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COMPETITIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR BUYING ORGANIC FOOD

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Abstract: *This study investigated the various competing marketing strategies that are likely to influence the intention to buy organic food by adult Bangkokians that are aware of organic food and that have plans to buy it during their next purchase. These marketing strategies included egoistic product benefits (i.e., taste, safety, health), altruistic product benefits (i.e., environmental protection, helping small local farmers) and other marketing strategies (i.e., price, availability, certification, information, word of mouth). A total of 420 responses were collected from the adult shoppers in supermarkets and specialty stores. The results of the multiple regression analyses suggested that the positive motivations for organic food adoption among the general public were taste, price, availability, information, and word of mouth. Environmental protection turned out to be a negative motivation regarding organic food adoption, and women were more likely to buy organic food than men. The positive driving forces behind buying organic food for women were price, availability, information and word of mouth, whereas for men they were taste and price. The only negative driving force appeared in the group of men: environmental protection.*

Keywords: *Organic food, Marketing strategies, Taste, Price, Availability, Word of mouth*

INTRODUCTION

Organic food consumption tends to increase rather rapidly in well-developed countries especially in the US and Europe. This may be due to the product benefits of either egoism or altruism. The egoistic reasons for organic food consumption include good taste, safety and good health, whereas the altruistic reasons for organic food consumption cover environmental protection and supporting small local farmers. It is likely that product benefits are the first and foremost attraction for buying organic food in Thailand as well. However, it would be interesting to find out which of these two competing categories of product benefits works best in Thailand. In addition, the market share of organic food in the overall health food in Thailand is still only at 4%. This evidence seems to suggest that there might be some other competing marketing strategies that drive the consumption of organic

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food in Thailand besides product benefits. High prices and product unavailability are two major obstacles to organic food purchase. It remains to be seen in this study whether low price and product accessibility will be a positive driving force for organic food adoption in Thailand. Organic food certification seems to be another marketing tool that comes onto the scene in order to build the consumers' trust in genuine green products, which may come with a higher price as compared to conventional food products. In this era, if we act without good information we may end up doing the wrong things. Therefore, good marketers can provide the good service of providing reliable information through communication and labels that can help consumers make good decisions concerning the purchase of organic food. This study also aims at finding out whether word of mouth or interpersonal communication is a helpful marketing strategy in increasing organic food consumption. In short, it remains to be seen which competing marketing strategies will work best for organic food adoption in Thailand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taste

Taste has been seen to be a factor that significantly contributes to food choice (Glanz *et al*., 2003), and this is particularly true for younger people, who often seem to have less concern with their health (Neumark-Sztainer *et al*., 1999). Additionally, the aspects of culture and gender have also been seen to influence the importance given to taste and health, with the people of some countries even placing more importance on health matters than those in others, as discussed in the work of Rozin *et al*. (1999) in the U.K. and the work of Roininen *et al*., 2001 in the U.S. concerning the pleasure of eating—less importance was given to eating in these two countries than in France, Belgium, or Finland. Furthermore, women have generally been seen to be less concerned about the pleasure aspect of eating than men, placing more attention on the health aspect of eating (Rozin *et al*., 1999; Roininen *et al*., 2001).

There is also a psychological element here, since research has shown that people view food organic food as tasting better and being more flavorful than alternatives (Lyons *et al*., 2001). McEachern and McClean (2002) studied organic dairy products and found that the strongest motivating factor for individuals purchasing these products was their perception of their improved taste. Taste has also been seen as a main motive for buying organic versus conventional foods (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002~ Magnusson *et al*., 2001~ Radman, 2005~ Wier *et al*., 2008). Thus, it is hypothesized here that taste or the perception of taste is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Safety

Henson (1996) in his study found that customers are willing to pay for food when greater safety is perceived or when improvements in food safety are perceived, and he indicated that females and younger consumers are more willing to pay more for food if they perceive a reduction in the risk of food poisoning. The author also explained that this willingness to pay less in this context was related to the individual's personal experience with food poisoning, their attitudes toward food poisoning, the control that they felt they had over the risk of food poisoning, and the characteristics of the individuals themselves. Further, food safety has been stressed as a motive for purchasing organic food (Padel & Foster, 2005; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998), which is supposed to be toxic-free, containing no pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Thus, it is hypothesized that safety is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Health

