The Transtheoretical Model: A Theoretical Framework for Organic Food Penetration

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Abstract

While organic food is growing strongly globally this same category remains small in Australia. A synthesis of the literature indicates that organic food is purchased for taste, to alleviate health concerns (e.g. to avoid food scares, food additives and chemicals) and to show concern for the environment and animal rights issues. The academic literature reporting attitudinal and behavioural insights into the purchasing of organic food products provides a limited view to guide marketers seeking to grow market share for organic foods.

This paper puts forward a research agenda to rectify this deficiency. The primary objective of this agenda is to provide a mechanism that will help marketers to understand how to increase consumer penetration of the organic food by encouraging non organic consumers into the category. This paper proposes that the Transtheoretical Model, a model of behaviour change, be used as a theoretical framework to guide research in a field of growing importance.

Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) reports that 18% of Australian household weekly income, is spent on food and this is larger than expenditure on housing, recreation, medical needs, clothing and fuel (ABS, 2001). Thus food represents a significant proportion of Australian household expenditure. Growth of the Australian organic food category has been exceptional with increases over the last fifteen years, that are unmatched by any other category (Hassall & Associates, 1996). While the annual growth rate of conventional grocery categories averages two percent (category dependent), organic food categories and subcategories have demonstrated growth rates between 15% and 20% for the last three years (RIRDC, 2002). Industry forecasts suggest that organic foods are predicted to grow to $437 million by 2008 (using a conservative base rate of 15%), while growth rates between 20% and 25% per annum are envisaged (Biological Farmers of Australia, 2003). These statistics suggest that the organic food category is growing five times faster than conventional food categories (Retail World, 2005). However, while organic food growth rates are very high the size of the organic food category remains quite small. The major characteristic of this growth is the constant escalation in niche consumer demand (Lyons, Lockie and Lawrence, 2001).

Given the increasing importance of the organic food category to the Australian food industry, academic research is needed to consider how organic food purchasing can be increased. This paper starts by summarising what is already known about the drivers of organic food consumption and concludes with an agenda to guide research in this important field. The Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change is proposed as a theoretical framework to guide the research agenda. The aim of this research agenda is to identify how to increase consumer penetration of the organic food category by encouraging non organic consumers into the category.
Literature Review

The marketing literature has adopted two philosophies of consumer or buyer behaviour, namely stochastic and deterministic philosophies. The first philosophy of consumer behaviour is represented by a number of mathematical models known as the “stochastic” theories of buyer behaviour (for examples see Ehrenberg, 2000; Farley and Kuehn, 1965). At its core, the stochastic view suggests that changes in market structure are the result of random forces. According to the stochastic philosophy we would conclude that marketers are unable to influence buyer behaviour, yet published case studies (AFA, 2006) document how marketing campaigns can deliver incremental profit and market structure changes. In contrast to the stochastic philosophy the deterministic philosophy suggests that consumer behaviour is a direct consequence of marketer programs.

Following a deterministic philosophy this research sought to understand the influences of organic food purchasing. A comprehensive review of the literature revealed a large number of international industry and academic studies yielding insights into consumer motivations for organic food purchasing. Many academic studies have originated from the United Kingdom (UK) (Baker, Thompson and Engelken, 2004; Harper and Makatouni, 2002; La Trobe, 2001; McEachern and McClean, 2002; Padel and Foster, 2005) and the United States of America (USA) (Kolodinsky, 2005; Lohr, 2001; Raab and Grobe, 2005; Williams and Hammitt, 2001; Williams and Hammitt, 2000). To a lesser extent, some studies have examined organic food choice in European countries (Honkanen, Verplanken and Olsen, 2005; Insa-Ciriza, 2000; Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2003; Magnusson, Arvola, Hursti, Aberg and Sjoden, 2003; Sanjuan, Sanchez, Gil, Garcia and Soler, 2003; Squires, Juric and Cornwall, 2001). With the exception of the UK studies of Harper and Makatouni (2002) and McEachern and McClean (2002) research into organic food consumption has employed quantitative research methodologies to understand organic food consumption. Opportunities exist to extend our knowledge using alternative research methodologies.

To date, a myriad of variables have received research attention. These variables were categorised resulting in the identification of seven key drivers of organic food purchasing. These are displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Known relationship</th>
<th>Origin in the literature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging populations</td>
<td>Aging populations concerned with their health were more likely to purchase organic food products.</td>
<td>Baker, Thompson and Engelken, 2004; Harper and Makatouni, 2002; Insa-Ciriza, 2000; La Trobe, 2001; Magnusson, et al. 2003; McEachern and McClean, 2002; Padel and Foster, 2005; Williams and Hammitt, 2000</td>
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<td>Environmental concern and animal rights issues</td>
<td>Concern for the environment and animal rights issues was likely to be related to organic food consumption and in particular individual memberships with animal welfare and environmental awareness groups play a role in their decision to purchase organic food.</td>
<td>Harper and Makatouni, 2002; Honkanen, Verplanken and Olsen, 2005; Squires, Juric and Cornwall, 2001; Williams and Hammitt, 2000.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table 1: Factors Influencing Consumer Demand for Organic Food</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foods free of synthetics and chemicals</strong></td>
<td>Consumers wanting to move towards foods free from synthetics and chemicals were more likely to purchase and consume organic food.</td>
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<td><strong>Awareness of food scares</strong></td>
<td>Research focused in the UK and Europe acknowledged a real awareness of the impact of food scares and suggests that organic food consumption is higher in markets where there has been a food scare.</td>
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<td><strong>Safety and emergence of unknown diseases</strong></td>
<td>Safety of food supply and the emergence of unknown diseases in humans, plants and animals was linked to organic food consumption. From the studies it was apparent consumers wanted to trust their food products however they were largely skeptical due to historical events.</td>
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<td><strong>Distrust of regulatory authorities</strong></td>
<td>The key findings reported from European consumers is that they can not rely upon the food industry and government authorities to give them full facts about the products they buy.</td>
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A review of organic food research focused in the Trans Tasman regions of Australia and New Zealand revealed that research on organic food in the Trans Tasman is somewhat supply focussed. For example, supply issues receiving research attention in the Trans Tasman include production systems and guidelines (Chang, Griffith and Zepeda, 2004), labelling (Chang, 2004), certification and the impact of government legislation (McCoy and Parlevliet, 2000).

