

Consumer Attitudes Towards **Farmed Seafood**

- **How to encourage positive attitudes?**
- **Reactions to the concept of 'Organic Seafood'.**

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Consumer Attitudes Towards Farmed Seafood

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The UK fish industry is changing more rapidly than ever, and it is essential in this climate of rationalisation, to plan ahead and to anticipate future developments, whether on the supply or demand side.

The supply side to the industry is forced into change for economic reasons, whilst the demand side fluctuates according to consumer and lifestyle trends, and the way they impact on shoppers' attitudes towards food and retailing.

Some changes, such as the requirement for the labelling of farmed seafood which we are about to discuss here, have effects both on supply and demand, although this booklet concentrates on the latter aspect.

The main interest here is to examine consumer reactions to the labelling of farmed seafood. With new legislation looming, producers need to understand how best to present the information that they will be obliged to provide via product labelling and, from a retail point of view, there is a need to understand what consumers think about the farming of seafood and how they are influenced by the labelling of such products.

In response to these issues, Seafish commissioned some research to assist decision-makers with the question of labelling farmed seafood products. The research sought to fulfil two specific requirements.

- The first objective is derived from a recent announcement on future EU legislation regarding labelling. The rule, which will take effect from 2002, requires that all farmed products be labelled as such at their point of retail.

It has been stated that the label must carry the actual word *'Farmed'*, but this does not exclude having additional terms displayed alongside. It is important to gain a full understanding of the impact different terms featured on the label might have on consumers. There are different ways to express the fact that seafood is farmed, and it is possible that some descriptors will influence consumers more favourably than others. If this proves to be the case, why not add them onto the label to reinforce positive attitudes and perhaps motivate people to purchase such products?

With this goal in mind, any synonym to 'farmed' represents a potential candidate for inclusion on the label and the research enabled Seafish to test a range of descriptors and establish preferred options.

- Secondly, *organic products* are a recent development in the grocery arena, and are quickly spreading to most categories. Would it be advantageous for farmed seafood to be positioned as organic? Most importantly, how would consumers react to an organic label for seafood?

Both aspects are interwoven in the study of farmed sea fish, and will be examined in conjunction with each other.

- Seafish commissioned an Edinburgh-based agency (Scott Porter Research), to undertake this extensive project, which consisted of *qualitative research* (12 extended focus groups) followed up by quantitative research (a survey of over 1,000 housewives).
- The qualitative stage began in late summer 2000, when principal shoppers in the household were selected to take part in the groups according to several factors: lifestage, social class, location, their frequency of buying seafood, and whether they considered purchasing organic foods. Additional criteria were the purchase of a mix of fish products (natural and processed), and the requirement for half the respondents to be consumers of finfish only, with the remainder eating finfish and shellfish.

This ensured that the research would include all types of consumers, and adequately cover topics like organic foods whilst referring to a wide range of seafood products (natural, processed, finfish, shellfish).

- Once all the issues were discussed in detail at the focus groups, *subsequent quantification* of the findings took place via an omnibus questionnaire, Omnimas. Around 1,000 housewives were interviewed in home, in October 2000, to gauge their attitudes towards organic foods in a more statistical way. In other words, key issues raised at the qualitative stage were singled out and run past a much wider sample in order to get a view that would be representative of the whole population. The build of the sample ensured this was the case, as it replicated the demographic profile of the adult population as a whole.

4 ATTITUDES TO FARMED SEAFOOD AND

REVIEW OF ALTERNATIVE DESCRIPTORS

There is an expectation in the industry that consumers hold overall negative attitudes towards farmed fish, so the study needed to establish from the outset whether this belief was legitimate.

It appeared that consumers primarily associated farming with livestock and land-based activity, and to a much lesser extent, salmon and trout. In the light of media exposure and food scares (BSE, GM foods...), attitudes to farming in general were negative, and, as a result, this perception was applied to farmed seafood as well. Some respondents mentioned issues recently reported in the media, like the presence of lice in salmon farms, which further reinforced negative attitudes towards farmed fish. On a more intrinsic level, it was also considered that the idea of farming fish was not as readily acceptable as that of farmed livestock. The reason for this was that consumers perceived fish to be 'wilder' creatures, more suited to (and dependent on) a natural and vast environment, as opposed to livestock, whose usual farm environment is a confined space.

