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Exploring Options for Local Foods Campaigns

Abstract

"Buy local" campaigns educate consumers about local foods opportunities and have the potential to change consumer behavior by encouraging increased purchasing of local products. Initiatives nationwide strengthen communities through entrepreneurship. An analysis of buy local initiatives conducted through Extension, departments of agriculture and economic development, and nonprofit organizations around the country shed light on the structures of those initiatives and best management practices for communicating with target audiences. Program staff use a variety of communication tools, including social media, advertising, and events, to reach diverse community groups. Findings stimulate consideration of how Extension might build capacity of buy local programs through collaboration and communication efforts.

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Introduction

Local food systems have the power to enhance economic viability of communities and states (Ingerson, Jayaratne, Wymore, & Creamer, 2014). Moreover, it makes sense that increasing consumer knowledge, engagement, and access related to local food systems could improve residents' health. Community-wide collaborations that cross many sectors can address food system issues and build capacity related to local foods opportunities (Morgan & Fitzgerald, 2014).

One such collaboration is the Connecticut 10% Campaign (hereafter, 10% Campaign)—a public education initiative intended to increase consumer awareness and excitement about local agriculture and, ultimately, the amount of local foods purchased. An average of 2.5% of Connecticut residents' food and gardening expenditures are on locally grown products (Warner, Lopez, Rabinowitz, Campbell, & Martin, 2012). The purpose of the 10% Campaign is to raise individual local expenditures to 10%. University of Connecticut (UConn) Extension leads the project with nonprofit partner CitySeed, which administers the BuyCTGrown website. Other nonprofit partners serve in promotional and advisory roles (J. Martin, personal communication, August 31, 2015).

Raising awareness of and engagement with local foods is part of a larger overall effort within Extension to raise awareness about food systems in general. Audiences for information about food systems include farmers,

workers, consumers, governments, institutional purchasers, and communities (Morgan & Fitzgerald, 2014). Many Extension programs center on food system–related education, including programming related to 4-H, families, gardening, and agriculture (Morgan & Fitzgerald, 2014; Perez & Howard, 2007). Extension educators from various program areas build capacity by incorporating different perceptions of local food systems, providing the opportunity to target multiple audiences and maximize impact in communities (Thomson, Radhakrishna, & Bagdonis, 2011).

Like education about food systems in general, education about local foods has broad implications and can be complicated to achieve. Agriculture and community sustainability are intertwined, but this connection is often overlooked (Thomson et al., 2011). Consumers, farmers, institutions, and businesses are all target audiences in Connecticut. They comprise a wide scope, leading to divided resources. However, a singular portrayal of a local food system can mask the diversity of the food system, a situation that challenges local foods programs to continue targeting multiple audiences (Wilsey & Dover, 2014). Moreover, because humans form their belief systems when they are young, youths should be an additional primary audience addressed by such educational programs (Wright & Nault, 2013). Food system education is generally informal, and interest is integral to participation (Perez & Howard, 2007); consequently, piquing audience members' curiosity is critical to program success. Finally, a challenge related specifically to increasing the purchase of local foods is lack of information available for measuring how much food is local in a community (Timmons, Wang, & Lass, 2008).

Entities within Extension are taking steps to address the challenges of providing education about local foods. Understanding consumer motivations for participation and engagement is essential to marketing and is accomplished by communicating with target audiences (Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, n.d.). For an Agriculture and Food Research Initiative grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, researchers at the Universities of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine surveyed thousands of consumers and farmers about producer and consumer issues related to purchase of local foods (University of New Hampshire College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, 2015).

Obviously, the need to understand how to increase public engagement with local food systems is important. The study described herein involved analyses of "buy local" programs across the country. The study was conducted as part of an effort to grow the 10% Campaign in Connecticut; however, the results are relevant to Extension personnel elsewhere and others involved in providing education about local foods.

Purpose and Objectives

Although the Connecticut program is successful, its effectiveness could be improved, and the 10% Campaign team is exploring options for reaching new audiences and increasing impact. Multiple communication avenues used by other initiatives could be considered in Connecticut, including avenues not tied to Internet connectivity.

The study described here was intended to answer the following questions (guided by Owen [2006]):

1. How are buy local initiatives in other states structured?
2. Which demographic groups are targeted by other buy local initiatives?
3. What communication methods are other buy local initiatives using to reach audiences?

Methods

Online Analysis

Through an online analysis of buy local programs, outreach efforts, social media platforms, and focuses of initiatives were documented. For each state, a Google search with the search term "[state name] buy local" was conducted. Search results were added to a spreadsheet in three categories: Extension, department of agriculture or department of economic development, and other organizations, which included nonprofits and business alliances. An assessment of social media pages revealed types and frequencies of posts and audience engagement.

Survey

A survey for collecting additional data about buy local programs was planned and implemented. The survey instrument contained 28 open- and closed-ended questions addressing the respondent's number of years active in the local foods movement, number of program employees, number of volunteers, budget, communication platforms used, target audiences, and marketing efforts. The survey instrument was reviewed by members of the 10% Campaign team and submitted for institutional review board (IRB) approval. The UConn Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness determined that IRB approval was not required.

