; secondary data analysis on food consumption habits, and consumer survey analysis applying chi square method.

In order to evaluate social marketing activities implemented in Latvia, it is necessary to look at the political, demographic-economic, social-cultural, and technological aspects of the environment that directly affect food consumption.

Political aspects

Monitoring the political-legal environment means being alert to possible changes in legislation, government priorities and the influence of numerous pressure groups that lobby government (Kotler 2001). An upstream approach open to social marketers is to increase the level of political will to make policy changes by changing social norms and increasing salience and concern over social issues in general population (Henry 2001).

In nowadays, the abundance of different product labels can easily bewilder an average shopper – “fast” or “convenience” food (takeaways, pre-prepared meals), “green” food, “clean” food (organic, preservative free, all-natural, free of genetic modification) and “functional” food (having some beneficial effect beyond normal nutrition) often are supplemented by markings recognizable in domestic market – “Natural product”, “Green spoon”, “Latvian product” etc. Individual choices around food are powerfully affected by the environment in which they are made and have an equally powerful effect on the health of the individual who makes them. According to Storey, healthy and sustainable food choices will be made only in an environment where such food is accessible and affordable (Storey 2008). Whereas, in a free market economy, the lobbying power of the food industry often blocks public health attempts to address sustainable consumption issues (Donovan, Henley, 2010). This fact is vividly demonstrated by the product label initiatives, which are exposed to inevitable misappropriation of language by large corporate companies. These companies have adapted the word “organic” for marketing leverage and customer manipulation and can be classified as green washing in the food industry. Large corporate food manufacturers have created organic lines that have illusory appearance of products from small family-operated farms; these include, e.g. Seeds of Change (M&M/Mars), Boca Foods (Philip Morris/Kraft), and Sunrise Organic (Kellogg). The label designs, the names, even the websites give no indication of an affiliation with the umbrella company that manufactures the products. It is a deceptive and worrisome situation for conscientious consumers who want to support organics and not corporations (World changing: A User’s Guide..., 2008). Another problem is the complexity of product information – it is difficult to understand for an average shopper. Alongside with the progress of civilization, the daily life complexity increasingly becomes a burden, which makes it difficult and costly for routine events one of which is shopping (Leeb 2009). For the illustration of nowadays increasing life complexity, Leeb mentions the comparison: “The Pythagorean Theorem contains 24 words, the Lord’s Prayer – 66 words but, e.g. the USA Government regulation on cabbage sales – 26 911 words.” Consequently, shoppers today have to spend much longer time to detect the differences among products often using a loupe taken with them to be able to read microscopic letters of the products’ content and distinguish many different patriotically sounding slogans on the product packaging.

In Latvia, to educate consumers about healthy and sustainable food systems and their principles, pupils already in the primary education establishments are taught the basics of healthy and sustainable lifestyle both in biology and sport lessons. Also informative social marketing campaigns on products necessary for human health have been widely carried out in mass media during 2009-2012. Social marketing could be defined as the application of marketing principles and tools to the achievement of socially desirable ends. Social marketing in contrast to commercial marketing not only targets individual behaviour change, but also attempts to “go upstream” and target groups of individuals, legislative bodies, government departments, and non-profit organizations who have the power to enhance such attitude that helps to protect people’s health, sustainable wellbeing and quality of life. These advertising campaigns were implemented on the EU money with the co-financing of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Latvia. The total costs of these advertising projects were approximately 750 thousand EUR. The main activities envisaged by this project were advertising campaigns on TV informing TV viewers about necessity to consume fresh vegetables, fruit, milk products, and honey (Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina, 2012).

In the context of the European Union single market policy and its negative side effects, Latvian consumers' feelings are also often affected by patriotic slogans, such as “*Let's support our local producers!*” The problem is that consumers' motivation and awareness, why they should support directly local producers, often are primitive and based on false stereotypes. In spite of this fact, the campaign “*Do not buy foreign!*” has been one of the most successful social campaigns of such kind. It was initiated in 2012 with the budget of 20 thousand EUR. The initial organizers of this campaign were 17 Latvia local food producers. The objective set by this campaign was that in 2014 “*do not buy foreign*” must become a way of life. Besides, an important supplementing motivator of this campaign was attempt to prevent officials from buying imported food products for public needs (e.g. kindergartens, old people's homes, representative needs at state organizations etc.) if there is a possibility to replace imported food with locally grown.