According to Davies *et al*. (1995), the strongest motive for people purchasing organic food is because of their perception that it is healthy to them, and health concerns appear to be the most important reason for purchasing and consuming organic food (Tregear *et al*., 1994; Wandel & Bugge, 1997; Magnusson *et al*., 2003; Padel & Foster, 2005). More specifically, previous research carried out by, for example, Lockie et al. (2002) Grankvist & Biel (2001) has identified interest in health as a primary motive for purchasing organic food, and health consciousness has been found to be a predictor of the purchase of, and the intention to purchase, organic food (Magnusson *et al*, 2003; Magnusson *et al*, 2001). Fotopoulus and Krystallis (2002) have their own opinion of health consciousness and its impact on the intention to purchase organic food, asserting that increased attention to one's health through proper nutrition is a key factor that influences consumers' choices. Therefore, it is hypothesized that health is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Environmental Protection

Environmental concern has also been found in research related to people's purchase of "green" food. Aman *et al*. (2012) for example revealed that environmental knowledge and environmental concern were perceived to be important for people in terms of the purchase of green products in general regardless of their categories. Further, environmental concerns together with other issues were found to be influential in forming consumers' attitudes toward organic food (Voon *et al*., 2011), with Teng *et al*. (2011) asserting that environmental friendliness along with other factors significantly influenced the consumers' intention to purchase green

products. It is therefore hypothesized that environmental protection is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Supporting Small Local Farmers

Some research has focused on the role that support of the local economy plays in favorable attitudes toward the purchase of organic food. This attitude on the part of the consumer is most likely tied to his or her belief that organic food is locally grown, often on smaller, family-owned farms. Somewhat related to this idea is that fact that some consumers are ethnocentric in their food-purchase tendencies, as can be seen in the work of Fotopoulos and Krystallis (2002) related to Greek organic food buyers, who use this as a criterion for their purchase decisions. It is hypothesized that supporting small local farmers is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Price

All products have a price, which can be thought of as the value that is assigned to the product or service in monetary terms, and cost and its variability has been seen as one of the most important elements in the purchase of organic food (Bhate & Lawler, 1997). It has been found in the research that some people are more willing to pay for organic food than others: those that are female, that have a higher education and occupational prestige, those in their 40s, and those that are optimistic about organic farming (Tung *et al*., 2012, 1003). Contrarily, an inverse relationship has been found between the number of people in the household and the likelihood of their paying a premium for organic food (Govindasamy & Italia, 1999), and the high cost of organic food in fact is often discussed as a barrier to its purchase (Padel & Midmore, 2005; Jensen *et al*., 2011). It is hypothesized then that price is negatively related to the intention to purchase organic food.

Availability

The lack of availability of organic food and the inconvenience associated with its purchase have been seen to be among the main barriers to the purchase decision (Hughner *et al*., 2007). In a qualitative study of Italian customers (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002), it was revealed that people felt that organic products were difficult to find, and Padel and Foster (2005) found similar results in a UK sample and concluded that people reacted negatively when they felt that they had limited choices compared to conventional alternatives and had to put greater effort into buying organic food, for example finding and entering health food stores, which are sometimes less centrally located. In fact, in a study of Turkish customers, the availability of organic products were seen as better predictors of purchase frequency

than the anticipated environmental benefits (Ergin, & Ozsacmaci, 2011). Thus, it is hypothesized that availability is positively related to organic food purchase.

Certification

It is obviously not possible for customers to trace the origin of the food they eat, or would be considerably difficult and for this reason they must have trust in the farmers and sellers of the food when making a purchase decision. This is perhaps especially true for the organic food sector when trust on the part of the consumer is of key importance. Brom (2000) for example trust in the food sector and concluded that because of the disconnection between the production and consumption of food today, trust in food needs to be institutionalized. Trust is typically built upon the communication between individuals; however, in this case consumer trust needs to be established in another way, for example though governmental control procedures or those of independent institutions.

