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CONSUMERS' AND PROFESSIONALS' RESPONSES TO SITUATIONS RAISING ETHICAL QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this study we have attempted, in collaboration with an agrifood company, to compare and contrast the responses of consumers and professionals to the same set of situations raising ethical questions, in order to highlight the differences and the similarities of viewpoint between these two groups of stakeholders. In order to do this, we constructed multi-stakeholder scenarios comprising a description of the situation and the various possible approaches to managing the situation. We constructed two scenarios, dealing with the origin of the gelatin used in the company's products and the company's product information on livestock feed (GMO).

This allowed us to:

- study the extent of the professionals' ethical perceptions and the possible compromises between ethical values and business interests in the decision-making process.
- compare and contrast the ethical perceptions of consumers and professionals.

In the first part we discuss the exploratory phase which enabled us to construct the scenarios. In the second part we compare the ethical value of the decisions suggested for each scenario according to consumers and professionals and the probability of adopting the various decisions according to professionals. The third part compares consumers' and professionals' responses on the matching of each decision to consumer expectations and on the decision which would appear to them to be ideal.

If there is a convergence between consumers and professionals in relation to the ethical classification of the various decisions, we can note, however, that consumers' expectations with regard to ethics are little understood by professionals.

This study leads to a better understanding of the significance of considerations of an ethical nature in consumer perceptions and allows them to be compared and contrasted with the ethical judgments of professionals. It gives professionals a better insight into consumer expectations on sensitive issues and highlights certain differences between consumer expectations and managers' suggestions.

Key words: Food, ethics, consumer expectations, GMO

Within the totality of concerns expressed by consumers, we can distinguish issues in connection with the perception of physical risks, in relation to their body, and more general concerns, going beyond physical risks, in relation to the individual in his globality and his relationship with others. This study was conducted within the framework of a project attempting to explain the relationship between the perception of food risks⁴ by consumers and their ethical

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demands as a “reassurance” mechanism with respect to these risks. The general objective is to understand the various facets of ethics, and to study the importance attached to them by different stakeholders in the agrifood industry.

An increasing number of research institutes are adopting the term of ethics in their barometers (Ipsos, Sofres, Research International), without always defining exactly what the term encompasses. This term is also very vague for consumers, and it can be a delicate matter to ask them directly what they think of ethics, and what it means to them. This explains the significant difference between what they say, which shows that consumers are relatively sensitive to the arguments and the ethical efforts companies are making, and what is observed, revealing their (still) weak involvement at the level of the purchasing decision. Indeed, consumers appear to have an ambiguous attitude towards ethics: Unless they are “militants”, they are unwilling to get involved in order to ensure that the agrifood supply chain becomes more ethical, but they are ready to condemn all stakeholders in the supply chain at the slightest error or on the basis of pure suspicion.

In this study we have attempted, in collaboration with an agrifood company, to compare and contrast the responses of consumers and professionals to the same set of questions, in order to highlight the differences and the similarities of viewpoint between these two groups of stakeholders. In order to do this, we constructed multi-stakeholder scenarios comprising a description of the situation and the various possible approaches to managing the situation. This allowed us to:

- study the extent of the professionals’ ethical perceptions and the possible compromises between ethical values and business interests in the decision-making process.
- compare and contrast the ethical perceptions of consumers and professionals.

In the first part we will discuss the exploratory phase which enabled us to highlight the main ethical concerns raised by consumers and to construct the scenarios. In the second part we will compare the ethical value of the decisions suggested for each scenario according to consumers and professionals and the probability of adopting the various decisions according to professionals. The third part compares consumers’ and professionals’ responses on the matching of each decision to consumer expectations and on the decision which would appear to them to be ideal.

Main ethical concerns raised by consumers

In order to construct the scenarios, we analyzed first of all the contents of the questions addressed to the company’s consumer service department. This first phase enabled us to develop the methodology for the main study.

