BIOLOGICAL VERSUS SYNTHETIC FOOD - RESULT OF AN EFFICIENT CONSUMER PROTECTION STRATEGY

ALIMENTELE ECOLOGICE VERSUS ALIMENTELE SINTETICE - REZULTAT AL UNEI STRATEGII EFICIENTE DE PROTECȚIE A CONSUMATORILOR

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Abstract: *One of the greatest threats to the human race is the invasive, deliberate manipulation of food supply. Without doubt, the contamination of food with synthetic chemicals, combined with production techniques that utterly decimate the intrinsec nutritional value of raw food, is the primary root which cause disease.*

The aim of the paper is to show us that a really safe and nutritios consume of food means for the consumer, to select only biological food. To be sure that the consumers will make the right choice and they will buy and consume biological food and avoid the syntethic, risky food consumption, an efficient consumer protection strategy is needed, where the Consumer Protection institutions may play a major role.

Key words*: biological food, synthetic food, consumer protection*

INTRODUCTION

Food industry is a huge market force. Globalization of world markets has led to a significant increase in the variety of products available to consumers, which causes high competition between companies and regions.[*]

Nowadays, this industry produces a major number of different food products. As the market has grown, so has the amount of choices that consumers have. Marketers are always interested in the spending and

[*] Csorba, L., Lile, R. - "New behaviour trends in the area of food industry products", in the volume: Theoretical an practical approaches in economics, "Aurel Vlaicu" University Publishing House, Arad, 2010, pp. 162-173

purchasing power of the consumers. That's why, multiple ways are used to influence the consumers' behavior.

One of the greatest threats to the human race is the invasive, deliberate manipulation of food supply. Without doubt, the contamination of food with synthetic chemicals (e.g., pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals, preservatives, food dyes, stabilizers, artificial flavorings, fake vitamins, growth hormones, tranquilizers, antibiotics), combined with production techniques that utterly decimate the intrinsec nutritional value of raw food (genetic engineering, irradiation, high-temperature processing, hydrogenation etc) is the primary root which cause disease.

Contemporary consumers are increasingly aware of the interdependence between food production, advertising, food consumption, their own health and that of the environment. That's why, they try to buy and consume healthier food, more exactly, ecological food.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Lots of times, what a food company are selling is a lifestyle or an image, rather than a product. Obviously, it’s up to each of us to decide what we eat, but if we’re constantly bombarded with images of food every time we pick up a magazine, or every time we watch TV, then we’re going to be swayed in what we choose.

In a lot of states, through legislation have been introduced very severe forms to control the food quality/security. We're all understandably concerned about food additives, which have become a necessary evil now, because of mass production, and many food additives are permitted. Normally, every food additive has to be tested before it's allowed to be used commercially. Preservatives are different from additives, inasmuch as they're generally safe because they're closely related to natural substances. The ones used in the foods we buy have all been rigorously scrutinized for safety before being allowed, but if the consumers are still worried, it's the best to avoid these products. Perhaps, the most worrying are GM foods, which have been genetically altered.

At the same time, the greatest part of the foods marketed are predominantly high in sugar, fat and salt. That means, the hugest part of the food marketed all over the world is unhealthy or dangerous. Even if the Departments of Consumer Protection all over the world regulates all persons and businesses that manufacture or sell food products, approximately 2% of

adults and about 5% of infants and young children suffer from food allergies, while each year, roughly 30,000 individuals require emergency room treatment and 150 individuals die because of allergic reactions to food. Allergy symptoms can vary widely: from mild irritation to death. Given that allergies are difficult to cure, sufferers must avoid foods which contain allergens at all costs. At present, there is no cure for food allergies. Comprehensive food labelling is therefore crucial. EU legislation requires all ingredients to be indicated on the label of the food products, in particular the potentially allergenic ingredients too.[*]

Our bodies are not designed to operate on nutritionally stripped, chemically laden food. Daily intake of micro doses of toxins through pesticides and herbicides, GMO food, irradiated food, additives, dangerous substances like aspartame, sugar, salt and so on, over the course of years or decades and the deprivation of optimum nutrition - which is contrary to what nature intends - may cause degenerative disease. To be free of this risks means that we must avoid - as often as possible - to eat synthetic food.