Contact information for persons representing buy local initiatives was obtained during the online analysis phase of the study. A census sample was surveyed through Qualtrics, a statistical analysis software suite (Qualtrics Research Suite, 2015). The survey was administered to three groups, representing 97 programs. One group comprised representatives of Cooperative Extension programs having buy local campaigns. A second group comprised personnel from state departments of agriculture or departments of economic development, whichever administered the buy local program; all states were included except Wyoming, which had no evidence of a buy local initiative. The third group comprised nonprofits and other organizations. The survey was emailed to the contact for each campaign. An email reminder was sent to nonresponders 1 week after the original request. A total of 32 responses were collected, for a 33% response rate. Additionally, personal conversations were conducted with representatives of several initiatives who inquired about survey results.

Results

Online Analysis

Buy local Extension programs in Hawaii (<http://hawaii.edu>) and Utah (<http://livewellutah.org>) both involved the promotion of health, nutrition, and positive lifestyle choices. Hawaii's program focused on food and nutrition, whereas Utah's encompassed gardening, healthful living, and wellness.

The online analysis also revealed initiatives targeting consumer behavior consistent with the UConn Extension program. Several initiatives involved a \$10 or 10% pledge that engaged consumers and promoted buying locally (Table 1).

Table 1.

Buy Local Programs Involving Consumer Pledges

State

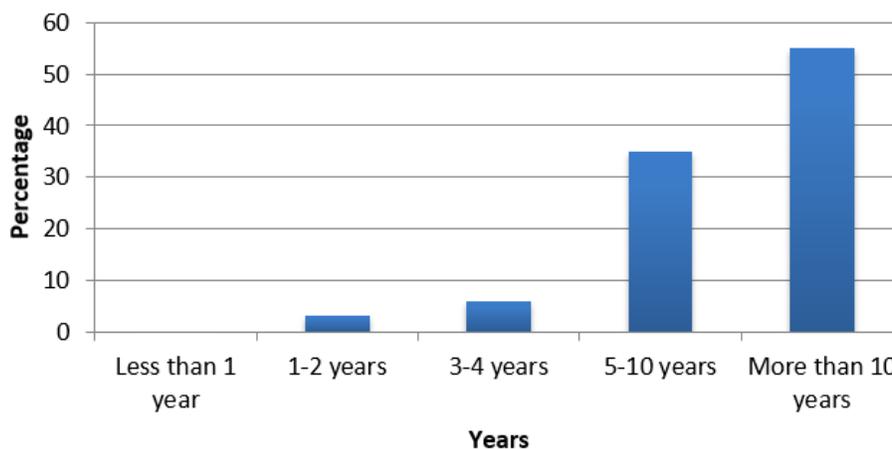
Type of pledge

Connecticut Extension (http://www.buyctgrown.com)	10% pledge
Idaho (http://idahopreferred.com)	No dollar amount
Illinois (https://www.agr.state.il.us)	\$10 pledge
Nebraska Extension (http://food.unl.edu)	\$10 pledge
North Carolina Extension (http://www.ncsu.edu/project/nc10percent/)	10% pledge
Ohio Extension (http://localfoods.osu.edu)	\$10 pledge
Virginia (http://virginiafoodsystemcouncil.org)	\$10 pledge

Survey

Respondents to the buy local survey were affiliated with a variety of the three groups surveyed: 35% from Cooperative Extension, 45% from a department of agriculture or department of economic development, and 19% from nonprofit or other organizations. The majority of respondents had been active in the local foods movement for more than 5 years (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Buy Local Survey Respondents' Years Active in Local Foods Movement



A question addressed the number of full-time-equivalent employees working on the buy local initiative. Results varied, with 33% of represented programs having one full-time-equivalent employee, 22% having five or more, and 11% having none. Volunteers do not play a large role in the buy local initiatives surveyed as 60% had no volunteers. On the other hand, 24% had 11 or more volunteers. Respondents from programs with one to three volunteers comprised 8% of the sample, and 8% had four to six volunteers.

All programs had multiple target audiences (Table 2). For the "Other" category, survey respondents identified

the following audiences: food and agriculture organizations, schools, institutions, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients, rural community leaders, farmers, food and retail businesses, and farmers' market customers. Respondents were asked to identify the age ranges of target audiences. Although youths comprised part of many of the target audiences, only 61% of the initiatives were targeting youths in kindergarten through 12th grade. All programs were targeting people aged 30 to 39.

Table 2.

Target Audiences of Buy Local Programs

Audience	Percentage of programs
Suburban consumers	84%
Families with children	84%
Families without children	80%
Businesses	80%
Urban consumers	76%
Local government	36%
Other	32%

Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and blogs, were used to varying degrees (Table 3).

Table 3.

Social Media Platforms Used by Buy Local Programs

Social media platform	Percentage of programs
Facebook	96%
Twitter	80%
Instagram	40%
YouTube	36%
Pinterest	32%
Blog	28%
Other	20%

Respondents reported increasing audiences reached by using social media, websites, word of mouth, flyers, radio, blogs, and apps (Table 4). Tools listed as "Other" included in-store promotions, printed materials, signage at Extension offices and offices of program partners, promotional giveaways, television, and events.