Indeed, there is an opportunity for upstream social marketing to encourage governments to use its influence, e.g. by providing healthy food at school. *School Fruit Scheme* is an EU-wide voluntary scheme that provides school children with fruit and vegetables, aiming thus to encourage good eating habits in young people. In Latvia, the EU and national support can be applied to producers, participating in this programme. This is a good example of socially responsible approach – on the one hand, all children (also from poor families) get access to fruit (e.g. apples, pears and cranberries) that are otherwise seldom purchases at home and regarded as special goodie. And on the other hand, it is a possibility for local producers to have although small but stable market as well as possibility to obtain society's recognition. Hereby it is important to recall that due to ethnocentrism expression, Latvian population is more responsive to campaigns that involve real, well known people and companies. One of such campaigns being practised already for the second year is “*Cranberry – Super Berry*”, which is a social project financed by EU, Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Latvia and local cranberry producers. The main idea of this campaign is that Nordic berry cranberry is good for health and wellbeing. In scope of the project, a website has been created and in it people can actively participate in different quizzes, contests, find various recipes with cranberries, and even learn how to make a natural cosmetic product at home. The campaign “*Cranberry – Super Berry*” has been successful because it not only promotes a good and healthy product but also helps to strengthen the link between consumers and natural food source.

Economic aspects

The professor L.Melece, Head of Department of Quality and Environment Protection, Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics, considers that nowadays there can be distinguished two directions of food production. The first is food production in middle and large-scale enterprises (industrialization and efficient production) mainly for international and regional (the EU, the former USSR countries etc.) markets. To ensure this type of production, companies need to implement the following measures: industrialization, consolidation and modernization; increase of competitiveness and innovation; focus on regional and global markets; quality (ISO 9000, ISO 22 000) and environmental (ISO 14001, EMAS) control systems; use of food quality brands. The second direction for further development of the food sector is food production on farms, small and micro-scale enterprises that comply with principles of sustainable and environmentally friendly food chain and produce value-added food products mainly for the local market. The main conditions for such food production are: local and artisan (individually) produced food, including organic; organic food and market development; local food markets and distribution; culinary tourism; “*Slow Food*” movement; voluntary quality schemes. This description brings the justification – food that is both grown and sold locally skips many steps of processing, packaging, and transporting, sparing the environment and eliminating the dependency on suppliers far removed from the region. Consequently, locally grown produce is fresher, which makes it taste better and ensures that the consumer is getting maximum nutrition for his/her buck, and after all the link between the producer and consumer is not lost. Another aspect is strengthening of local economy, providing work for small farmers, creating or saving workplaces, preserving small shops and securing food. G. W. Schenk has emphasized the importance of “*regional value adding*”. If someone spends 10 EUR in the supermarket, about 2 EUR remain in the regional community and 8 leave the area. If someone spends 10 EUR to buy from a regional producer, 8 EUR remain in the regional community and 2 leave the area. Buying regional products can generate 4 times more the regional community than buying supra-regional. Even, if regional products would cost twice as much – comparing the supra-regional products, the regional people would gain more.

Demographic aspects

The demographic environment is analysed by noting trends in population growth, distribution and movement, as well as demographic of age, gender, education, household characteristic and ethnicity.

Marketers need to understand the characteristics of the ageing Baby Boomers (born between 1941 and 1960) as well as Generation X (born about 1961-1981) and Generation Y (born 1982-2002) and the future Generation Z (born 2003-2023). These generations differ on many dimensions, such as their preferences for green products and packaging, interest in recycling, music and entertainment tastes and attitudes towards convenience foods.

In Latvia, like in most of countries, organic foods are perceived as being expensive and purchased by a young, affluent, well-educated and health-conscious demographic (Finch 2006), while functional foods appeal to baby boomers as they move into their fifties-sixties and become concerned with ageing and lifestyle disease risks (Frost and Sullivan 2008). According to the Census Data of Latvia Statistical Bureau (2011), the largest population decrease (14%) was detected in the 23-31 year-old population group. The reason for this population decrease is difficulty to find a job in Latvia, thus forcing youngsters to leave Latvia for finding a job in the UK, Ireland, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and other wealthier EU countries. The Census Data also give evidence that due to economic migration and low birth rates the population is rapidly ageing. The average age of the population in 2011 was 41.6 years. The demographic situation suggests that the social marketing campaigns aimed at changing food consumption behaviour should especially concentrate on Generation X perception peculiarities because this is the largest segment daily purchasing food for their households.

Social and cultural aspects

After Latvia regained its independence and became a free economy, a new era of fast-food rapidly overtook all spheres of life. The fact that fast food with its high fat content is the most often reason for obesity has now found the expression in real life – according to the World Health Organisation research in Latvia, in 2010 every fifth 1st grade pupil was overweight. There has also been an increase in the consumption of pre-fabricated food products in Latvia. However, lately in the context of environment protection and healthy lifestyle trends development in Latvia, organic farming producers purposefully strengthen their position in the market by offering both wider choice of products and moving closer to supermarkets (some supermarkets offer special organic food sections and provide outdoor sales facilities for organic food producers). Yet, consumers are not sure if the prices of organic products in the shelves of supermarket eco product department or farmers' outdoor market really correspond to the value of these products. The reason for such scepticism roots in society perceptions that have once been distorted by two false beliefs – one of them assumes that organic products are exclusive commodities, which always cost high prices, and the other one – everything that is grown or processed in Latvia is anyway natural and it makes no sense to pay more for some products only because they are labelled with Latvian eco product label.