Each food must meet the following three conditions: to be safe, nutritious and to have a high quality. Good nutrition and health depend in large part on the consumption of adequate amounts of good quality, safe food. The consumers all over the world must have access to relaible nutrition information trough education, information and labelling regulations. Consumers should be able to choose foods that are appropriate for their individual health needs and to prevent insuficient and unbalanced diets that can lead to undernutrition, obesity or chronic diseas. At the same time, each state must solve the issue of food advertising aimed to children.[†]

But, which marketed foods meet this conditions simultaneously? What's behind the advertisements? Who to believe? How to choose?[‡]

Because of the strong competition, products and services marketed needs to be credible. Nowadays, the only food category who seems to be credible is the ecological, biological, natural food.

The responsibility for safe and nutritious food is shared by all the players in the food system, whereas the challenge is to build comprehensive

[*] http://www.fda.gov/food/labelingnutrition (15 March 2011)
[†] http://www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/ (15 March 2011)
[‡] Csorba, L - "Protecția consumatorilor în economia de piață", Editura Universității "Aurel Vlaicu", Arad, 2010, pp. 153

food systems that ensure the long term involvement and commitment of all concerned parties.

A number of ways have been explored to assure the consumers that the marketed food is safe and nutritious. One such way advocated by FAO is the development of a comprehensive and effective food system which ensures both: safety and nutrition. FAO have a very important role internationally in advising member countries about appropriate legislation and regulations, which may include specific standards and guidelines related to quality, safety and labelling of foods put up for sale.

Nutrition education is just one of the high numbers of strategies that are nowadays widely used to promote ecological food and healthy diets. The basis of any nutrition education programme is to encourage the consumption of a nutritionally adequate diet, to promote healthy lifestyles and to stimulate effective demand for natural food.[*]

Who should give nutrition education? When should it be offered? To whom should it be aimed? The answer to these questions is simple: everyone who has the knowledge (for example, members of health teams, school teachers and so on) to provide nutrition education. Each person or consumer should be the target of nutrition education.

Nationally, nutrition education may be carried out by several ministries (health, agriculture, education etc.) and also by various NGOs. All these bodies should agree on common objectives for a nutrition education programme, and each ministry must decide how it plans to implement it. The efforts of the various ministries and organizations involved in nutrition education should be closely coordinated so that the messages received from different sources will complement and reinforce each other.

As an example, the aims of the National Authority for Consumers Protection (ANPC) are to carry out market surveillance for consumer products and services, to pursue the effective integration of the Community acquis in the area of consumer protection, to educate and inform consumers about their rights, to be the national contact point for the EU rapid alert system for dangerous consumer products (RAPEX) and to be the liaison office for the EC regulation on consumer protection cooperation, to co-

[*] http://www.fao.org/docrep/w0073e/w0073e07.htm (20 February 2011)

operate and share information with other European public authorities on EU legislation enforcement.

In that paper, we want to suggest a new strategy able to be implemented by the Romanian Association for Consumer Protection, in order to sustain the communication policy for biological, organic food and the nutrition education. This strategy may appear simple, but its application will require a change in both: the philosophy and the operation of most nutrition education programmes.

The final goal of this strategy is:

- to contribute to a high level of consumers health in the area of food safety, restoring and maintaining the consumers confidence;
- to decipher the Romanian consumers behavior regarding their possibility to use ecological food;
- to sustain the communication strategy of the firms which produce biological food.

The concrete ways to reach these objectives are:

- an efficient food consumer education;
- the promotion of a safety consume;
- the public relation strategies;
- to inform the consumers regarding the bio- food products existing in the market, in order to sustain their buying decision;
- to solve the consumer protests and their disputes.