Table 4.

Tools Used by Buy Local Programs to Reach

Larger Audiences

Tool	Percentage of programs
Social media	100%
Websites	83%
Word of mouth	83%
Flyers	33%
Radio	29%
Blogs	25%
Apps	21%
Other	17%

Traditional marketing tools used by programs included newspaper and magazine articles and radio, magazine, and television advertisements (Table 5). Marketing tools comprising the "Other" category were billboards, online advertising, public service announcements, bus sides, television sponsorships, trade shows, posters, booths, and information sheets. Idaho Preferred used U.S. Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop funds for advertising to conduct online advertising over an 8-week period, and consumer market research showed that the digital advertising was effective in driving consumers to the website (E. Klodowski, personal communication, November 4, 2015).

Table 5.

Traditional Marketing Tools Used by Buy Local Programs

Tool	Percentage of programs
Newspaper articles	75%
Magazine articles	63%
Radio advertisements	54%
Magazine advertisements	46%
Newspaper advertisements	42%
Television advertisements	38%
Other	25%

In response to an open-ended question, respondents estimated the number of people reached per year. The question did not specify type, so some respondents listed direct contacts and others listed indirect contacts. Responses varied from 1,000 direct contacts to 30 million indirect contacts. After responses were separated into direct and indirect contacts, the means were 124,500 direct contacts and 20.5 million indirect contacts.

Another open-ended question asked about specific tools used to reach new audiences; respondents indicated that these included events, social media, partnerships, promotional materials, and advertisements.

Overall, representatives of buy local initiatives attended a variety of types of events to reach target audiences (Table 6). Responses in the "Other" category included concerts, food shows, conferences, food summits, grocery store openings, and state fairs.

Table 6.

Outreach Events Used by Buy Local Programs

Type of event	Percentage of programs
Farmers' market	91%
Community event	78%
Agricultural fair	74%
Trade show	70%
Health fair/event	48%
Other	30%

Respondents reported working with a variety of partners in their buy local efforts (Table 7). Types of partners listed for the "Other" category included beverage manufacturing businesses, nonprofits, and hospitals.

Table 7.

Partners of Buy Local Programs

Partner organization type	Percentage of programs
Farmers' market	78%
State agency	74%
Cooperative Extension	74%
Producer organization	65%
Restaurant	65%
Grocery store	61%
School	57%
University	57%
Organic association	43%
Federal agency	39%
4-H	26%
Conservation district	22%
Other	26%

An open-ended question asked how initiatives measured impact. The responses demonstrated challenges buy local initiatives face in measuring change in behavior and impact on local food systems. Tools for measuring impact included surveys, sales figures from various sources, and increased numbers of event attendees, healthful school meals, or pledge partners.

Finally, respondents were asked in an open-ended question about specific goals for the subsequent 5 years. Targets included engaging with institutional markets, urban areas, diverse populations, and universities and fostering connections between growers and buyers. One respondent stated that measuring impact was a goal.

Discussion and Recommendations

The primary objective of the study was to explore the structures of buy local initiatives in states other than Connecticut to generate ideas for the Connecticut 10% Campaign; however, the results may be relevant to Extension programming elsewhere as well. On the basis of the study results, Extension programs could consider modifying local food initiatives to expand reach. It is sensible to assume that the number of employees working on a buy local initiative directly correlates to impact but can be limited by funding. The survey results indicated that 24% of programs had 11 or more volunteers. Use of volunteers is an area in which programs could increase capacity despite funding limitations. Collaborating with Extension programs with a strong volunteer base, such as 4-H or master gardeners, could build capacity community-wide by introducing new audiences.

The second objective was to determine demographic groups being targeted by initiatives. All programs surveyed are targeting multiple audiences. Youths were not a primary audience of initiatives represented in the study. Strategic collaborations with 4-H and other organizations involved in youth programming could shape belief systems of future consumers.

The third objective was to determine communication tools of buy local initiatives. Websites, social media, paid advertising, and promotional materials increased scope. Moreover, many respondents relied on word of mouth to reach larger audiences. The findings indicate that marketing and advertising could be used to increase awareness of buy local initiatives. In general, respondents used traditional marketing tools such as newspaper articles and advertisements to reach audiences. Additionally, creative use of funding, such as that which occurred in Idaho, could be explored.

Limitations

The compilations of buy local campaigns used in the study may have omitted initiatives that did not appear in Internet search results. Programs without "buy local" in their keywords would not have been listed.

A census sample was conducted. Response rate and validity threats through self-selection were considered (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010). Generic email accounts used by initiatives could affect response. The prior limitation on the method used to generate programs surveyed also threatens validity (Wholey et al., 2010).

Summary

Focus group research, interviews, and case studies could further elaborate on data analyses conducted through the review and study discussed here. Developing communication capacity could allow local food initiatives to

continue growing. Buy local initiatives have success promoting programs at nontraditional events, through advertising, and via partnerships. Collaborating with other Extension programs could open the door to previously untapped events and to audiences that have not participated in buy local initiatives.

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