Exploratory phase

Originally introduced within the framework of after-sales service to collect and deal with complaints relating to products and their use, consumer service departments are still mainly places where individual consumer concerns are expressed (Barrey, 2002). Gradually, however, questions of an ethical nature are becoming increasingly common (Gurviez et al., 2003; Sirieix, Codron, 2003). The following issues arose out of the analysis of the contents of the questions addressed to the consumer service department:

- Issues in the news headlines such as GMO, Mad Cow Disease, microbiological and chemical contaminations, etc. These issues are mostly related to physical risk

⁴ A programme carried out with financial help from the french Ministry of Agriculture within the interministerial programme “Food Quality Safety”. D. Kreziak (University of Savoie), S. Pontier (Paris XII), J-J. Nillès (University of Savoie) and Isara-Lyon contributed to the results of this study and we would like thank them for their participation and contributions

- More general issues relating to the reduction of packaging materials, the composition of products based on religious and moral considerations or criticisms about companies' information and labeling of products.

Methodology of the study

The study was carried out using a sample of 16 people working in the company and 15 consumers of the company's products. Company employees were contacted by post and interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis. A letter was sent to approximately one hundred employees listed in the company telephone directory selected in order to obtain as varied a sample of respondents as possible (function, age, sex). Hence, interviewees work in a wide range of diverse departments. Data collection was carried out via individual interviews.

The consumers form a random sample, constituted using the "snowball method" and made up of people who did not know the researcher. Moreover, a broad diversity of backgrounds is represented: both men and women, of varying ages (-35 years and + 35 years), some having children, others not, and residing in different regions.

Selection of the scenarios

Confronted with situations posing an ethical problem, perceptions and reactions of various stakeholders can vary. In order to study them, we selected the scenarios-based method, which has also been used in the case of sales forces (Nillès, 2001; Lavorata, Nillès, Pontier, 2005).

Currently, consumer expectations relate not only to a company's products but also increasingly to issues regarding pre- and post-production activities. Thus we constructed two scenarios relating to pre-production control, dealing with the origin of the gelatin used in the company's products and the company's product information on livestock feed (GMO), and a post-production scenario, i.e. the issue of reducing packaging materials. In this paper, we focus on the two

Table 1 Simplified presentation of the two scenarios

| | |
|---------|--|
| GMO | A quality manager within the company must provide information on the nature of the dairy cows' feed. He must respond to consumers who are concerned as to whether the dairy cows eat GMO products. Taking into account economic and political constraints (GATT agreements), this manager cannot confirm that the animal feed is non-GMO. Soya bean cattle cakes, which are prime feed for the animals and cannot at the present time be substituted, originate primarily from U.S. imports. On the other hand, analyses are regularly carried out to check for the absence of GMO in the milk produced by the cows and no GMO by-products eaten by the animals can be detected. |
| Gelatin | To create the texture of certain products, a Fresh Dairy Products quality manager in an agrifood company must use gelatin. He must choose between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bovine gelatin which is perfectly safe at the present time but for which certain products present formulation defects • Pork gelatin which the Muslim community cannot consume for religious reasons, but which, on the other hand, gives a finished product which has all the required organoleptic qualities • Fish gelatin which presents an allergenic risk Only fish gelatin will be mentioned on packaging within the list of allergenic products. The origin of the gelatin is not specified in the other two cases. (Not all specific labeling information relating to the dietary restrictions of all consumers can be detailed on packaging.) |



scenarios relating to pre-production issues.

The scenarios present, on the one hand, the context of the decision and, on the other hand, the various options available to the decision-makers. The scenarios were first of all validated by specialists in the three problem areas in order to ensure that they matched the reality of the situations encountered in the company. Then, these scenarios were tested on two people of non-scientific background to check the clarity of the wording.

Interviewees were asked to think about their perception of the critical situations presented, to put themselves in the position of a decision-maker and to give their point of view. Thus, for each scenario, they had to:

- give their opinion on the scenario, after only reading the scenario, and specify the elements to be taken into account in order to deal with the given problem.

- after reading the possible decisions and for each decision,

1. Give an ethical value to this decision (ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 = unjustifiable decision and 5 = ideal decision) according to what appeared desirable to them, notwithstanding organizational constraints, and justify their answer.

2. Give a value to this decision between 1 and 5 according to whether, in their view, it will satisfy the consumer (1 = it will be totally unsatisfactory and 5 = it will give him/her total satisfaction).

3. State whether, in their view, there is another possible decision we had not thought of, and if so, to suggest it.

In addition, the professionals had to attribute a value to the decision according to the probability that the manager would adopt this course of action (ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 = impossible decision and 5 = he/she will definitely take this decision), and justify their response.