Although attitudes to farmed sea fish remain predominantly negative, most respondents were at least open to the concept, provided that health and safety conditions (in terms of confinement, feeding, etc.) could be met.

This fact established, the research proceeded with testing relevant product descriptors in order to evaluate consumers' attitudes and to find out whether some labels would be better received than others.

'REARED'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Livestock, contained and bred for human consumption.• Sense of 'care', link with rearing children, 'softer' image'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Farmed.• Controlled environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No: not possible to 'hand-rear' a fish like other livestock.• No: shellfish are seen as static.

'Reared' suggested some kind of relationship with the farmed animal, which did not seem credible when applied to fish, and even less so to shellfish. The latter is seen as more static, i.e less 'lively' in a sense, which makes the idea of rearing redundant.

One consumer quote sums up the difficulty: *"How can you rear a mussel?"*

'CULTIVATED'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth process. • Crops more than meat or seafood. • Sense of 'quality', slightly more upmarket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmed. • More positive connotations than 'Farmed'. • Natural link with shellfish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes. • Both for finfish and shellfish.

'Cultivated' referred to farmed products grown for commercial purposes, but introduced positive perceptions of 'quality' and 'extra care'. The only downside to this is that some consumers might perceive it as more upmarket, hence more expensive. As was the case for the word 'Farmed', those consumers who actively support environmental issues still considered the label to convey the impression of too much human intervention in the process. Overall though, it attracted a fairly positive response.

'...ON THE SCOTTISH COAST'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean, unpolluted, wild environment. • Superior taste and quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The word 'Coast' provides a strong link with seafood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, motivating on an emotive level. • Scotland associated with fishing.

This expression was tested as a qualifying statement to another word, such as '**Farmed** on the Scottish coast', '**Cultivated** on the Scottish coast', etc. It appealed very strongly to respondents across all groups and was regarded as a very powerful and motivating label, as it communicated many positive images on an emotional level (wild, rugged environment, natural, better taste...).

Not only did this expression bring the description to life, but it also shifted the focus away from the idea of a farming process, and into something seemingly more natural.

Although this label referred to Scotland as an example, it does suggest that other geographical or costal references may also be viewed positively.

5 ATTITUDES TOWARDS ORGANIC FOODS

Organic foods probably represent the biggest development seen in the grocery market in recent years, and certainly retailers view them as a fast-growing and profitable sector.

Interestingly, the issue of organic foods still provokes mixed levels of understanding. Two radically different views of the concept emerge when talking to consumers; whilst it is generally acknowledged as a 'chemical-free' process, opinions are divided as to what 'Organic' actually entails.

Some consumers describe it as a natural process, with minimal (or no) human interference.

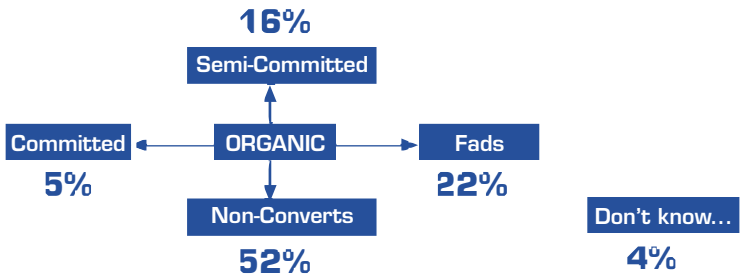
At the other end of the spectrum, there are consumers who consider that, on the contrary, the organic process is a controlled procedure, governed by rules and administered by official bodies.

