

THIRTEEN

‘WE ARE WHAT WE EAT’

The Agro-Food Industries

APPLIED CASE STUDY

As Chapter 13 of *Global Shift* notes, the food industry in the developed world is increasingly focused on issues of consumer choice, and of branding. This is brought particularly to the fore in the issue of genetic modification (GM) of foods, that is to say, foods which have been altered through deliberate genetic manipulation. This case study will consider how labels and narratives are used by both pro- and anti-GM factions to try to influence consumer choice.

As food choices in the developed world increasingly become driven by lifestyle factors, so there are movements against GM foods on either health or moral grounds. At the same time, GM techniques are also used to produce cheaper, faster-growing and more desirable food products. On the one hand, GM can lead to foods which produce higher yields in harsh conditions or countries with short growing seasons, or foods with added health benefits (such as cheeses with added calcium or zinc). On the other hand, the long-term consequences for human, animal and plant health of extensive GM are not known, and there are also issues regarding the exploitation of the developing world through such practices as terminator seeds. Biofoods companies want such foods to be seen as safe and desirable, while anti-GM campaigners of various sorts want them to be seen as dangerous products to be avoided.

Labelling

Many studies have been published indicating that the consumer appeal of GM foods varies depending on the words used in the labelling of the product (e.g. Park and Lee 2003, Noussair et al., 2004). The study by Park and Lee showed that

foods labelled as ‘bioengineered’ were more appealing to consumers than foods marked as ‘genetically modified’ or ‘biotechnology’, as ‘engineering’ is seen as having positive, constructive, intelligent connotations, where the idea of food being ‘modified’, or the product of ‘technology’, is repellent. Agro-food companies play down the ‘genetically modified’ aspect of their products, and instead play up the scientific, health-enhancing properties of the foods. On the other side of it, anti-GM campaigners emphasize the artificial nature of the food, using slogans such as ‘Frankenfoods’, and organic foods are marketed as beneficial to the environment, to the local economy and as having particularly healthy qualities in and of themselves. On the other hand, however, there is the question of whether any of this makes any difference, as several studies, including Noussair et al.’s, show that most consumers will buy GM foods in preference to organic ones if the GM product is substantially cheaper.

Narrative

A less formal way in which people on both sides of the issue make their case is through the use of narratives. Heugens’ study shows how biofoods companies circulate pro-science, progressive and humanitarian narratives about their products, likening biofoods to Mendel’s genetic discoveries or to the discovery of insulin, or else emphasizing the benefits of GM organisms for stimulating production, or for providing increased food supplies, in the developing world. At the same time, however, counter-narratives are circulated by competing organizations, emphasizing the ‘unnatural’ nature of GM foods, or by evoking science-fiction imagery of progress gone mad, such as the story of Frankenstein, or through presenting the corporations as soulless, money-hungry entities. Both groups distribute information supporting their position, with statistics and experimental results being used by both sides as part of their narratives. Positive and negative sensory experiences can also affect the public’s perception, on whether GM foods are ‘tastier’ or at least ‘no different to the others’, versus seeming ‘fake’ or ‘tasteless’. Perceptions of GM foods can be influenced by convincing narratives as well as by labelling.

Conclusion

The example of GM foods thus highlights the importance of capturing consumer markets to the agro-food industry more generally; the consumer resistance needing to be overcome (or, depending on one’s position, courted) has less to do with the inherent advantages or disadvantages of the food itself than issues of perception. Both positive and negative arguments seem to have equal impact. However, this is complicated by the fact that cost appears to be a more important factor, with people buying GM foods if they are sufficiently cheap or convenient. Although consumer choice may be important in situations of plenty, then, scarcity, shortage and economic recessions render issues of symbolism and perception moot.

QUESTIONS

1. Given that most consumers seem to be influenced by cost rather than marketing, is the issue of selling GM foods exaggerated? Why or why not?
2. Using your textbook, this case study and the recommended articles (and/or any other relevant material), conduct a debate on the use of GM organisms in food.
3. How important are formal labels compared with informal narratives in influencing consumer choice about GM foods? What does each mode of communication contribute to the debate?
4. How might national regulations regarding food labelling, marketing and protecting local industries affect the selling of GM food?

FURTHER READING

- Grunert, Klaus G. et al. (2004) Attitudes towards the use of GMOs in food production and their impact on buying intention: the role of positive sensory experience. *Agribusiness*, 20 (1): 95–107.
- Heugens, Pursey P.M.A.R. (2002) Managing public affairs through storytelling. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2 (2): 57–70.
- Noussair, Charles, Robin, Stephane and Ruffieux, Bernard (2004) Do consumers really refuse to buy genetically modified food? *Economic Journal*, 114: 102–120.
- Park, Hyun Soon and Lee, Sun Young (2003) Genetically engineered food labels: information or warning to consumers? *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 9 (1): 49–62.