Many studies have indicated that consumers will make a purchase decision about organic when they trust the producers and certifying institutions (e.g., Krystallis & Chryssohoidis, 2005; Padel & Foster, 2005; Harper & Makatouni, 2002). On the other hand, if the consumer lacks trust in the organic label or doubts that organic farming really makes a difference, for example in terms of environmental friendliness, food safety, and better taste, it can have an extremely negative effect on the decision to purchase organic food. It is therefore hypothesized that certification is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Information

Access to clear and reliable information is obviously closely related to the consumer's purchase decision, and in this regard the benefits and relevant knowledge of organic food products should be clearly communicated to consumers so that they can make informed purchase decisions that are based on the amount of money that they have to spend and their individual preferences (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). In fact, previous studies have revealed that consumers having sufficient information about organic food products is essential for expanding market demand because when consumers feel that they are in possession of proper information in this regard it will increase their trust and their positive attitudes toward their purchase, as discussed by Gracia & de Magistris (2008) and Howard *et al*. (1988), for example. Specifically, market visibility and information about organic foods can be increased via the effective use of labels and logos, and this can enhance the trust of the consumer and his or her willingness to make a purchase (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011). Von Alvesleben (1997) for example indicated that

organic labeling is a clear sign of quality, or is perceived to be, for consumers, and is an important tool for helping them to develop positive attitudes towards organic food in general. The use of organic labels sends the message to the consumer that he or she is able to make rational and informed purchase decisions (O'Fallon *et al.*, 2007), and thus it is hypothesized that information is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

Word of Mouth

Word-of-mouth communication has been defined as "informal (positive or negative) communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods, services, or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261). Word-of-mouth information can be communicated in a variety of ways, for example through such forms of communication as text messages, email, and phone calls (Dougherty & Green, 2011). Positive word-of-mouth communication in fact has been seen by retailers as a valuable means by which to promote their products and services (Gremler, Gwinner & Brow, 2001).

According to the present author's understanding, there is not yet a clear understanding of what causes word-of-mouth communications. Previous work seems to have focused mostly on how consumer satisfaction influences word-of-mouth communication, with more recent studies beginning to question the nature and strength of this relationship however (Mazzarol, Sweeney & Soutar, 2007). Other studies have found that a variety of factors have an influence on the consumer's use of word-of-mouth communication, including identification and commitment (Brown *et al.*, 2005), compensation and bargaining power (Cheung, Anitsal & Anitsal, 2007), and the need for information (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007).

Word-of-mouth communication is often generated and spread by consumers that have no official connection with the retailer or product, and for this reason this type of communication is often perceived as being more reliable compared to paid advertisements for example. This reliability or credibility has made word-of-mouth communication a medium that strongly influences consumer choices (Cheung *et al.*, 2007), and research on this topic in fact has found that word-of-mouth communication is seven to nine times more effective than paid advertising in terms of changing consumers' unfavorable or neutral attitudes into positive attitudes (Day, 1971). Work by Hogan, Lemon, and Libai (2004) revealed that word of mouth was three times more effective than company-sponsored advertisements. Thus, it is hypothesized that word of mouth is positively related to the purchase of organic food.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

The questionnaire used in this study was first tested with 12 MBA students for a preliminary understanding of the content. This was followed by a pretest, where 12 eligible adult respondents were interviewed that were at least 18 years old, were aware of the organic food and intended to buy organic food during their next food purchase. The questionnaire was revised based on the feedback from the interviewees for its suitability and clarity. Then, the main study was conducted. It was done by interviewing 420 eligible shoppers at 24 randomly-selected supermarkets and specialty stores for organic food in Bangkok. The rate of awareness of organic food turned out to be 83% and the response rate was 63%.

Data analysis

The egoistic benefits of buying organic food (i.e., taste, safety and health), the altruistic benefits of buying organic food (i.e., environmental protection and helping small local farmers) as well as other competing marketing strategies which were price, availability, certification, information and word of mouth were assumed to be positively related to the purchase of organic food. In order to investigate whether this hypothesis would hold true or not, a regression analysis was conducted. Specifically, the earlier-mentioned independent variables as well as the demographic characteristics, including gender, age, marital status, education, and household income, which were also used as the independent variables because they were used as the controllable variables, were regressed on the intention to buy organic food, which was used as the dependent variable. It should be noted that education was divided into low education, consisting of people with lower than a bachelor degree, and high education, consisting of those with at least a bachelor degree. Household income was also divided into two groups. The low household income group was comprised of persons that earned less than 36,000 Baht/month, whereas the high household income group was those that earned at least 36,000 Baht/month. The results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the standardized beta coefficients, as shown in Table 1, the positive determinants of the intention to buy organic food of the whole sample were price, taste, word of mouth, availability, and information. The sole negative influence on the intention to buy organic food was environmental protection. Price tended to have a pronounced effect on the intention to buy organic food in a way that was