There is a general belief that organic produce is 'good for you', but negative as well as positive associations are raised by consumers. They are summarised in the table below:

+	-
Healthier (chemical free) Superior flavours Ecologically sound Credible (guaranteed by rules)	Expensive (price premium) Limited availability Marketing 'hype' (for non-considerers) ¹

Overall, current purchasers still support the category, so there is no evidence of a 'backlash' against organic claims at this stage.

Importantly though, attitudes and behaviours towards the organic issue differ widely, and four different clusters of consumers can be identified according to their motivations for choosing organic products.



- The **'Committed'** group is made up of consumers who are very aware and supportive of environmental issues. For them, 'buying organic' represents a lifestyle commitment, and they believe the benefits relate to their personal wellbeing, but also to the environment. In actual purchase situations, these consumers try and 'buy organic' as often as possible, are willing to pay a premium, and go to some degree of inconvenience to find organic products. As a result of such a dedicated attitude, they might appear as the prime target market for organic foods, but the quantitative survey reveals that there are only about 5% of such strongly motivated consumers in the population.
- The **'Semi-Committed'** group, as the name suggests, does show awareness and support for the organic cause, but to a lesser extent. Motivations to purchase are more likely to be based on personal benefits rather than environmental ones. And this is reflected in their behaviour: this group will not consistently buy organic, but rather 'pick and choose' those products it considers are worth the extra cost. In terms of its size, the group accounts for about 16% of the adult population.
- The third group, entitled **'Fads'**, do not possess the same knowledge of environmental issues or regulations about organic production as the previous two groups. They tend to take organic produce at face value, and their motivations to purchase are driven by social implications rather than health or environmental benefits. This means they will purchase the category as it reflects a particular status (it is more expensive, it is 'trendy'...), which explains why their level of commitment is low. This does not in any way suggest that this group is less meaningful as 'organic' customers. They might lack detailed knowledge of the process but nevertheless are willing to purchase the category. Considering they represent 22% of the population, they are a crucial part of the target market for organic products.
- As their name indicates, the **'Non-Converts'** will rarely (if ever) buy organic produce. They are generally characterised by their absence of support towards environmental issues, and their mixed level of knowledge of the organic process. Overall, they are sceptical about the benefits of organic products and do not believe potential claims justify the extra cost. Given the size of the three groups above, it can be inferred that the 'Non-Converts' segment is the largest by far. In fact, it applies to over half of the population (52%) at present. Whilst this does put the actual size of the organic market in perspective, it nevertheless represents a large pool of 'untapped' customers, some of whom might still join the category and grow the market.

The quantitative survey gives us other useful insights into the organic consumer's profile and shopping behaviour, which helps us understand their motivations and needs.

For instance, how frequently do people shop for organic products?

The vast majority of shoppers do not buy organic food at all or rarely do so (which ties in with the 52% of 'Non-Converts' already identified). Fifty percent of respondents claim not to buy organic products at all, whilst 13% buy once every two or three months or less, i.e very rarely. This adds up to 63% of all respondents who do not (or rarely) buy organic food. With 5% of respondents who don't know how frequently they buy (if at all), this leaves us with 33% of respondents buying relatively frequently. Within this, the majority of consumers buy very frequently; indeed, 19% of all respondents buy once a week or more, which is a very high level of frequency for grocery items (although 'organic food' does obviously cover numerous categories). It seems to suggest that, of those consumers who do purchase organic items, many do so very frequently and appear to be loyal to the category.

Presented with the concept of organic seafood, some respondents spontaneously welcomed the idea, but subsequent discussions raised a number of questions across the groups, as there was some degree of confusion as to what 'Organic seafood' would actually entail. Consumers' attitudes towards organic fish were dictated by their attitudes towards organic products in general, which means reactions differed in line with the views held by those in the four segments previously identified ('Committed', 'Semi-Committed', 'Fads', 'Non-Converts').

REACTIONS TO ORGANIC SEAFOOD

WHAT WERE THEIR EXPECTATIONS?

