

How to stimulate local food sales in supermarkets via in-store priming?

The challenge

Recent years witnessed a **growing interest in ethical consumption**, i.e. consumption activities concerned with values and morality. Greater numbers of consumers, particularly young adults, report an increased interest for environmentally friendly and socially / ethically responsible foods.

However, a substantial **intention-behaviour gap** exists between self-reported preferences for socially / ethically responsible products and their sales, which remain disappointing. Intention-behaviour gaps are influenced by **factors** such as environmental constraints, necessary skills, self-control failures, competing goals, as well as memory lapses, that impact consumers' purchasing choices.

In addition to this, local produce linked to a specific geographical origin typically **lacks cost competitiveness** compared with generic versions which can be sourced from numerous territories. This leads to multiple retailers being **reluctant** to stock local products, citing **insufficient demand**.

Thus, developing **effective strategies to reduce intention-behaviour gaps** for socially / ethically responsible purchases is an important objective to support green and cause-related marketing as well as to help supermarkets increase in-store local food sales.

The pilot action

Within the framework of the Strengh2Food project, the University of Zagreb, with the support of the international grocery retailer KONZUM, conducted a pilot action aimed at investigating the **effectiveness of in-store primes to increase local food sales in supermarkets**.

Priming is a psychological subconscious effect for which exposure to a stimulus (primes) influences the response to later stimuli. Exploiting the priming effect means to use a certain stimulus (primes) to direct someone towards certain responses or choices.

The role of memory lapses within intention-behaviour gaps suggests a **potential role for aide-mémoire priming stimuli** in supermarket environments, namely stimuli that remind individuals of an existing goal to purchase ethically/socially responsible goods.

Key recommendations

For retailers:

- Invest in in-store Point of Sales (PoS) materials to stimulate local food sales in supermarket environments
- Use both pictorial and textual in-store PoS materials for different scopes
- Locate in-store PoS materials where purchases occur

For local food promoters and marketing professionals:

- Develop advertising messages that highlight the social and environmental benefits of local food to suppress price considerations
- Use in-store primes for other socially relevant matters



In this context, the pilot action involved a **pre-experimental phase** that allowed shoppers' degree of support for buying local foods to be assessed and served as a starting point for the development of **two types of in-store Point of Sale (PoS) materials: pictorial and textual**.

After laboratory testing, a **field experiment** was conducted within several KONZUM supermarkets across three countries (Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia) to assess the **ability of textual and pictorial PoS materials to increase purchases of local foods in supermarkets**.

The research involved the comparison of field sales data for the purchase of local apples and cherries vis-à-vis their imported equivalents. For Croatia, sales data were also complemented with an analysis of **loyalty card transactions** to better understand which market segments are more likely to respond to priming.

Main findings

The pre-test phase of the pilot action shows that consumers in the investigated countries possess a **positive attitude toward local food**. The latter is considered by respondents a form of ethical consumption, often associated with a perceived **superior quality** in terms of freshness and taste, **health benefits**, and the **desire to support local/national farmers**.

Findings from the lab and field experiment show that **exposure to in-store marketing materials**, both textual and pictorial, significantly **affects the likelihood of purchasing local foods**, thus demonstrating the ability of **PoS primes to increase sales of primed-related goods**.

In a real shopping environment, the research also finds that both pictorial and textual PoS materials can be effective in increasing sales of prime-related goods.

For proximal consumption events, such as purchasing fruit, pictures appear preferable, whereas text is preferable for distant consumption events.

These findings have important implications for the design of in-store marketing communications. **PoS materials are an added value for retailers** as they typically involve a low-cost investment, providing a means for improving demand for local food through a straightforward modification of the in-store shopping environment.

Recommendations for retailers

- **Invest in in-store PoS materials to stimulate local food sales in supermarket environments**

PoS materials are demonstrated to be an effective strategy to increase local food sales in supermarkets, especially amongst a population predisposed to responsible purchases. They represent a low-cost intervention for modifying consumers' behaviour in store.

- **Use both pictorial and textual in-store PoS materials for different scopes**

Both pictorial and textual PoS materials are demonstrated to be effective in increasing sales of prime-related goods, especially when seeking to promote a behaviour which is positively regarded by consumers. While pictures are more persuasive for proximal consumption events, such as purchasing fruit, text is preferable for distant consumption events.

- **Locate in-store PoS materials where purchases occur**

Retailers are recommended to position in-store PoS materials in the location where purchases occur. As a matter of fact, PoS materials are particularly effective as an aide-mémoire as they are encountered when consumers make purchasing decisions. This reduces the chance of memory lapses and provides an almost instantaneous opportunity for individuals to make choices consistent with an activated goal.

Recommendations for local food promoters and marketing professionals

- **Develop advertising messages that highlight the social and environmental benefits of local food to suppress price considerations**

Inducing shoppers to trade up to more expensive local foods is a major challenge. Marketing professionals are recommended to develop advertising messages that evoke the salience of local origins and the well-being of local farmers as an effective way to suppress price considerations and increase the demand of more expensive local foods.


- **Use in-store primes for other socially relevant matters**

Although the pilot action focuses on local foods, the potential for PoS materials to influence other retail choices in a similar manner appears promising. Especially in Western countries, characterized by a marked increase in obesity and other diet-related health problems, the ability to affect consumers' purchases in a grocery store is important. As such, marketing professionals are recommended to use other in-store primes, notably related to diet and health, as an effective way to improve socially desirable outcomes without economic incentives or coercion and in a cost-effective manner.

More info

Brečić R., Sinčić Ćorić D., Razum A., Gorton M., Filipović J., Begović G. (2021). Report evaluating the pilot initiative on mainstreaming local food supply chains. Strength2Food, Deliverable n. 9.2.

<https://www.strength2food.eu/2021/04/13/report-evaluating-the-pilot-initiative-on-mainstreaming-local-food-supply-chains/>

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Strength2Food is a five-year, €6.9 million project to improve the effectiveness of EU food quality schemes (FQS), public sector food procurement (PSFP) and to stimulate Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC). Lessons from the research have been applied and verified in 6 pilot initiatives that brought together academic and non-academic partners.



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