Table 1
Results for the multiple regression analysis of the intention to buy organic food and various marketing strategies for the whole sample

Model	*Unstandardized Coefficients*		*Standardized Coefficients*	*t*	*Sig.*	*Collinearity Statistics*	
	B	*Std. Error*	*Beta*			*Tolerance*	*VIF*
(Constant)	1.990	.742		2.681	.008		
Taste	.154	.055	.155	2.817	.005**	.714	1.400
Safety	-.093	.089	-.086	-1.048	.295	.318	3.147
Health	.119	.087	.109	1.357	.175	.331	3.018
Environment	-.112	.065	-.117	-1.721	.086*	.469	2.131
Help Farmers	.037	.061	.039	.609	.543	.517	1.935
Price	.265	.049	.319	5.446	.000**	.628	1.593
Availability	-.075	.041	-.105	-1.829	.068*	.656	1.525
Certification	-.176	.213	-.040	-.826	.409	.930	1.075
Information	.085	.049	.097	1.712	.088*	.675	1.482
Word of mouth	.411	.146	.145	2.819	.005**	.810	1.235
Gender	.197	.112	.084	1.758	.080*	.946	1.057
Age	-.004	.007	-.038	-.628	.530	.584	1.712
Marital status	-.193	.151	-.079	-1.280	.201	.570	1.755
Educgr	-.061	.172	-.018	-.352	.725	.827	1.209
incgr	-.159	.144	-.058	-1.103	.271	.787	1.271

R^2 = .162 $\bar{R}^2$ = .130 $F_{15,404}$ = 5.009 P = .000 ** = Significant at $\alpha \leq .05$ * = Significant at $\alpha \leq .1$

not expected. High price did not seem to be matter of concern for the persons that had a tendency to buy organic food; they tended to be willing to pay a higher price for organic food for the egoistic benefit of having better taste than conventional food, especially when most often purchasing organic vegetables and fruit (66%). The altruistic benefit of environmental organic food protection seemed to work to the contrary; the individuals did not seem to want to purchase for the purpose of environmental protection. Some even thought that the unobserved and unforeseen effect of the environmental protection of organic food could not be a good reason for them to pay a higher price for organic food as compared to conventional food, unlike the benefit of the good taste of organic food, which they could try and see the benefit for themselves. It is noteworthy that the majority of the people (27%) indicated that they were willing to pay a higher price (21-30%) for organic food as compared to conventional food.

Gender was found to be a significant determinant of the intention to purchase organic food; women are more likely to do so than men. The mean for the intention to purchase organic food for women was 3.75, whereas that for the men was 3.46. It would be interesting to find out, through further investigation, the deeper

motivation for women tending to purchase organic food more than men. Toward this end, two similar multiple regressions for the whole sample were run. One was for the women and another was for the men.

The results of the multiple regression for the female group as shown in Table 2 revealed that the positive driving forces of the intention to purchase organic food were word of mouth, price, availability, and information. It came as a surprise that none of the product benefits was an influencer of the intention to purchase organic food for women. Other competing marketing strategies tended to drive women to purchase organic food. The women seemed to be willing to pay a higher price for organic food as compared to conventional food, and that price is driven by the higher cost of organic food as compared to conventional food, which may due to the more labor intensive nature of organic farming. These days, many women in Thailand have to work outside the home and follow a busy lifestyle. Therefore, making good use of their time is critical for them and they are not likely to be willing to take any detours in travelling to far-away places in order to buy organic food. Therefore, convenient locations for organic food distribution are likely to be a key to its adoption. Women also have to be well informed either through the formal channels of mass media or labels, or through interpersonal communication by word of mouth. Word of mouth tends to take the precedence over information

Table 2
Results of the multiple regression analysis regarding the intention to purchase organic food and various marketing strategies in the female group