Committed	Semi-Committed	Fads	Non-Converts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strict regulation of the 'organic' environment. - Only possible in a farmed environment, to enable close monitoring of the whole process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Undecided about the level of regulation required. - Upon reflection, need for some regulations to ensure key aspects such as water quality, animal confinement... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Willing to accept the concept at face-value. - Expectation of a natural process, with low or no human intervention and no regulations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This label is not motivating. Mixed expectations: some see it as a natural process whereas others expect regulations. - Resulting produce would be more expensive. Suspicion that the concept is just a marketing 'trick' to create a premium-priced product.

Typical quotes from the different segments serve to illustrate how they felt about the concept of organic seafood:

Committed:

"If you could corner off a piece of the sea and put nice fresh water and no sewerage works, then you could say your fish was organically farmed - it's impossible."

Semi-Committed:

"Yes, it is organic, as long it is reared in a controlled environment."

Fads:

"It doesn't make any sense this organic thing, not when applied to fish - all fish are organic, unless they're farmed."

Non-Converts:

"That's just a marketing ploy to bump the price up."

IS THE ORGANIC LABEL CREDIBLE FOR SEAFOOD?

	Committed	Semi-Committed	Fads	Non-Converts
For Finfish?	No: strict monitoring not possible, too difficult to implement in practice.	Yes: as long as 'some rules' exist and are adhered to.	Unsure : - yes for some (accepting it at face value). - redundant for others ("all fish is organic!").	No
For Shellfish?	Yes: easier to contain, less problems of confinement.	As above	Yes	No

To summarise, although the concept of organic seafood does bring about some degree of confusion, the idea has some appeal, especially with the Semi-Committed and Fads segments. We know from the quantitative stage of the research that the Semi-Committed are thought to represent 16% of the population and the Fads 22%, so the concept appeals to a section of the market only rather than to the entire spectrum of consumers.

'NATURAL'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh produce: vegetables, yoghurt. • 'Untouched', no chemicals. • Healthy and wholesome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed reactions: implies 'wild' for some, is discarded as 'too vague' by others. • No meaning for fish, all fish is considered natural. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, no. Too vague and redundant for seafood. • Suspicion of it being a 'marketing exercise'.

Although the term 'Natural' conveys positive images in consumers' minds, it lacks in providing meaningful information about the product, and is considered too vague. An added difficulty arises in the context of seafood, as, on the whole, respondents considered fish to be *intrinsically* natural. A label reinstating that property would be likely to act as a deterrent towards other, non-labelled, seafood. Cynicism is evident again at this stage, with some shoppers considering that a label reading 'Natural' would entice unsuspecting customers attracted by the promise of a 'healthy, untouched' product, when in reality, it would not deliver any tangible benefits.

'WILD-CAUGHT'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game, but also salmon and trout. • Natural habitat, no human intervention. • High quality, exclusive product. • Freshness, superior taste. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very evocative images. • Traditional fishing methods. • Less impact on the environment. • Too aggressive for a minority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, across all four segments. • Suggests freshness, better taste and quality. • Not credible for shellfish (static nature).

This label is unique in its ability to achieve unanimous, positive attitudes across the groups. It is however obviously not applicable to 'farmed' seafood. Yet, it is worth noting that consumers felt that 'Wild-caught' superseded the term 'Organic' in so far as it communicates the positive aspects consumers look out for (freshness, flavour...) in an emotive way, without having to refer to farming procedures or regulations.

7 OTHER DESCRIPTORS TESTED

The only slightly negative point raised about this descriptor was the feeling (for a minority of respondents) that the image conveyed might be slightly too aggressive (when people imagine a struggling creature). This sentiment was far from being unanimous, and the vast majority of respondents were clearly in favour of the descriptor.

'GM-FREE'

Immediate association?	In relation to seafood?	Credibility?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confusion about the term.• Feeling that 'GM' is bad.• Associated with vegetables and crops (tomatoes).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No relevance whatsoever.• Fish not genetically modified.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No, redundant.• Maybe relevant for the feeding of farmed seafood, but the association is weak.