Table 2 GMO Scenario: Ethical value of the decisions

| Decision and wording | | Ethical value * | | Probability** |
|----------------------|---|-----------------|---------|---------------|
| | | Consum | company | company |
| 1 | He avoids going into details and states that the company abides by regulations which give no clear constraints with regard to cattle feed | 2.6 | 3 | 3.18 |
| 2 | He clearly informs the consumer that the company cannot guarantee that cattle feed is non-GMO, emphasizing the fact that this decision is independent of his will, resulting from financial and technical constraints | 4.5 | 3.8 | 2.25 |
| 3 | In order to reassure the consumer he states that the dairy cows do not eat GMOs | 1 | 1.09 | 1.09 |
| 4 | He informs the consumer that he cannot provide him with a response and that this type of question is dealt with at producers' level | 2.3 | 1.6 | 1.7 |

* ethical value of the decision (from 1 to 5, with 1 = unjustifiable decision and 5 = ideal decision)

** probability that the manager would adopt this course of action (from 1 to 5, with 1= decision impossible and 5= decision which he will definitely take)

Ethical value of decisions according to consumers and professionals and the probability of adopting the various decisions according to professionals

In order to determine the priorities in terms of consumer ethics and to compare them with those of the professionals, we compared, on the one hand, the scores for ethical value attributed to the various decisions for each scenario by professionals and consumers and, on the other hand, their ethical perceptions on these issues.

GMO Scenario

Table 2 below reveals the scores for ethical value and the probability, according to professionals, that the decision would be adopted.

Concerning decision 1, the consumers' evaluation is quite close to that of the professionals. The two groups recognize that there is a lack of transparency in this decision, and indeed, even of honesty for consumers (they think that "things are being hidden from us"). However, they highlight different main points. If the professionals tend rather to attach importance to adhering to regulations, consumers attach more importance to the fact that the response reflects the reality of the situation. Finally, they acknowledge the fact that too many details can give them cause for concern.

On decision 2, there is a divergence between the score attributed by consumers and professionals. If they all acknowledge the fact that this decision is quite fair because it is transparent and honest, professionals consider that the manager does not sufficiently accept his/her responsibilities by using the formula "independent of his will".

Whilst professionals strongly reject decision 4, consumers seem to be more understanding towards the manager who might take this decision. Like the professionals, they criticize the manager for failing to accept his/her responsibilities but acknowledge the fact that this situation can again reflect the reality of the situation.

Finally, consumers and professionals are in complete agreement concerning the evaluation of decision 3⁵ : for both groups it is a lie. However, they imagine slightly different outcomes. Surprisingly, it is the consumers who bring up the risks to the company image, whereas the professionals concur with consumers who, in their view, will not be reassured by such a response.

Probability that each decision would be adopted according to professionals

Decision 1⁶ has the highest probability of being chosen, even if the majority of the respondents think that this decision will be rejected because it does not give the consumer a response which matches the company's values. The average probability on decision 2⁷ is only 2.25. This response is unpopular due to its lack of professionalism, responsibility and reassurance of the consumer, which are the decision-makers' priorities.

Almost all respondents believe that the manager will not take decision 3⁸ because it is both unethical and likely to lead to serious problems. In this case, respondents consider that the manager's decision-making is heavily influenced by ethics.

As far as decision 4⁹ is concerned, it obtains an average probability equating to 1.7. Re-

⁵In order to reassure the consumer he states that dairy cows do not eat GMOs

⁶He avoids going into details and states that the company abides by regulations which give no clear constraints with regard to cattle feed

⁷He clearly informs the consumer that the company cannot guarantee that cattle feed is non-GMO, emphasising the fact that this decision is independent of his will, resulting from financial and technical constraints

⁸In order to reassure the consumer he states that the dairy cows do not eat GMOs

⁹He informs the consumer that he cannot give him a response and that this type of question is dealt with at producers' level



spondents allude to the decision-maker's failure to take his/her responsibility and his/her lack of involvement in the milk supply chain.