To be successful, this strategy must follow the next steps:

1. The decision freedom of the Associations for Consumer Protection.

The Association shall have the freedom to inform the general public regarding the nature of the risk to the health determined by using long time syntethical food, and to prevent the fraudulent or deceptive practices, the adulteration of food and any other practices which may mislead the consumer.

2. The specialization of the management of the Associations for Consumer Protection.

Consumer trust in food is important. Nowadays, they are demanding more and better information about the food they eat and how it is produced. In the context of today's global food markets, public health, environmental and sustainable policies have a huge impact upon the consumers' food choice and upon the consume behavior. That's why, the nutrition educators

(The Association for Consumer Protection) have much more to learn about natural food consume, to be successful in changing food habits and attitudes.

3. The implementation of new market research, in order to detect the existing deficiencies and abuses, and to take the needed measures.

4. The implementation of a questionnaire and the centralization of the results.

The best way to study the consumers position and their behavior regarding the consume of biological food is to implement a market questionnaire.

In 2009, it was elaborated a questionnaire which was implemented at 500 consumers in Arad county in order to analyse the behavior trend regarding the consume of natural food, more exactly of natural forestry products, to inform the consumers about the importance of a healthy consume and to sustain the activity of the entities which produce bio-food, in that region.

RESULTS AND DISCUTIONS

Without mentioning the questions posed in that questionnaire, we will discuss briefly the conclusions. Nowadays, in Arad (West Romania) around 30% of the consumers uses currently natural products. More than 50% of the respondents are indifferent regarding the consumption of synthetic food. The major reason of these situation is the high price of the ecological food and the low purchasing power of the peoples. 65% of the consumers are aware that they were not paying attention to the quality and security of the consumed food products, but they agree to change their habits if they where an efficient natural products market able to offer ecological food at affordable prices.

The study shows that the middle-aged consumers (30-50 years) are interested to use biological food products. However, almost all the respondents recognize that it is healthier to consume natural food products (95%). That's why, a certain segment to which a natural food firm can target their products are the consumers having between 19 and 60 years.

Not only The Association for Consumer Protection is a institution which may have the power to change the consumers behavior and to determine them to consume biological food. In the last years, new approaches have been used to change the consumer's behavior. One

approach which has been termed "social marketing" uses some principles from commercial marketing. Other approaches using principles adopted from the behavioral sciences have also improved nutrition education efforts: nutrition educators seek to identify the nutrition problems and eating behaviors of people within the social context in which they live, taking into consideration the cultural factors too.

CONCLUSIONS

FAO and other United Nations organizations provide assistance for the development of appropriate nutrition education programmes. They maintain that nutrition education should be carried out broadly through schools, newspapers, television, radio and other mass media, as well as through face-to-face contact.

In recent years, social marketing is used successfully to promote an improved health and a better nutrition. A major difference between traditional nutrition education and the newer social marketing approach is that the latter starts with what commercially would be called "consumer research". An attempt is made to discover, using various techniques such as surveys and focus group interviews, what the consumer or the public is doing and why.

Advertising is a very effective way of making a product or a service widely known and traders often use it to their advantage. However, there are several restrictions on advertising, such as traders must not promote a product or a service in a way that may either deprive consumers of their rights or which may be detrimental to competitors.

Given that most food is commercially produced, regulations and standards should protect consumers against deception and misrepresentation in the packaging, labelling, advertising and sale of food. Individuals should be protected against harm caused by unsafe or adulterated food, including food offered by street vendors. Food packaging and labelling should provide consumers with accurate information that is sufficient to enable them to make well - informed food choices.

In order to protect consumers and in the interests of fair competition, all adverts should be legal, decent, honest and truthful.

The complexity of the issues relating to consumer protection of food will increase in the future, due to the diversity of products and services offered by the businesses. Contemporary society has become increasingly

dependent on the successful implementation of the quality function for each type of food. For this reason, an increasing attention should be given to this function from both sides - the state and the businesses or consumers.

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