The label 'GM-free' brought about a certain level of confusion, with respondents being aware of the term, but not always knowing what it meant in practice. The only group to display a strong (and informed opinion) were the Committeds. Overall, GM-free was considered to have no relevance for Seafood and there was little discussion on the description.

8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consumers still tend to consider that labels are relatively unusual in the seafood category. This does not so much reflect the reality as their perception of the category per se, most often visualised through fish counters and the presence of fresh, loose seafood. In reality however, labels have become widespread for fish, just as they have for any other grocery market segment. They are playing a vital role in influencing consumer choice and indeed shoppers themselves are becoming increasingly discerning about such labels and the information they feature.

- Another strong characteristic in consumers is their predominantly negative attitude towards farmed seafood. This is fuelled by fears ranging from possible presence of diseases in fish farms, to loss of flavour, mass-production, and animal welfare. Although there is an awareness of declining wild fish stocks, respondents do not automatically make the link with farming representing a potential solution to the problem of over-fishing. For the majority this is not a factor motivating enough to persuade them to purchase farmed seafood.
- In the light of these findings, an apparent contradiction immediately arises as sales of farmed salmon have shown no sign of suffering and in fact are enjoying sustained growth. Two possible explanations are offered in answer to this dilemma. Firstly, the sample of the study covered fish consumers in general, and not specifically salmon consumers. As a result, it could be that if the sample only included salmon consumers, their attitudes towards farmed salmon might have been more positive, compared with the negative attitudes towards farmed seafood displayed by the present (wider) sample.
- Another possible explanation is the difference between attitude and behaviour from the consumer's point of view. To be more precise, there could be a discrepancy between what consumers think ('bad attitudes towards farmed seafood') and what they actually do ('buying it despite the negative feelings they expressed'). This is a commonly observed fact and supports the view that some consumer attitudes and beliefs can suddenly be over-ridden by more practical considerations (price, convenience, etc.) or may simply not be strong enough to deter actual purchase behaviour.
- These contradictions should be borne in mind when evaluating the usefulness of the following supplementary terms which appear to go furthest in countering the negative perceptions that people hold. Also, it has to be understood that none of the descriptors reviewed proved powerful enough to completely overcome consumers' negative perceptions about farming.

'CULTIVATED'

It appears that 'cultivated' shows some potential as an addition to a 'farmed' label, mainly because it conveys an impression of greater care taken in the process. Besides, it is occasionally used when referring to shellfish, providing some degree of familiarity with the seafood category.

'FARMED ON THE SCOTTISH COAST'

Coupled with the positive emotive reaction created by the expression '...on the Scottish Coast', 'Farmed' conveys a much more motivating message, in particular for the English consumer. The qualifying statement '...on the Scottish coast' has the beneficial effect of shifting the focus away from the production side of the process (for which consumers hold negative attitudes) towards the more emotive side ('the Scottish coast') and all the positive imagery it evokes.

'ORGANICALLY FARMED'

The organic sector is enjoying amazing year-on-year growth in the marketplace, and shows no signs of slowing down. Its customer base, although diverse (Committed as well as Fads for example), supports the category, and purchases according to a range of different motivations.

As far as seafood is concerned, there is some appeal for an organic category among some segments of the market, especially those with a low-to-medium commitment to the organic issue. The principal target market for organic fish is likely to be made up of those consumers who accept the concept at face value, without questioning practical implications. More discerning consumers however, with higher commitment to the organic ethos, believe that the concept of organic seafood lacks in credibility and would not be realisable in practice.

On balance, this nevertheless suggests an opportunity to pursue an organic claim for seafood. It could take the form of creating an 'Organically Farmed' category, which, to be motivating, would need to reassure the consumer by detailing what the actual process comprises, and guarantee that certain standards are adhered to. This would remain a fairly niche market, closely targeted towards those groups of consumers showing willingness to purchase such products (Semi-Committed and Fads). As we know from the quantitative survey, we are talking about a specific section of the market. Combined together, they account for 38% of the population.

These figures obviously relate to the British consumer, and as such, may not be applicable to overseas markets.

