

# Factors to consider when **WHEN COMMUNICATING FOOD SUSTAINABILITY TO CONSUMERS**



Food systems feed billions of people every day but face major sustainability challenges, from climate change, biodiversity loss, freshwater pollution and depletion, to food waste, malnutrition, and a host of other problems. Addressing these challenges requires action by food producers, processors and retailers, financiers, technologists, civil society and governments. Consumers also need to change their behaviour to shift food systems towards sustainability. How can this be achieved?

The first step is to assess the drivers of consumer food choice, which include:

## **CONTEXTUAL AND SUPPLY-SIDE**

- natural conditions
- urbanisation
- local, regional and global trade
- production and processing technology
- marketing and promotion
- market concentration
- governance and institutions

## **INDIVIDUAL AND DEMAND-SIDE**

- individual tastes, habits, preferences
- income, age, education, health status
- social and cultural traditions
- awareness and concern
- consumer technology
- values and beliefs

## **REGIONAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC VARIATION**

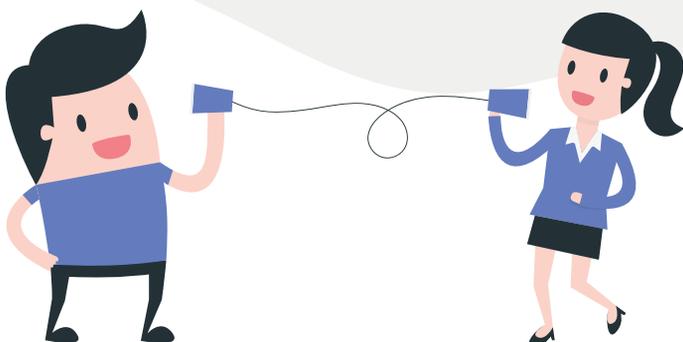
### **Higher income**



Consumers with more income and people who live in more affluent countries often enjoy a wide range of food distribution channels, including big brands and supermarket chains, online shopping, and home delivery. Growing demand for convenience means that cooking traditional recipes from scratch is increasingly replaced by take away meals or kits. However, affordability remains an issue for low income households even in relatively prosperous countries.

### **Lower income**

With rising average household incomes, and especially in emerging economies, consumers are adopting new food behaviours, including increased consumption of animal protein but also diets that include highly-refined, nutrient-poor and energy dense foods, which are associated with poor health outcomes. Less affluent areas continue to suffer from less access to diverse food options.



**How we communicate, and to whom, is just as important as what we say.**

Evidence of global dietary convergence is mixed, with evidence suggesting long-term shifts both towards and away from 'Western diets', underscoring the importance of public policy for influencing consumer food choices.

## INFORMATION OVERLOAD

With so many sources of information about food, offering conflicting views, consumers often express confusion or scepticism about sustainability claims or report difficulty in choosing sustainable foods.

A survey of 15000+ consumers in seven European countries found that the most relied upon sources of information were the product itself - what is displayed on the packaging - followed by labels and logos (Vittersø et al. 2019).



## SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT FOOD

Consumers get information from different sources of varying authority and trustworthiness:

- personal experience
- family and friends
- health advisors and other experts
- government agencies
- educators
- mass media
- advertisers
- social influencers (e.g., celebrity chefs)
- food producers, brands and retailers

Young adults generally express greater trust in technology-based information sources, such as fitness apps, bloggers and people on TV, than older consumers.



## CUTTING THROUGH THE NOISE



- Consumer-facing information about food sustainability must be visible and accessible, easy to understand, reliable and credible, and holistic.
- Labels printed on food packaging or displayed alongside the product, either physically or on a webpage, are one of the most common methods to communicate information to consumers
- Consumers are receptive to some producer voices, such as family farmers, but such perspectives are rarely represented in consumer communications.
- Storytelling using digital technology (e.g. QR codes on products) can help reconnect consumers to brands and producers.
- Communicating consistent messages via multiple sources and channels can help build consumer trust.