

The Next Maple Marketing Campaign

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Over two-thirds of consumers say that living a more sustainable lifestyle is important to them. Eco-friendly and Fair Trade claims are attractive to consumers, but the marketplace is still trying to clarify what lies behind these claims and if shoppers really follow through with their interests in the form of purchases. Consumer sentiment research looked at retail sales from 2017-2020 and showed that consumer spending on products with environmental, social and governance (ESG) claims grew at a faster rate than products without such claims (Am et al., 2023).

The authors acknowledge that this NielsenIQ-McKenzie study couldn't verify the accuracy of product claims, offering the reminder of the struggle to discern potential greenwashing, making false environmental claims, in the absence of third party standards. The term sustainability has been subject to critique or confusion for decades, due in part to diverse stakeholders that assign certain values or negative penalties to various features of a food product. Sustainability concepts like socially just, ecologically sound or differentiated from corporate agri-business are measured or perceived differently by different people with different interests (Kloppenburger et al. 2000).

More than half of U.S. consumers are intentionally buying from companies that adhere to ESG practices. Organic was one of the earliest

eco-labels to formally communicate sustainability to consumers. Early state-based programs in the 1970's manifested in the establishment of the National Organic Program in 1990. It took over a decade to finalize national organic standards in 2002. At present there are more than 200 eco-labels and certifications in use in the food industry. Experts wonder at what point consumers will be too confused by the options.

Climate impact and carbon reductions remain high on the list of product features that consumers seek. The global food system is estimated to contribute up to 30% of total greenhouse gas emissions (Kim and Neff, 2009). Recent efforts by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show how global climate targets have begun to incorporate food systems through both production systems and consumption patterns. Just Salads is an example of a company that includes carbon footprint labelling on each product (<https://justsalad.com/carbonlabel>).

Maple forests and syrup currently benefit from claims of storing carbon but no standardized carbon verification program has emerged on major brands to date. The situation is not helped by the confusion of carbon markets and credits. There are a number of methodologies and companies seeking to measure and claim these

credits. Another complicating factor for maple sellers will relate to who “owns” the claim. It is generally assumed that once a carbon credit is sold or leased by the maple forest owner, that owner loses the ability to promote a carbon claim on their products. The credit custody then shifts to the buyer. Perhaps a solution for maple syrup will be a future aggregator of forest carbon where the actual maple producers retain an ownership stake in the business entity.

Studies show that consumers may place different emphasis on ESG features embodied in a multi-attribute food product. Research on honey found that “origin” and locality may be more important than “fair trade” claims. A further look at clusters of consumers, however, shifts the analysis by indicating that shoppers in dif-

ferent age groups may find different features more important. Fair trade consumers tended to be in the 31-50 year range and have higher levels of university education while the “local” consumers tend to be more than 50 years old (Sama et al., 2018).

Imagery of small family businesses and maple tradition is pervasive in maple producing regions. There is an undeniable cultural flavor to maple. It is yet to be seen how maple companies will relate to consumers in far off regions that don’t identify with New England and northern U.S. forest community imagery. What social message will resonate to distant markets?

Pure maple syrup can be promoted with a number of product features. De-Magistris and Gracia (2016)

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looked at locally grown almonds in Spain to investigate the interaction between features like organic production, origin of production (distance to consumer) and price. Results found consumers are willing to pay more for products with an organic label, and this price premium for organic is larger than any premium they would pay for a short-distance/more locally produced product. This study serves as a reminder that the geographic audience for the next maple marketing campaign matters. Maple sellers seeking to expand markets in non-production regions are likely find value emphasizing environmental features, potentially more value than a state origin claim. Maple market research showed that brand recognition of Vermont maple products declined sharply for consumers out of state

and continued to decline as the distance increased (Atlantic, 2021).

Health conscious consumers are driving a growth trend for natural sweeteners. Higher micro-nutrient concentrations set maple syrup samples apart from other sweeteners in the laboratory. Maple syrup, however, is not the only industry seeking to capture this market (Eggleston et al., 2021). Demand trends toward less refined and “healthier sugars” have already resulted in dramatic growth to sucrose dominant refined white and brown sugars compared to highly processed and artificial sweeteners. The contribution of minerals, vitamins and antioxidants can add value for consumers. Turbinado style or “raw cane sugar” is an example of alternative processing that has reached



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mass markets. Even less refined and non-centrifuged brown sugars with higher nutritive properties have been consumed for centuries for food and medicinal purposes. These cane sugars are gaining attention in European and North American regions (Segui et al., 2015). A counter-debate voiced within the maple industry points out that if consumers are seeking to indulge and enjoy a special high quality treat, they could become distrustful of “health claims” on syrup.

What else can we expect to see in consumer demand trends? There are numerous themes across the broader food industry that may or may not rise to importance for maple, such as flavor, culinary experiences, plastic free packaging, and others. We can


hand it off to the marketing professionals for guidance.

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Maple Syrup Grading School to be Offered in Massachusetts

The *International Maple Syrup Grading School* is for maple producers, bulk syrup buyers, state inspectors, and others needing to accurately grade maple syrup or judge maple product entries at fairs and contests. Quality control issues are also addressed. This school provides a strong scientific base combined with intensive hands-on exercises. This approach enables participants to learn how to grade or judge maple products with confidence. Past course participants have shared that the class offers, "Excellent explanations, exercises and interaction. Far better than reading available material only."

This year's program is scheduled to take place immediately after the NAM-SC Annual Meeting on October 29th and 30th in Grafton, MA. Sign up for the Grading School interest list to be the first to learn when registration opens. <https://extension.umaine.edu/maple-grading-school/2023-schools/>