Demand issues have received considerably less attention in the Trans Tasman. Three consumer orientated studies (Lea and Worsley, 2005; Lea, Worsley and Crawford, 2005; Nijmeijer, Worsley and Astil, 2004) conducted in the Trans Tasman suggest consumers believe organic food to be healthier, tastier and better for the environment than conventional food; however expense and lack of availability were strong barriers to purchase. Additionally, women were more positive about organic foods than men while identity and value systems influence consumers demand for organic food products. More insight into organic food purchasing is required to provide a more comprehensive view of organic food purchasing in Australia and New Zealand.

The academic literature reporting attitudinal and behavioural insights into the purchasing of organic food products provides a limited view to guide marketers seeking to grow market share for organic foods. While the literature helps us to understand that organic consumers are more likely to perceive that organic food has a better taste or that organic consumers are more likely to demonstrate concern for animal rights and the environment our current understanding does not provide sufficient guidance for marketers seeking to grow market share. Research is required to identify how to increase consumer penetration of organic food by encouraging non organic consumers into the category. A longitudinal study focussed on behaviour change is recommended. The Transtheoretical Model, a model of behaviour change will first be summarised before an agenda for research is proposed.
The Transtheoretical Model of Behavioural Change

A model of intentional change focusing on the individual consumer is suggested as a basis to guide this research agenda. The Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1983; Prochaska, Di Clemente and Norcross, 1992; Prochaska and Velicer, 1997) has been used as a basis for developing effective interventions to promote health behaviour change e.g. to stop smoking.

The Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1983; Prochaska, Di Clemente and Norcross, 1992; Prochaska and Velicer, 1997) is an integrative mode of behaviour change. The model describes how people acquire a positive behaviour. The central organizing construct of the model is the Stages of Change (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Transtheoretical Model of Behavioural Change

Adapted from Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1983.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Stage</th>
<th>Consumer characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Precontemplation</td>
<td>Consumers are not intending to take action in the foreseeable future, usually measured as the next six months. They may be in this stage because they are uninformed or under-informed about the consequences of their current purchasing behaviours.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Consumers are intending to change in the next six months. They are aware of the pros of changing but are also acutely aware of the cons. This balance between costs and benefits of changing can produce profound ambivalence that can keep people stuck in this stage for long periods of time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Consumers in this stage are intending to take action in the immediate future, usually measured as the next month. These consumers may have a plan of action, such as joining a health education class or buying a self-help book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Consumers have made specific overt modifications in their purchasing within the past six months.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>Consumers in this stage would be increasingly more confident that they will continue this new pattern of behaviour.</td>
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The Transtheoretical Model of Behavioural Change includes a series of independent variables, termed the Processes of Change. Processes of Change are the covert and overt activities that people use to progress through the stages (see Table 1). To date, ten processes (Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1983; Prochaska, Velicer, Di Clemente and Fava, 1988) have received the most empirical support in health behaviour change research. Rather than profiling consumer characteristics (e.g. on values or demographics), the transtheoretical model would expand our understanding of organic consumers by allowing marketers to identify the proportion of consumers in each stage and the actions associated with each stage along with the processes of change.

If the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change can be applied to consumers to increase organic food purchasing (e.g. promote a positive food purchasing behaviour change), the processes of change would provide important guidelines for marketing practitioners.
An Organic Consumer Research Agenda

The Transtheoretical Model is proposed as a theoretical framework to guide this research agenda.

Figure 1 – Organic Food Research Agenda

Stage one would involve identifying the overt and covert behaviours associated with each stage of the model. For stage one, observations and in-depth interviews are recommended to identify the overt and covert behaviours associated with each stage. Both current and non users require attention to identify their predisposition to purchase organic food products. Decision making in food is typically low involvement, relying on subconscious or automatic decision making. Rather than relying on consumers to recall decisions they are largely unaware of observation can be used to record overt behaviour (Boote and Mathews, 1999). In-depth interviews should also be used in stage one to gain insight into covert behaviours (Bell, 1993; Richardson, 1996) and more importantly to identify the processes of change.

The second stage of this research program would involve a consumer survey to capture the key overt and covert behaviours associated with each stage in the Transtheoretical Model. A marketing program attempting to move (some) consumers to the next stage would then be implemented. The third and final stage of this research would involve a follow-up survey, again capturing the key overt and covert behaviours associated with each stage. The survey should be administered to the same sample twelve months later. This longitudinal approach will enable overt and covert behaviour change to be identified. The Transtheoretical model requires an intervention based longitudinal research design to measure overt and covert behaviour change. The Transtheoretical Model is proposed as a suitable theoretical framework to consider how to increase consumer penetration of organic food by encouraging non organic consumers into the category.
References


Retail World, 2005, Retail World Yearly Update, Retail Media, Sydney, 57 (24), 35 – 84.