Model	*Unstandardized Coefficients*		*Standardized Coefficients*	*t*	*Sig.*	*Collinearity Statistics*	
	B	*Std. Error*	*Beta*			*Tolerance*	*VIF*
(Constant)	1.633	.983		1.661	.098		
Taste	.110	.074	.119	1.479	.141	.656	1.524
Safety	-.138	.130	-.136	-1.058	.291	.258	3.870
Health	.155	.122	.153	1.269	.206	.295	3.394
Environment	-.068	.100	-.072	-.677	.499	.375	2.664
Help Farmers	.009	.091	.009	.095	.924	.474	2.110
Price	.211	.069	.250	3.064	.002*	.640	1.563
Availability	-.126	.056	-.183	-2.251	.025*	.644	1.552
Certification	-.343	.285	-.086	-1.203	.230	.839	1.192
Information	.146	.067	.176	2.162	.032*	.644	1.554
Word of mouth	.781	.221	.263	3.533	.001*	.771	1.297
Age	-.006	.009	-.055	-.663	.508	.611	1.638
Marital status	-.025	.192	-.011	-.131	.896	.614	1.630
Educgr	.313	.252	.086	1.241	.216	.896	1.117
incgr	-.291	.210	-.105	-1.388	.167	.747	1.338

R^2 = .181 $\bar{R}^2$ = .121 $F_{15,191}$ = 3.035 P = .000 * = Significant at $\alpha \leq .05$

regarding organic food adoption because it usually comes from a more reliable source of information, for instance, family members, friends or other experienced consumers that have no ties with any companies.

The results of the multiple regression of the male group, as shown in Table 3, indicated that the positive driving forces for organic food adoption in this group were price and taste, whereas the negative influencing factor was environmental protection. The men seem to be more willing to pay a higher price for organic food as compared to the conventional food for the egoistic benefit of product taste but did not seem to listen to the claim for the altruistic benefit of environmental protection. For the men, seeing is believing, and this was the case for the good taste of organic food, which could be proven by oneself, unlike the case of environmental protection, which was not considered to be self-evident.

Although the high price of organic food did not seem to stop people from having the inclination to purchase it, the high price of organic food may still be a barrier for those that do not currently do so. The wide distribution or the availability of organic food was likely to be a marketing strategy that helped people in their purchase of the products more often. It is noteworthy that in general, the majority of the respondents (42%) still purchase organic food less than once a month—only

Table 3
Results of the multiple regression analysis of the intention to buy organic food and various marketing strategies in the male group

Model	*Unstandardized Coefficients*		*Standardized Coefficients*	*t*	*Sig.*	*Collinearity Statistics*	
	B	*Std. Error*	*Beta*			*Tolerance*	*VIF*
(Constant)	2.230	1.189		1.876	.062		
Taste	.172	.081	.163	2.113	.036*	.730	1.371
Safety	-.024	.123	-.021	-.199	.843	.371	2.695
Health	.088	.127	.077	.699	.486	.355	2.818
Environment	-.143	.088	-.147	-1.624	.106*	.532	1.880
Help Farmers	.091	.086	.100	1.063	.289	.489	2.045
Price	.297	.070	.364	4.221	.000*	.585	1.708
Availability	.004	.061	.006	.070	.945	.629	1.591
Certification	.062	.344	.013	.180	.857	.870	1.150
Information	-.001	.076	-.001	-.007	.994	.619	1.614
Word of mouth	.122	.196	.045	.625	.533	.830	1.205
Age	.003	.011	.027	.283	.778	.478	2.092
Marital status	-.322	.245	-.125	-1.318	.189	.486	2.059
Educgr	-.368	.240	-.117	-1.532	.127	.751	1.332
incgr	-.089	.207	-.033	-.428	.669	.750	1.332

R^2 = .205 $\bar{R}^2$ = .144 $F_{15,182}$ = 3.363 P = .000 * = Significant at $\alpha \leq .1$

21% of the respondents buy organic food every week. It would be better if organic food could be distributed beyond supermarkets and extended to a larger number of specialty and convenient stores or even distributed via e-commerce.

CONCLUSION

The motivations for women and men purchasing organic food were largely different, but both segments were willing to pay a high price. Women tended to like the easy access of the product, and the availability of information either through the mass media or labels or word of mouth via interpersonal communication. The men were motivated to purchase organic food for the egoistic reason of its good taste as compared to conventional food. The altruistic reason of environmental protection worked against their willingness to purchase organic food.

In general, people that have an inclination to purchase organic food are willing to pay a higher price for it as compared to conventional food. The product benefit of good taste was seen to be a key driving force in the intention to purchase organic food, and availability also played an important role in influencing its purchase. Other supporting marketing strategies in assisting with the purchase of organic food were information and word of mouth, and word of mouth seemed to have priority over information. It is a pity that environmental protection had a negative impact on the purchase of organic food.

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