Table 3 Gelatin Scenario: Ethical value of the decisions

| Decision and wording | | ethical value | | probability |
|----------------------|---|---------------|---------|-------------|
| | | consum | company | company |
| 1 | He uses bovine gelatin as much as possible and reserves pork gelatin for situations where it is impossible to formulate products using bovine gelatin | 3.7 | 3.5 | 3.8 |
| 2 | He decides not to use pork gelatin in order to avoid causing offence to the Muslim community. Thus, he only uses bovine gelatin and stops producing products requiring pork gelatin | 3.8 | 3.4 | 1.6 |
| 3 | When technological constraints prevent the use of bovine gelatin, he uses fish gelatin which appears on the list of allergens. This avoids withdrawing products from the Fresh Dairy Products range | 3.6 | 3 | 2.7 |
| 4 | He uses gelatin which offers the best quality/price ratio | 2.07 | 1.6 | 1.8 |

Comparison with the decision which is actually adopted

In reality, it is decision 1 which is in fact taken by managers. We are told that the company abides by the regulations which contain no precise definition regarding livestock feed. However this decision obtained an average ethical score of only 3 from the professionals and 2.6 from the consumers, with this decision lacking in transparency, and even in honesty for certain consumers. According to professionals, this decision is the one which has the highest probability of being taken. Even if the majority consider that this decision does not accord with the company's values, they are under no illusions regarding the fact that it has the highest probability of being adopted.

Gelatin Scenario : Moral and religious considerations on product composition

Table 3 below reveals the scores for ethical value and the probability that the decision would be adopted.

On the four decisions, the scores given by consumers are higher than those given by professionals. On decision 1 the scores are close (average score of 3.7 for consumers and 3.5 for professionals). The majority of professionals emphasize the quality of the product (food safety and organoleptic quality). Ethical behavior consists above all of "being absolutely certain that in terms of food safety, the company is totally confident and that all possible measures are taken to ensure that the products are healthy and fit for consumption". Some raise the need to respect all citizens by creating a product intended for the greatest number of consumers and especially by playing the transparency card and allowing all consumers to make their own choices according to their personal food preferences or dietary restrictions.

On decision 2 perceptions of the two groups are quite close (average score of 3.4 for professionals and 3.8 for consumers). Two-thirds of professionals and a slightly fewer than two-thirds of consumers consider that this decision allows the religious convictions of Muslim communities to be respected. But for both groups, it appears that this decision, sometimes thought to be

too radical, can cause offense to the rest of consumers.

Respondents give more or less the same opinion on decision 3 (average score of 3 for professionals and 3.6 for consumers). Whereas some consider that this “clear” and “transparent” decision due to labeling allows all consumers to be respected, whatever their food preferences or allergies, others think that it is unjustifiable, even immoral to take such a health risk with full knowledge of the facts.

On decision 4, consumers and professionals criticize the lack of ethical considerations in this decision (respect of consumers and their religious convictions and/or dietary restrictions (vegetarianism, allergies, etc.), food safety and transparency). The manager seems to take only financial considerations into account, is not attentive to consumer expectations and does not fulfill his/her duties.

Probability that the manager would adopt this course of action according to the professionals

According to respondents, decision 1¹⁰ is the most likely to be adopted by the manager (3.8), because it advocates respecting food safety. On the other hand, some respondents emphasize the lack of transparency (labeling) which runs counter to the value of respect of consumers, and in particular of the Muslim community.

For decision 3¹¹ (which obtained an average ethical score of 3), respondents are relatively divided and the average probability obtained equates to 2.7. A majority of respondents stress the health risk of this decision. This evaluation reduces the likelihood of the manager adopting this decision in any significant way, in particular since “respect of allergies is a strategic commitment of the company”.

The probability of decision 2¹² being adopted is very low (1.6). The company could not financially bear to withdraw products from its range. Moreover, there are remarks to the effect that the company cannot be seen to take the side of one community to the detriment of the rest of the population. Furthermore this strategy would not be financially tenable.

The probability that decision 4¹³ would be adopted (1.8) is low, like its ethical evaluation (1.5). This decision will not be taken by the manager because it is not ethical (listening to and respect for consumer demands, transparency, responsibility on food safety) and does not take into account consumer expectations (“that means that I don’t care about the consumer”), which could damage the brand (risk of serious problems).

