SOCIAL ISSUES ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCTS SOCIJALNA PITANJA O STAVOVIMA POTROŠAČA PREMA ORGANSKIM PREHRAMBENIM PROIZVODIMA

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ABSTRACT

Organically produced food of both plant and animal origin, processed or unprocessed, has been receiving a new and stronger emphasis due to its distinctive and favorable features. Moreover, the production process is what conceptually distinguishes organic from conventional foods. Communication strategies between vendors in the market are a vital aspect of the sustainable organic market growth, as well as the understanding of consumer demands. Organic products should be marketed without restraints and hindrances in the trading process. Therefore, the consumer choice to purchase organic food products stems either from the desire to consume tasty and nutritional food or to enhance the sustainable development of organic food production. Consumer expectations regarding the production methodology, processing, handling and sale of organic products are key factors of the organic food chain.

Key words: social issues, organic food, producers, consumers.

REZIME

Organski proizvedena hrana biljnog i životinjskog porijekla, obrađena ili neobrađena, dobija novi i jači naglasak zbog svojih povoljnih karakteristika. Štaviše, proizvodni proces je ono što konceptualno razlikuje organske od konvencionalnih namirnica. Komunikacione strategije između proizvođača na tržištu su vitalni aspekt održivog rasta organskog tržišta, kao i razumevanje potražnje potrošača. Organski proizvodi trebaju biti plasirani bez ograničenja i prepreka u procesu trgovine. Prema tome, izbor potrošača za kupovinu organskih prehrambenih proizvoda proizilazi iz želje da se konzumira ukusna i hranljiva hrana ili da se poboljša održivi razvoj proizvodnje organske hrane. Očekivanja potrošača u pogledu metodologije proizvodnje, prerade, rukovanja i prodaje organskih proizvoda su ključni faktori lanca organske hrane.

Ključne reči: socijalna pitanja, organska hrana, proizvođači, potrošači

INTRODUCTION

"Natural food" is a term used to differentiate between good and bad types of the same food, whereas "organically cultivated food" refers in particular to food produced by methods that comply with the standards of organic farming. Organic food is usually perceived by consumers as green (environmentally friendly), safer (containing less pesticides and herbicides), whole and nutritious.

Organic production systems are based on specific production standards in accordance with the European Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 of 28 June 2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products (applied from 1 January 2009). Under this Regulation, organic production encompasses production methods that comply with the rules established by this Regulation in all stages of production, processing and distribution (Regulation EC No. 834/2007), starting from the primary production of an organic product and ending with storage, processing, transport, sale or supply to the final consumer and, where appropriate, labeling, advertising, import, export and subcontracting.

Organic production meets the demands of a particular segment of consumers for food products produced using natural substances and processes. Organic production methods involve various cultural practices aimed at obtaining high-quality food products by protecting the environment, maintaining and increasing soil fertility, and promoting the development of sustainable agriculture (Danciu, 2006).

Organic production plays a dual societal role. On the one hand, it provides consumers with organic products, and on the other, it contributes to environmental protection, animal welfare and rural development (Regulation EC no. 834/2007). Control is maintained in all stages of production, processing and distribution. Moreover, all operators are mandatory subjected to a permanent control, officially recognized and supervised by the authorized public institutions.

In general, organic methods produce lower yields, which means lower profit rates for farmers. Consequently, organic products are marketed with higher prices, which is a significant disadvantage from the consumer perspective (Morar, 2013). In addition, restrictions on using chemical agents for pest and disease control can lead to an increased incidence of inferior goods, hence a shorter shelf life.

Studies show that at least half of consumers want to buy products that "support the earth", but most of them find that organic products fail to meet the requirements of their fundamental purchase (price, taste, quality, availability, etc.).

Organic food products are characterized by high prices, limited supply, low awareness and minimum availability in shopping centers. As organic products are more expensive than conventional, they may not be affordable for low-income families. The lack of credibility of organic products, or the confusion about such products' may be a possible factor influencing the organic behavior. The low availability of organic products also poses a great hindrance to the rate of their consumption and market turnover. The following factors also

impede the development of the organic food market: time allocated to families, family's place of residence, effort and time to purchase organic products, and poor distribution of organic products.

It is therefore important that producers improve the appearance of organic products and set more affordable prices. The distribution channel has an important role in removing hindrances to consuming organic food, not only by providing various organic products, but also by increasing the consumers' awareness about organic products.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Organic food products are a viable alternative for ensuring good health of both people and the environment. A well-balanced diet containing necessary nutrients provides good health and protection against diseases (Radosavljević, 2010). The consumer behavior towards organic food products may serve as an indicator of the consumption and marketing of organic food products. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impediments to the market development of organic products, as well as the factors that influence the consumer behavior towards organic products. In this analysis, we used an exploratory research method, mainly quantitative, i.e. a comparative analysis of the results obtained in several studies on the organic food market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communication strategies between vendors in the market are a vital aspect of the sustainable organic market growth, as well as the understanding of consumer demands. Organic products should be marketed without restraints and hindrances in the trading process, taking into account the following considerations:

- As long as consumers have doubts about the origin of an organic product they will not be willing to pay more than for conventional products.

This subjective problem of consumers contradicts the objective state of the issues at hand because the EU Regulation no. 834/2007 governs the correct labeling of products. Due to the fact that many European consumers are not aware of this Regulation, raising the consumer awareness about the strict standards organic food production must meet is the first step to take.

