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The Role of Trust in the Consumer's Choice to Buy Locally

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The Role of Trust in the Consumer's Choice to Buy Locally

Megan Duffy, Advised by Kimmarrie Murphy and Bruce Hardy

ABSTRACT

Trust is an abstract idea which, while hard to define, exists universally and is the foundation of many aspects of American culture. And, while stereotypes of Americans have created a world where one often suspects the worst, trust is preserved in much of the United States today. This research attempts to understand qualities of trust in a small, rural Ohio city as it pertains to local farmers and the customers which buy from them. Through voluntary surveys and interviews, I was able to discuss individuals' trust towards the local food producers and how it differed from a relationship one might have with a worker at Walmart. Through my investigation, I discovered that trust is indeed a major incentive for buying locally; people of Knox County want to know where their food is coming from and who is growing it. Ultimately it is the community which determines the success of the local food movement, and trust allows individuals to feel comfortable investing in the local producers around them.

INTRODUCTION

The Mount Vernon Farmers' Market has become a social event for many Knox County residents over the last seven years, it is a place to buy fresh food, but also visit with neighbors and other community members. Because community is such an important aspect of the event, I wanted to better understand the relationship of the customers with the local producers. Founding information about FM relationships came from Andreatta et al., 2002. I wanted to know if trust between the two parties encouraged customers to buy locally and if yes, how that trust manifested itself in the relationship and the variances of what trust meant to different Knox County residents.



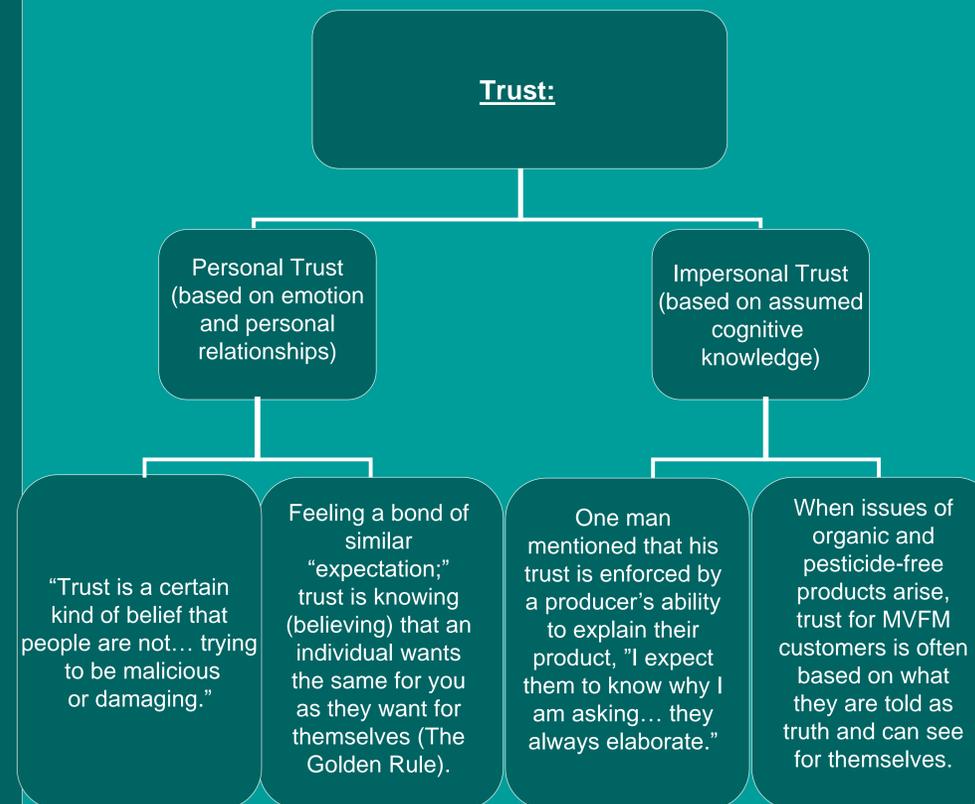
The Mount Vernon Farmer's market is both a social affair and a time to shop. Friends will meet and acquaintances will be made. Demonstrative of community, it is held in the city square, the focal point of Mt. Vernon's downtown district.

METHODS

The project data was collected in two parts: voluntary surveys and semi-directed interviews conducted with a tape recorder. Throughout the summer surveys were distributed at the Mt. Vernon Farmers' Market (MVFM) and other local food venues (CSA's, farm stands, ect). The survey inquired about buying habits and tendencies (survey used from Maurer et al. 2006). Respondents were asked about their definition of "local," and asked how important the idea of organic and local products were to them. The second part of the data collection was completed in 20-45 minute surveys with nine of the survey participants. These interviews gave me a chance to ask about specific relationships that have been built and how trust affects the interactions that exist between the consumer interviewed and his/her vendors.

BASIC FINDINGS

- Interviews suggest that a consistency of attendance and quality are important factors in choosing which individual to buy from.
- Many interviewees felt that they had a social responsibility to their community to support local producers.
- Interviews indicate that a year round local food venue (for example, an indoor market) is strongly desired.



DISCUSSION

It quickly became apparent that trust and the relationships individuals had with farmers allowed customers to feel safe with their food purchases. Individuals did not mention fears of food poisoning in conjunction with local food as some did with grocery store products. Trust was displayed in a variety of ways throughout the market. After in-depth interviews, statements of the interviewees were divided into common themes. These themes were gathered from the papers of Prigent-Simonin et al., 2005 and Hansen et al., 2002 who both looked at the role of trust in relationships and broke trust into the two categories listed above. Many customers referred to friendships they had formed with different producers at the market. These relationships often made customers feel that the food they were purchasing locally was safer and of better quality than the same product at Walmart that had been grown across the country or world. Qualities of trust remained varied with each interviewee, but two common themes existed throughout all the interviews; shoppers at the market all had confidence in the quality of the products they purchased (faith in quality=trust) and all felt it was important to know the producers intimately.



A variety of fruits, vegetables, baked goods, and other "home-produced" products are sold every Saturday during the growing season. Knowledgeable growers are able to answer questions about their product that a grocery-store employee may be unable to reply to knowledgeably. Most of the produce is picked the evening before or morning of the MVFM and growers will often be ready with an estimate of what the produce will look like the next week.

Intimate knowledge of the product allows the producer to build a strong relationship with customers; vendors are often able to provide product details down to which acre of field a vegetable came from.

CONCLUSIONS

My research has shown that the level of trust a consumer has with vendor is a good indicator of whether the vendor will receive the customer's patronage. Trust in the farmer makes his or her products more valuable because of the benefits both parties receive in the exchange of cash for produce. The consumer is confident in the quality of his/her purchase, assuming the knowledge they have about the product is true. If interaction with the farmer is positive and socially enjoyable, the customer will most likely come again to that particular farm stand. The farmer benefits from a relationship of trust through establishing a steady customer base. Both deepen their connections within the rural Knox County community.

WORKS USED

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