

Introduction

“Everyone” supports the idea of purchasing and eating sustainable foods yet far fewer do it. This project explored the reasons for this gap and then utilized the new understanding to design an educational program to reduce it. The first phase involved a literature review and series of focus groups to better understand and address the barriers consumers face when trying to use ethical principles in making food purchasing decisions (e.g., cost, lack of information, accessibility). Based on the resulting insights, a sustainable foods educational program was designed, tested and is currently being evaluated. “Great Meals for A Change” is an informal, value-based program in which volunteers host a sustainable meal for friends in their home. It combines the social and personal atmosphere of a home cooked meal with simple educational activities facilitated by the hosts that strengthen values-based purchasing decisions. The meals are then passed forward in a community context such that one of the participants hosts a similar meal for their friends, with a local community organization and web site providing the educational materials and support.

Conceptual Background

This action research project draws on concepts from Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999), but accepts the view of marketing campaign critics who provide evidence that long term change across a spectrum of pro-environmental behaviours is more likely to occur if there are clear, intrinsic, value-based reasons that motivate the change (Crompton, 2008).

CBSM presents three primary ideas with respect to motivations and performance of personal and social behaviour:

- People will naturally gravitate to actions that have high benefits & few barriers,
- Perceived barriers and benefits vary dramatically among individuals,
- Behavior competes with behavior, thus people make choices between behaviors (accepting one means rejecting another) (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999).

The CBSM framework informs a range of effective social marketing research in communities. However, studies indicate that there is a distinction between attitudes and underlying values, and though a more difficult challenge, efforts to engage people in a dialogue that shifts values can produce more systematic and longer term change relative to accepting people’s current values and social context, and then using rewards and incentives to increase a specific behaviour (Crompton, 2008). A values -based approach is adopted for this project because sustainable food purchasing includes a broad range of possible behaviours and a complex set of ethical choices (e.g., weighing local versus organic production, valuing minimal waste in packaging to workers rights and the corporate scale of the producer, etc.).

Research Questions

- What are consumer’s paths and barriers to making sustainable food purchasing decisions in relation to their demographic characteristics?
- What strategies are most helpful to facilitate consumers translating positive sustainable purchasing attitudes into actual sustainable food purchase decisions?

References

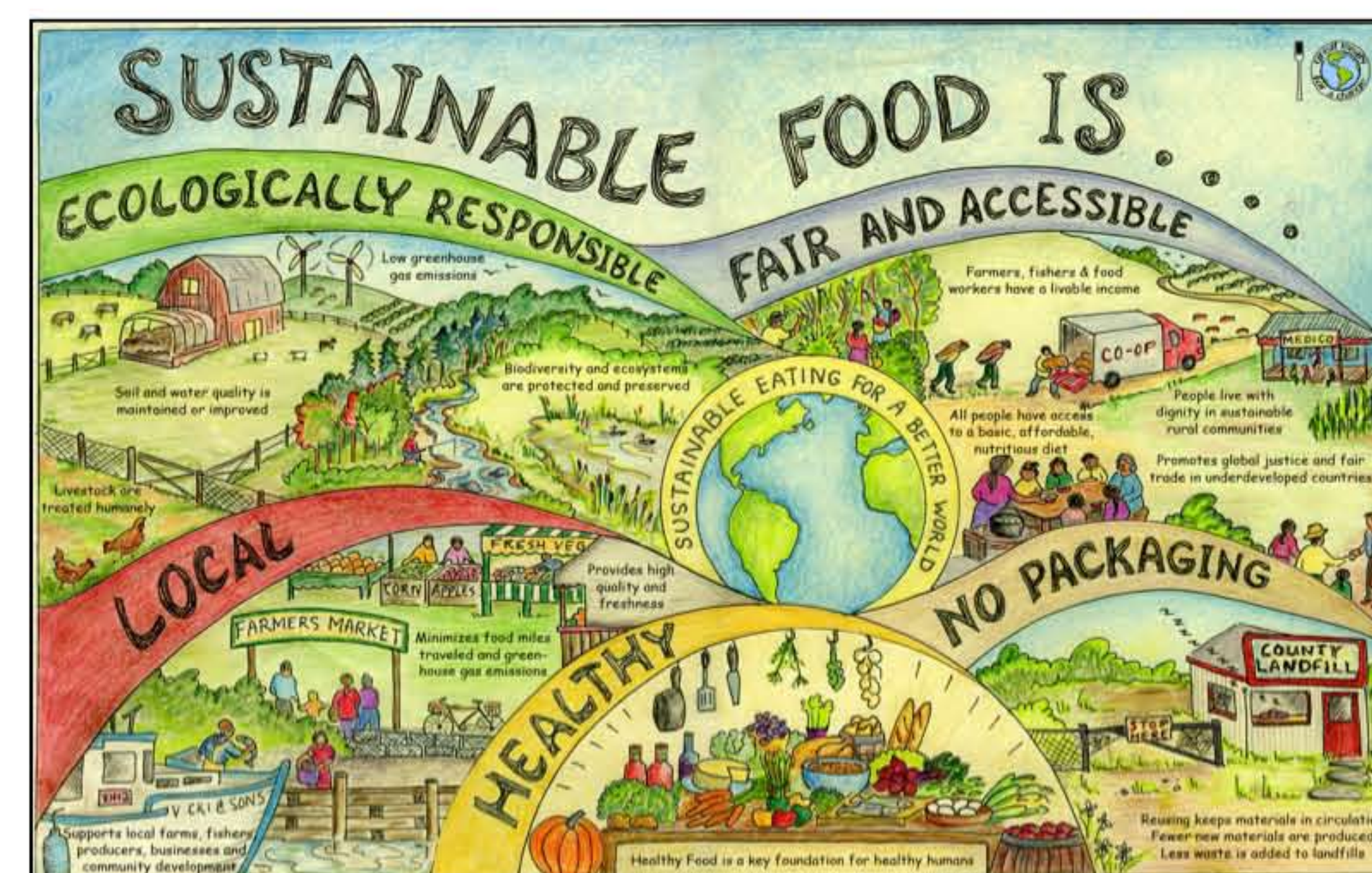
Crompton, T. (2008). *Weathercocks and Signposts: The Environmental Movement at a Crossroads*. Available on-line at: ww1.org.uk/strategiesforchange (accessed May 1, 2010).
McKenzie-Mohr, D. Smith, W. (1999) *Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community Based Social Marketing* (New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC).