- As long as consumers have trouble identifying organic products on the market, owing to a wide range of organic product names and brands, they will fail to reach their full market potential.

Consumers in the European countries (for example Germany and Italy) have trouble identifying organic products on the market owing to a wide range of organic product names and brands (Dumitru, 2004). Establishing a common EU logo for organic products would be the simplest and most effective way of resolving the issue of low organic product visibility in the market, which can be used in addition to private brands. If a logo is not publicly known, it has no value.

The European Union introduced a new logo for organic food according to the EU Regulation No. 271/2010 of 24 March 2010, amending the Regulation EC No. 889/2008 and laying down the rules for the implementation of the EC Regulation No. 834/2007 regarding the EU logo for organic production (*Regulamentul UE No. 271/2010*). The new logo will be compulsory from 2010 for all organic products sold in the European Union Member States. The purpose of this logo is to give consumers more information about the origin of the product

and to assure them that EU standards have been met during the production process.

National and private logos for organic production may be used in the labeling, presentation and advertising of products which meet the requirements set in the Regulation on production and labeling of organic products.

- As long as consumers interested in organic food are not able to find stores which sell them, the demand will be limited.

In some European countries, where organic products are sold mainly in small and specialized stores (farms stores, organic product stores, food for health care stores, etc.), it is not easy for consumers to find organic products. Most of these shops with small turnover and profit do not expend a great deal of effort to make themselves known. One solution would be to set up regional associations for advertising and promoting organic products.

- As long as consumers cannot find (at least some) organic products within a wide range of products in conventional supermarkets, the sales potential will be limited.

In conventional supermarkets with limited range of organic and a vast variety of conventional food products, where there were no campaigns or promotion sales for organic food, consumers will find the latter easier. The following actions could be taken in order to prompt the selling of organic food: placing organic products together, clear labeling which attracts consumers to products on different shelves, displaying organic products in places other than shelves, etc.

Due to space requirements, placing organic products together is rarely done in conventional supermarket. However, such placement would enable consumers to find organic products more easily, the price difference between conventional and organic products would not be as obvious, and promotional activities (distribution of leaflets or tasting) could be better suited for the target audience.

- As long as consumers are not aware of the benefits of organic food, they will not pay more for such products.

In several European countries, organic food suppliers do not spend much on marketing campaigns, public relations, advertising and sales promotion activities. If large food companies spend between 5 and 10% of the turnover for communication campaigns, most small companies invest less than 1% for this purpose (Paunchici and Popescu, 2006). If no one knows the benefits of products and services, no one will pay more for them.

The communication strategies for advertising and promoting organic food, and the budget allocated for that purpose, are just as important as the communication arguments for organic food. Many suppliers have shaped the organic and communication arguments based on the existing organic food consumers and their requirements. In most European countries, the main reasons for buying organic products are health and environmental protection. However, it is risky to promote just a few arguments, especially if one of them, such as environmental protection becomes less important to a certain part of the population. Furthermore, it will be difficult to convince new groups of consumers to buy organic products because they may have other preferences and judge food by other criteria compared to ordinary buyers.

Organic foods feature the following benefits: superior taste, reduced chemical residues, higher standards of animal welfare, the absence of genetically modified organisms, increased natural character, etc. Organic providers should communicate the benefits noted above to consumers in order to increase the value of organic products in the consumer's mind, and the supplier should translate these features into functional and emotional

benefits for consumers.

- As long as retailers of organic food themselves are not fully convinced that organic products exhibit advantages over conventional products and are of superior quality, they will not be able to persuade consumers into buying more organic products and thus increase the sales.

In conventional supermarkets with high turnovers, suppliers of organic products should attend training courses with vendors in order to get them acquainted with the methods of organic production. However, many vendors argue that such courses are too expensive and therefore are no longer provided. The worst thing that can happen to a supplier of organic products is an uninformed retailer/shop assistant who would, when asked about a higher price of organic products compared to conventional products, answer: "I do not know, but if you want something cheaper, take this one (i.e. the conventional one). Training courses can be very effective, because retailers are a more credible source for many consumers than professional models in advertising campaigns. However, if a retailer does not contribute to attracting attention to organic products in the store, the funds invested in advertising campaigns would be wasted.

The benefits of the acquisition and consumption of organic products should be the focus of organic food producers, processors and retailers. A proper use of marketing tools can enhance the credibility and knowledge regarding the supply of organic products. Moreover, effective strategies for organic marketing should be developed in order to achieve a proper positioning of organic products in the market.

CONCLUSION

Many consumers are not aware that the organic production standards entail the standards for producing, processing, labeling and selling organically produced foods, as well as for their handling, storing, processing, packaging and transporting. If organic suppliers want higher prices for their products, they must emphasize the additional benefits of organic products by vigorous promotional campaigns.

There are several ways to convince consumers that organic foods are of higher quality than conventional. With regard to taste, which is one of the major quality aspects of organic food products, high level promotional activities could be, for example, snack food promotions in stores or a money-back

guarantee if the taste does not please the consumer. This warranty, representing the highest level of conviction strategy, shows to the consumer that the provider is very convinced in the superior taste of his product.

Therefore, the consumer choice to purchase organic food products stems either from the desire to consume tasty and nutritional food, or to enhance the sustainable development of organic food production. Consumer expectations regarding the production methodology, processing, handling and sale of organic products are key factors of the organic food chain. Consumer attitudes, concerns and factors involved in the decision process related to organic foods should be taken into account by all of those who foster a consumer-oriented approach to the organic production chain.

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