'WILD CAUGHT'

As a final remark, 'Wild Caught' proved to be a very well received potential label. Even though it is clearly not applicable to farmed seafood, the research suggests that it has potential in its own right, in the non-farmed market, since it was judged extremely positively right across the sample of consumers.

Stage one Qualitative Research

Sample: 12 extended focus groups

Group	Lifestage	Fish Consumption	Organic Considerer	Social Class	Location
1	Independent	Light	Yes	ABC1	Edinburgh
2	Independent	Medium	Yes	C2D	London
3	Independent	Heavy	Yes	ABC1	Manchester
4	Family	Light	Yes	C2D	Manchester
5	Family	Medium	Yes	ABC1	Edinburgh
6	Family	Heavy	Yes	ABC1	London
7	Empty Nester	Light	Yes	ABC1	London
8	Empty Nester	Heavy	Yes	C2D	Edinburgh
9	Independent	Medium	No	C2D	Edinburgh
10	Family	Heavy	No	C2D	Manchester
11	Empty Nester	Medium	No	ABC1	Manchester
12	Empty Nester	Light	No	C2D	London

Key criteria for the sample:

- Lifestage

Independents: single/married, no children, 25-40 years;

Family: with children living at home, 25-50 years;

Empty nesters: no children at home, 45-65 years.

- Fish consumption

Light: once every 2-3 months;

Medium: 1-2 times per month;

Heavy: at least once a week.

- Organic Considerer

Defined as either current purchaser of organic produce, or at least who would consider doing so (non-rejectors of category).

- Non-Considerer

Defined as non-purchaser of organic produce (and who would be unlikely to do so).

In addition:

- all principal purchasers/preparers of household food;
- a mix of fish category typically bought (natural and processed);
- half in each group eating finfish only (remainder also eating shellfish).

Stage two Quantitative Research

Conducted via Omnimas, Taylor Nelson Sofres's random location face-to-face omnibus survey.

Fieldwork dates: 6th October - 10th October, 2000.

Sample: 1,000 + housewives, grossed up to represent the adult population.

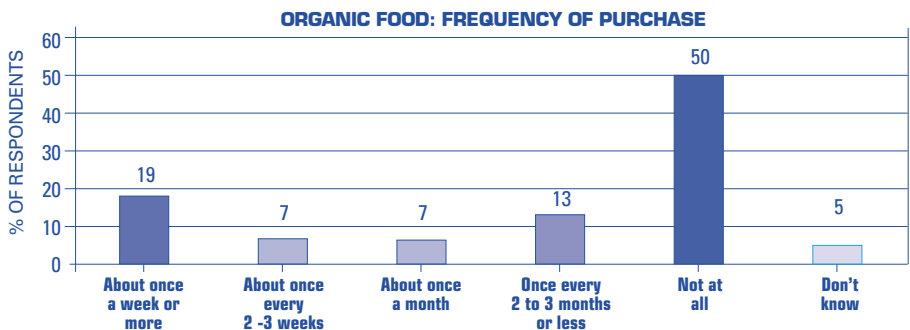
Which of the following statements best describes your attitude and purchase behaviour with respect to organic foods?

- A I am committed to buying organic products as often as I can. I am prepared to actively seek out sources of organic produce and to pay extra for it.
- B I support the principle of buying organic food. When it is available in my local shop or supermarket, I will regularly choose those organic items which I feel are worth the extra expense, but I will not make a big effort to source them from elsewhere.
- C I believe that organic products are better/good for you, and will purchase them from time to time, particularly for special occasions.
- D I'm not convinced about the value of organic products in terms of health and taste benefits, and don't feel that they are worth paying extra for.

The results obtained revealed that 5% of adults are Committed (i.e. agree with statement A), 16% are Semi-Committed, 22% are Fads and 52 % are Non-Converts. Four percent of all respondents admitted that they did not know.

On average, how often do you purchase and prepare organic food products in your household?

Once a week or more	1
Once or twice a month	2
Once every 2-3 months	3
Less often	4
Never	5



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