

Message in a milk bottle: Where do organic and conventional milk consumers in California go for information about dairy products?

Ashlan E. Wickstrom, B.S.

Graduate Research Associate, The Ohio State University

311 Ag Admin. | 2120 Fyffe Rd.

Columbus, OH 43210

Ph: 614-292-1626

Email: wickstrom.9@osu.edu

Annie R. Specht, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, The Ohio State University

203A Ag Admin. | 2120 Fyffe Rd.

Columbus, OH 43210

Ph: 614-292-1626

Email: specht.21@osu.edu

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Introduction

Demand for organic food products is increasing globally, with milk products accounting for 15% of all organic sales, second only to fruits and vegetables (USDA, 2016). Conventional fluid milk sales decreased by 0.4% between 2015 and 2016, while organic milk sales saw a 2.4% increase during the same year (USDA, 2017). This trend provides opportunity for growth and diversity within the dairy industry; however, it has been met with conflicting consumer perceptions of the differences between organic and conventional milk. Labeling policies may be contributing to the perception that organic milk products are safer and healthier (Kiesel & Villas-Boas, 2007). In states like California, there is both a strong dairy industry and a push for ‘natural’ food products. By better understanding the personal connections and different media platforms that consumers in California use to get information about milk products and dairy farming, we can explore the strategies and channels that communicators can use to most effectively reach and educate a large number of consumers who prefer organic milk products.

Theoretical Framework

While many elements play a role in purchasing decisions at the grocery store, we wanted to investigate the differences in social media use and social networks (both online and interpersonal) between those who buy organic milk and those who buy conventional milk. Social cognitive theory indicates that events and people external to an individual can influence that person’s perceptions toward, and motivation to perform, certain behaviors (Bandura, 2001). In studies of online and interpersonal networks on purchasing decisions, results indicate that trust and connections made via social media, formation of a stronger relationship with brands or products, and the behaviors or norms exhibited by those in one’s interpersonal groups can influence purchasing decisions (Hajli, 2014; Hudson et. al, 2015; Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

Methods

The objectives of this survey were to determine 1) which channels and influencers, both online and personal, milk consumers use to acquire information regarding milk products and 2) how social media affiliation with, and exposure to, dairy farming differs between those who buy organic and conventional milk. For this study, we used an online Qualtrics survey of 300 individuals in rural, suburban, and urban areas of California who purchase milk. Participants were asked about their social media use and exposure to information about milk products. The survey also gathered information about respondents’ social networks to determine how much information they receive from family, friends, and offline media sources. A content analysis of open-ended survey responses was then performed to compare social media use and social network experiences of those who consume organic milk and those who consume conventional milk. Frequencies were determined for social media exposure.

Results

Of the 322 survey participants, 76 reported that they prefer to buy organic milk while 222 prefer conventional milk; the remaining participants did not have a preference or buy alternative products. Of the 76 organic purchasers, most said they purposefully *seek out* information about milk from either online sources ($n=40$) or from their local grocery stores and markets ($n=11$). Of

the 222 conventional consumers, most reported that they sought out information from online sources ($n=99$), followed by TV ($n=32$), and ‘other people’ ($n=29$).

When asked where they simply *come across* information, however, most organic consumers reported TV ($n=28$), followed by online sources ($n=23$) and print sources ($n=14$). Conventional consumers also said they come across information mainly on TV ($n=103$) and online sources ($n=64$), while the third category was ‘other people’ ($n=40$). Unlike the organic consumer data set, a handful of conventional consumers cited their own personal experience with dairy farming as a source of information about milk products ($n=6$). Data for social media exposure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Frequency of consumer exposure to milk information on major social media platforms.*

Organic Consumers ($n=76$)			Conventional Consumers ($n=222$)		
Platform	n	%	Platform	n	%
Facebook	50	66%	Facebook	111	50%
Instagram	17	22%	Pinterest	34	15%
Twitter	15	20%	Twitter	28	13%
Pinterest	13	17%	Instagram	22	10%
Blogs	3	4%	Blogs	13	6%

Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, a large portion of all consumers reported that the Internet is the primary way they seek out information about milk products. A larger percentage of organic consumers indicated that they see their grocery store or market as a source of information, while stores were not a prevalent source for conventional milk consumers. This indicates that local stores and supermarkets may be important channels for reaching and educating organic consumers in California. The conventional consumers had higher reports of both seeking out, and coming across, information from other people, as well as citing their own experiences with dairy farming as their primary source of information about milk products. The emphasis on other people as sources of information among conventional consumers indicates that interpersonal relationships and connections are an important part of dissemination of information. Among the major social media channels, there were slight differences in where users reported seeing information. Facebook was the clear leader for all consumers seeing milk-related content, while the other platforms were less consistent. Based on the outcomes of organic consumer responses and the assumptions of social cognitive theory, leaning on social media and in-store communication channels may be the best way to reach organic consumers and influence their perceptions of, as well as motivation to purchase, conventional milk.

Implications/Recommendations

These results highlight some important differences between the activities of organic and conventional consumers. Knowing these differences can help communicators tailor educational information about milk depending on their target audience. Conventional milk brands wishing to capture organic consumers, for example, can look into the most prevalent channels for reaching this audience; in this case, online and in-store. Future research should expand on the various social media sources to identify the most authoritative accounts and users in those platforms. More in-depth analysis of the interpersonal networks of consumers can also help communicators and marketers reach people through their social circles.

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