Comparison with the decision which was actually adopted

In fact, it is decision 1 which is adopted due to technological constraints. Whereas the ideal would be to have only products containing South American bovine gelatin (free from the risk of Mad Cow Disease), technological problems (formulation defects) force the company to use mainly pork gelatin in its products. Given that not all specific labeling information relating to the dietary restrictions of all consumers can be detailed on packaging, the origin of (pork and bovine) gelatins is not specified. The average ethical score attributed to this decision is quite

¹⁰He uses bovine gelatin as much as possible and reserves pork gelatin for situations where it is impossible to formulate products using bovine gelatin

¹¹When technological constraints prevent the use of bovine gelatin, he uses fish gelatin which appears on the list of allergens. This avoids withdrawing products from the Fresh Dairy Products range

¹²He decides not to use pork gelatin in order to avoid causing offence to the Muslim community. Thus, he only uses bovine gelatin and stops producing products requiring pork gelatin

¹³He uses gelatin which offers the best quality/price ratio

¹⁴between 1 and 5 according to whether, in their view, it will satisfy the consumer (1 = it will be totally unsatisfactory and 5 = it will give him/her total satisfaction)



good: 3.5 for professionals and 3.7 for consumers. The average score relating to the likelihood of the manager taking this decision is 3.8. Hence, the professionals have no illusions about the likelihood of this decision being taken by the manager.

Matching of each possible decision to consumer expectations according to consumers and professionals

We asked consumers and professionals to what extent each of the decisions appeared satisfactory to them in the eyes of the consumer. To be more precise we asked them to give:

- a score measuring the likelihood that the decision would satisfy the consumer¹⁴
- the positive points of this decision with regard to consumer satisfaction
- the negative points of this decision with regard to consumer satisfaction

On the two scenarios, professionals' perceptions of consumer expectations are distorted. Indeed, they are mistaken on the decision consumers would favor. They think that the consumers are relatively unlikely to be attracted by the decision which the professionals do in fact choose.

On the "GMO" scenario, decision 2¹⁵ is preferred by consumers (3.7) whereas professionals think that they would not like it (2.1). Whereas professionals highlight the manager's lack of involvement and commitment, consumers are generally attracted by the honesty of this response. On the other hand, professionals think that decision 3¹⁶ would be more acceptable to them (2.6): they base their opinion on the need for consumer reassurance. Consumers, on the other hand, are not at all satisfied with this response (1.6). It is correct to say that they want to be reassured but not at the cost of a lie.

On the "gelatin" scenario, decision 3¹⁷ satisfies the consumers the most (3.8) whilst professionals think that it would not appeal to them. The two groups raise the same arguments (both positive as well as negative) but generally professionals highlight the weaknesses of this decision (health and allergy risks). In terms of consumer satisfaction professionals tend to favor decision 1. Although it is not completely transparent, it allows for quality products (health safety and organoleptic qualities) to be marketed for the greatest number of consumers (3.3). Consumers also have mixed feelings but are generally favorable to this decision for the same reasons (3.6).

Ideal decision according to consumers and professionals

Table 4 Ideal decision according to consumers and professionals

If professionals are mistaken regarding consumer expectations, it can be noted on the other hand that when the two groups are asked to put forward another decision which would be more favorable, their suggestions are similar. Professionals place greater emphasis, however, on the qualities of an ideal decision, whereas consumers suggest more concrete solutions.

CONCLUSION

¹⁵He clearly informs the consumer that the company cannot guarantee that cattle feed is non-GMO, emphasising the fact that this decision is independent of his will, resulting from financial and technical constraints

¹⁶In order to reassure the consumer he states that dairy cows do not eat GMOs

¹⁷When technological constraints prevent the use of bovine gelatin, he uses fish gelatin which appears on the list of allergens. This avoids withdrawing products from the Fresh Dairy Products range