Technological environment

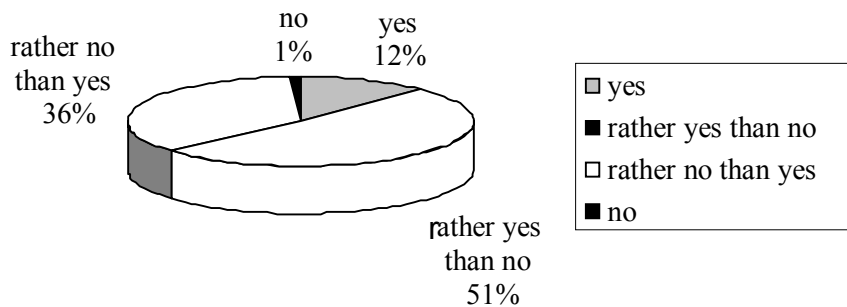
According to Kotler, technological environment includes the rate of change, the budgets available for technological innovations and the commercial opportunities for new technologies (Kotler 2001). From the social marketer's viewpoint, social campaign effectiveness can be enhanced with appropriate technology (e.g. manufacture higher quality products, reduce salt etc.).

In 2013, in Latvia the issue of increasing excise tax on "unhealthy" food products, such as products with high contents of trans-fatty acids, e.g. palm oil, margarine, and salty snacks has been widely discussed both by policy makers and different groups of society. The increase of excise tax has strongly been advised by the Ministry of Health, whereas the Ministry of Agriculture actively opposes such measures. There are many pros and cons, marginally looking at the problem – health of society vs. food producers' business survival problems, which might result in de-localization of production facilities out of Latvia, thus dismissing hundreds of employees. Nevertheless, general tendencies in food production in Latvia show that food producers are indeed interested in producing healthier are more appealing to consumer goods, and the main problem is to have a clear position – what is healthy. Therefore, since any change puts pressure on using new technologies, which often require additional financial investment, the food industry should be timely informed about necessary changes to adapt to the necessary changes.

Empirical study characteristics and results

In order to find out the recent food consumption habits, Grinberga-Zalite et.al. conducted an internet based survey, in which 259 respondents were questioned. The respondents' age distribution was as follows: 35 year old and older respondents accounted for 8.5%, the respondents in the age group 18-35 constituted 13.5%, and 19-34 year old respondents accordingly represented 78% of the sample. The gender breakdown was as follows: 64% were female, while 36% - men. The survey contained 10 questions about respondents' shopping habits for meat and vegetables and their consumption.

Is your daily food healthy?

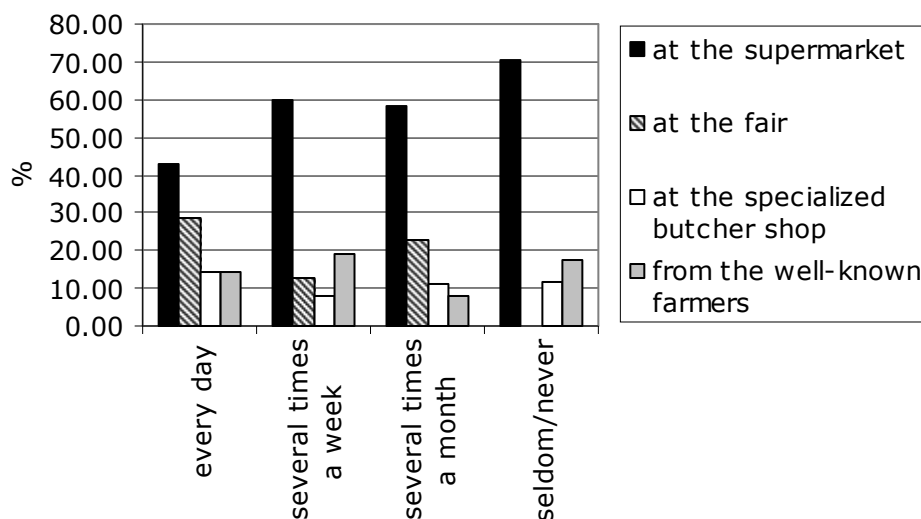


Source: Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina, 2012

Fig. 1. Customers' evaluation of their food health degree

On the question, whether respondents evaluate their daily consumed food as healthy, Figure 1 reveals that 32 respondents answered affirmatively and 132 respondents chose the answer „rather yes than no”, whereas 92 respondents chose the answer „rather no than yes” and three persons answered in the negative. In general, this leads to the conclusion that 63% of the respondents are inclined to think that their daily food is healthy, whereas 37% of the respondents consider that the food they consume is not healthy. The obtained data were aggregated for further use in chi square calculations.

