

ANNUAL CONFERENCE FEATURE

Connecting local food to global consumers

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Food products by nature have a strong link with rural places and the people and culture of these places. Two seemingly unconnected consumer trends offer interesting opportunities for the promotion of rural areas, products and communities: the increasing demand for authentic qualities in food products; and the escalation of consumer activities on the internet.

Consumers are increasingly demanding authentic qualities in food products, and this change in consumer preferences is having a measurable impact on the food retail market. Food now takes up a small proportion of average household expenditure, and a decreasing number of shoppers actively consider the cost when choosing food to buy today. Quality is becoming a much stronger driving force in the choice of food products.

Authenticity is important to food products for reasons of traceability, protection from imitation and consumer perceptions.

The French concept of terroir conveys a better understanding of how the link between place and food can affect consumer choices. Terroir refers to a specific

geographic place/region, but is about more than just location. A link with the environment/nature strengthens the bond between the product and the land or 'soil', but it is the cultural/historical link between the product and the people/community responsible for producing the product that is central to the concept of terroir.



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Credibility is an important issue with terroir. Many companies create myths to exploit consumer demands for 'authentic' products. Consumers are not always aware that they are being sold myths, but if they are exposed the damage to the product's credibility can be serious and expensive.

The second trend is the rapid development in consumer activities on the internet. There has been an explosion in the use of the internet since the world wide web was established in 1992, and this rapid growth and development has had a major impact on communication trends. A new generation of "net natives" has

arrived, overtaking the "internet immigrants" in terms of connectivity and interactivity.

The average 15-24 year old watches less TV and films, listens to less radio, and reads less magazines and newspapers than the national average, and yet spends three hours per day online. 70% are members of a social networking site and over a third have contributed to a website, forum or blog. This change in communication styles has led to a radical change in the nature and motivation for social interactions, and an exciting opportunity for branding and rural products.

Whereas the initial phase of internet development was all about spreading information to users, the new phase (often referred to as Web 2.0) is all about the social interaction. There is a rapid growth in user generated content. Consumer interactions are escalating

through chat rooms, forums, blogs and other similar activities. Social networking on the internet is booming, and virtual worlds are growing in popularity both inside and outside of the gaming community. These changes make large numbers of potential consumers much more accessible to smaller, rural producers.

The concept of terroir offers an interesting opportunity to use the inherent characteristics of rural food producers to develop unique brands, and the changing trends on the internet provide a way of reaching and targeting consumers with a lot less effort than a traditional branding/marketing campaign. Together these two trends open up exciting possibilities for the development of a crofting brand, offering consumers the authentic food products they are looking for while celebrating the people, places and culture behind these products.



Burland croft produce — local food at its best

As we saw, what cost to the world?

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