Table 4 Ideal decision according to consumers and professionals

| Ideal decision | according to consumers | according to professionals |
|--|---|--|
| GMO scenario | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add to response 2, a reassuring score on the absence of GMO in milk (regular analyses) 2. Give clear explanations on the different stages of the milk supply chain, from the cattle feed, i.e. to detail the "technological and economic constraints" by clearly indicating the responsibilities for each party 3. Explain the advantages and risks of GMO to educate people about this subject which has received a bad press 4. Use transparency (with, for example, a logo specifying the risks of GMO animal feed) 5. Or going further still, only deal with non-GMO cereal producers. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasize the company's image by complementing, for example, decisions 1 and 2 with information on quality of the milk which contains no trace of GMO 2. Reassure the consumer by providing information principally on the finished product 3. Protect the company image by offering, for example, clear information on GMOs (harmful effects and advantages) in order to reassure the consumer on this subject which often receives a bad press 4. Allow consumers to finally understand this issue more fully by opting for clear information on cattle feed and thus total transparency |
| Gelatin Scenario Moral and religious considerations on the composition of products | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use chemical or vegetable substitutes (develop research on new processes) 2. Label all the gelatins and in particular the pork gelatin, so that consumers know what they are eating and they can make a choice 3. Develop an information strategy on the risks and advantages of gelatin: large companies need to provide clear information, otherwise consumers will be suspicious of them. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transparency with labeling of pork gelatin 2. Respect for all communities 3. Seek a solution to eliminate problems linked to consumer dietary restrictions (religious convictions, allergies) by creating, for example, a range of products targeted at the Muslim community or by abandoning gelatins (animal) in favor of gelling agents (vegetable) |

This study has led to a better understanding of the significance of considerations of an ethical nature in consumer perceptions and allows them to be compared and contrasted with the ethical judgments of professionals. It gives companies a better insight into consumer expectations on sensitive issues and highlights certain differences between consumer expectations and managers' suggestions.

In general, professionals' and consumers' ethical perceptions are quite close. The greatest difference between their evaluations is evident in the GMO scenario. On this scenario, for consumers as for professionals, an ethical decision is a decision which is honest, transparent and through which the manager takes his responsibilities. However, unlike professionals who are



very demanding in terms of clarity and transparency, consumers - some of whom acknowledge the fact that too much information can give them cause for concern – tend to favor the honesty of the response. They consider, therefore, that a response, even if it is not detailed, can be very good on an ethical level as long as it reflects the reality of the situation. On the other hand, they abhor lies and consider that when they can, managers should accept their responsibilities and give a satisfactory response to the consumer. What interests the majority of consumers is the response itself and to a lesser extent the manager's involvement in the supply chain, in contrast with professionals.

Concerning the gelatin scenario, consumers and professionals both emphasize the need to respect the consumer (religious convictions and dietary restrictions caused by allergies), to market products intended for the greatest number of consumers, to produce safe and good food, and finally to be clear and transparent. If the importance attached to these various criteria by consumers and professionals is not exactly the same on the various decisions, their evaluations are broadly similar.

Given that these issues are complex and that they confront managers with questions of an ethical nature, managers sometimes voice diverging opinions on these problems and measures actually taken do not meet with unanimous approval. In addition, a further difficulty is to evaluate consumer satisfaction on these decisions. Indeed, consumers do not have the same expectations and do not all have the same ethical sensitivity towards the subjects which have been tackled. If there is a convergence between consumers and professionals in relation to the ethical classification of the various decisions, we can note, however, that consumers' expectations with regard to ethics are little understood by professionals. In both of the cases we have studied, professionals have an erroneous perception of consumer expectations.

If demands of an ethical nature still represent a minority of the total contacts with consumers, these concerns are on the increase. Consumers, increasingly well-informed and involved in sensitive issues regarding pre- and post-production activities in agrifood supply chains, are becoming increasingly demanding nowadays with respect to agrifood companies. Nevertheless, it is sometimes difficult for companies to respond to the multiple demands of consumers. Indeed, managers have to be able to reconcile "business" interests with ethical considerations, and to take decisions on often complex problems, such as the labeling information on GMO livestock feed or moral and religious considerations on the composition of the products, outlined in this paper.

The conclusions of this study could be complemented by an analysis of the influence of the function occupied in the company on perceptions of ethical problems and the courses of action of managers currently in post. In order to do this, it would be necessary to work with a broader sample of professionals, with several people occupying the same function. As far as consumers are concerned, it would be also desirable to conduct other interviews on the issues we have discussed with people involved, and not only laymen. These complementary studies would give researchers as well as professionals a better understanding of the real expectations of consumers on these sensitive issues which are continuing to grow in importance.

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