Phase 1: Focus Groups & Surveys

Focus Group Methods: The research took place in in Kings County Nova Scotia, a rural farming region. Six focus groups were held with persons from the following demographic groups: professionals, seniors, parents with kids, students, parents with teens, and persons with low-incomes (5-8 persons per group). Groups were 60-90 minutes each following pre-defined topics, facilitated by two researchers. Audio recordings were transcribed and read carefully for meaning and themes.

Survey Methods: Prior to focus groups, all participants completed written surveys on shopping patterns, key personal factors in making product choices, demographic characteristics, and level of environmental concern.

Results of Focus Groups & Surveys



What motivates sustainable purchasing? What are the barriers?

- *Cost is key*, but other factors play a role. Participants say they will pay more for healthy, quality, & local products.
- *Trust in personal relationships*: Participants rely on and trust their personal relationships as sources of information, whether the sources are knowledgeable or not.
- *Experiences*: Participants are far more likely to purchase a sustainable product choice if they have had direct experiences with the product through gardening, tours, family background, etc.
- *Frustration, distrust, & suspicion of grocery stores* is prevalent, but no one sees a broad alternative, though they support smaller venues (e.g., farm and farmers’ markets).
- *General distrust of distant organic items* vs. support for local items.

What are the best educational strategies to produce change in purchasing habits?

- *Experiential Learning*: All groups focused on experiential ways of learning—gardening, farm visits, cooking classes, gaining personal experience at farm markets, seeing things in action, etc.
- *Personal Relationships*: Emphasis on learning about and/or interacting with farmers and food producers to gain awareness of the issues.
- *Written Information not valued*: Participants valued learning through personal experiences and relationships, not written information.

Although there were distinctions between demographic groups, the key themes were common across all groups.

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Phase 2: Development & Evaluation of Educational Strategy

Phase 1 research resulted in the development of *Great Meals for a Change*, a community-based tool to promote behaviour change. It uses a series of educational activities (experiences), the structure of an informal meal (social context), and existing friendships (personal relationships) to educate consumers and motivate their choices with respect to sustainable food.



Great Meals for a Change Program

- Activities (e.g., a puzzle, matching game, trivia pursuit-type card game, postcards) help guests learn about and appreciate the principles of sustainable food, and how to apply them in their own lives.
- A meal is hosted by anyone willing to invite 6-7 of their friends into their home for a meal while facilitating the educational activities.
- Guests receive a cloth tote “goodie bag” containing the menu, recipes, principles, a list of actions, and an invitation to host a similar meal with their friends.
- The program is “passed forward” via networks of friends to spread through the community.

Evaluation Design

Great Meals for a Change is currently being evaluated with respect to its impact on participant attitudes, knowledge of principles and actual choices with respect to sustainable food purchasing:

- 9 meals have been delivered by hosts to 5-6 friends in Wolfville, with a researcher present as participant/observer.
- 2 ninety-minute workshops have been delivered by hosts using the same activities, but at the university with no meal and people who do not know each other (this provides a comparison group).
- Hosts were trained by attending a meal at a researcher’s home, and were given a dinner facilitation manual & program materials.
- All hosts and guests complete brief pre-session and post-session purchasing surveys (after 2 - 3 weeks).
- Two participants and hosts from each session are being interviewed by a researcher to obtain in-depth feedback and perspectives.