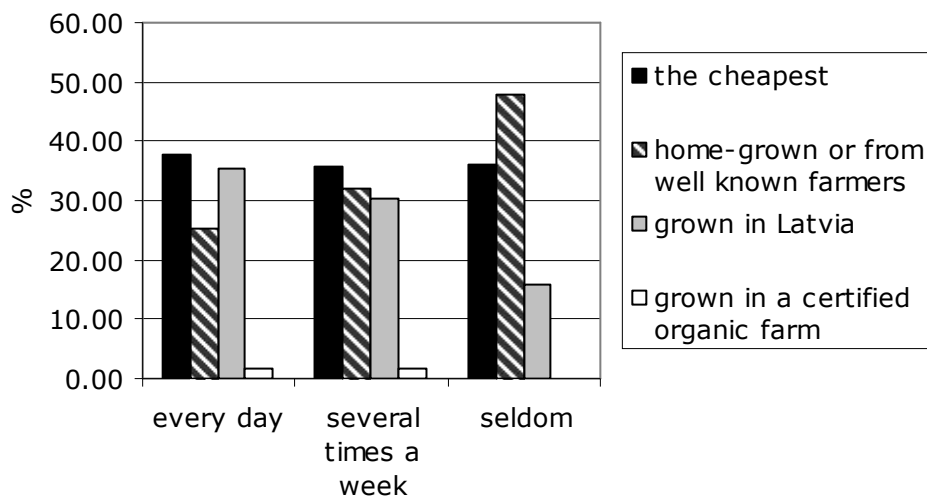
The data aggregated in Figure 2 indicate that all groups of consumers most often buy fresh meat from supermarkets, also those consumers who try not to use prefabricated meat products still choose the easiest method of shopping, not especially considering what producers' meat they buy.



Source: Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina, 2012

Fig. 2. Fresh meat purchasing frequency

The vegetable consumption habits, revealed in Figure 3, show that from those consumers who try to follow a healthy lifestyle almost as many respondents buy the cheapest vegetables as those who try to buy not the cheapest but locally grown vegetables.



Source: Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina, 2012

Fig. 3. Choice of vegetables for daily consumption

Basing on the survey results, the authors applied chi square method to either approve or deny the previously formulated hypothesis – those consumers who daily use locally grown and healthy food do not buy meat in supermarkets, choose not the cheapest but the healthiest vegetables and do not consume meat prefabricated products (sausages, pates, smoked products etc.).

The authors aggregated respondents' answers on the survey questions and displayed them in Table 1.

Table 1

Aggregated respondents' answers on the survey questions

Healthy eating habits	Choose the cheapest vegetables	Very often consume prefabricated meat products	Buy meat at the supermarket	Total
yes	49	103	86	164
no	46	89	59	95
	95	192	145	259

Source: Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina, 2012

Unfortunately, the calculations obtained using the chi method indicated that the empirical chi is 1.679093, whereas theoretical chi is 5.991465, which suggests that there are no differences in eating habits among those consumers who consider that their consumed food is healthy and that they support local food producers and those consumers to whom these issues are not essential (Grinberga-Zalite, Liepa, Avotina 2012).

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1. In nowadays, the abundance of different product labels can easily bewilder an average shopper. Therefore, social marketing campaigns should be focused not only on healthy eating issues, but should give practical information about food products' labels used in the food industry.

2. The social marketing campaigns implemented in Latvia so far have mainly borrowed the ideas of the existing marketing campaigns of the EU. On the one hand, collaboration with the highest level and well recognizable organisations help to save time since the information on the recommended market segmentation and ideal targets is already available. However, on the other hand, the negative side effects of the EU single market policy, resulting in a growing number of the EU sceptics, leave a significant part of the population reluctant to campaigns being implemented by the EU support. Therefore, to effectively reach target audiences, it would be necessary to involve in the campaigns more credible opinion leaders and use more appealing settings that have little fun with messages (e.g. situation comedies etc.).
3. The survey revealed no differences in eating habits among those consumers who consider that their consumed food is healthy and that they support local food producers and those consumers to whom these issues are not essential. This fact suggests that despite implemented social marketing activities, Latvian consumers are still reluctant to behaviour shift, especially if they have to sacrifice convenient shopping at a supermarket to one that is less convenient – attending farmers' markets that are more difficult to access or beforehand make a special order and receive products at home. Therefore, participants of local food system should develop more solid relationships with their consumers making their sales location closer to places where people shop or organizing mobile shops in the suburbs of the cities.

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