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COMMENTARY

Sylvia Lane and Christine M. Bruhn on...

ORGANIC FOODS: THEIR DEMAND WILL REMAIN LOW

Conventional wisdom would have us believe that food safety is well on its way to being the driving force behind consumers purchasing decisions, that only price and availability stand in the way of increased production and consumption of organically grown foods. To be sure, Chung Huang in the Third Quarter 1991 issue of *CHOICES* reported that nearly one-half of Georgia consumers rank pesticide use among their three top concerns about food, but that while people may say they prefer organically grown produce, they don't reflect this desire in actual purchases.

We also found, in national survey after national survey, that the vast majority of consumers say they are seriously concerned about food safety—particularly about pesticide residues—and that organically grown produce has been more widely available than ever before.

Huang correctly noted apple sales fell after the February 1989 Alar scare, and grape sales fell after the 1989 cyanide in the Chilean grape incident.

Where we differ from Professor Huang is in attributing the underlying factors behind the consumer's produce purchasing decision to be the result of weighing gains and losses. In our studies we did not find that to be the case. Our explanation of what is behind the consumer's decision and subsequent purchasing behavior in this case is that consumers react to the various levels of cognitive dissonance they experience. Where the discordant effect on the decision to purchase is large enough (other factors affecting the decision such as price and appearance remaining constant), consumers will not buy non-organically grown produce or buy organically grown produce, instead.

The consumer at the grocery store is first concerned with finding the item they planned to buy and consume. After that the prices of the item; its substitutes; the price of complements are applicable; and the attributes of the product, such as quality, size, freshness, how long it will last, etc., all enter into the purchase decision along with the perceived degree of the food's safety. In the case of fresh produce, the buyer may think, "These are nutritious and fit into my menu plans. They are reasonably priced, and they look and will taste good." On the other hand, the prospective purchaser may think, "They

may contain residues or substances which could cause cancer." As Wicklund points out, this is a clear case of cognitive dissonance.

Psychologists have found that, in most cases of cognitive dissonance, people do not change their habits (in this case, buying habits), but instead, justify them by either debunking the negative evidence, playing down the importance of the issue, overemphasizing other kinds of dangers to life, or seeking out social support. Other studies, such as Kassarian and Cohen's, have concluded that rather than revoke their habits, people use denial and rationalization to cope with dissonance—which would explain the high level of consumer concern but the low level of change in purchasing behavior. In fact, Beall and his associates report that only 8 percent of California food shoppers recently surveyed volunteered they were buying less produce because of concerns about pesticide residues.

Most consumers appear, despite their concerns and the resulting dissonance, to accept the relative safety of conventionally grown produce. Thus, it seems that factors other than food safety (such as prices) will continue to drive the demand for conventionally grown produce and that—barring any large media campaign on food hazards that catches the public interest—the demand for organically grown produce will likely remain relatively low. **C**

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Readers of *CHOICES* interested in more information about the prospective demands for organic foods may want to read the following articles:

"Pesticides and Your Food: How Safe is 'Safe'" by Gary A. Beall, Christine M. Bruhn, Arthur L. Craigmill, and Carl K. Winters in *California Agriculture*, 1991, 45:4-11.

"Food Safety: Consumer Concerns and Consumer Behavior," by Christine G. Bruhn and Sylvia Lane in a 1991 University of California, Working Paper No. 593, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Berkeley.

Consumption Economics by Marguerite Burk, published in 1968 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York.

"Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Behavior." by H. H. Kassarian and J.B. Cohen in *California Management Review*, 1965, 8:55-64.

Perspectives on Cognitive Dissonance by Robert A. Wicklund, and Jack W. Brehm published Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1976, Hillsdale, New Jersey.

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