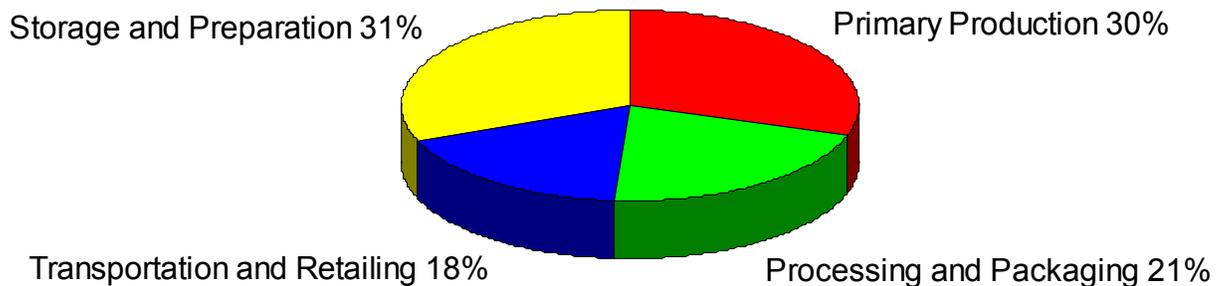


Making Organic Society's Norm

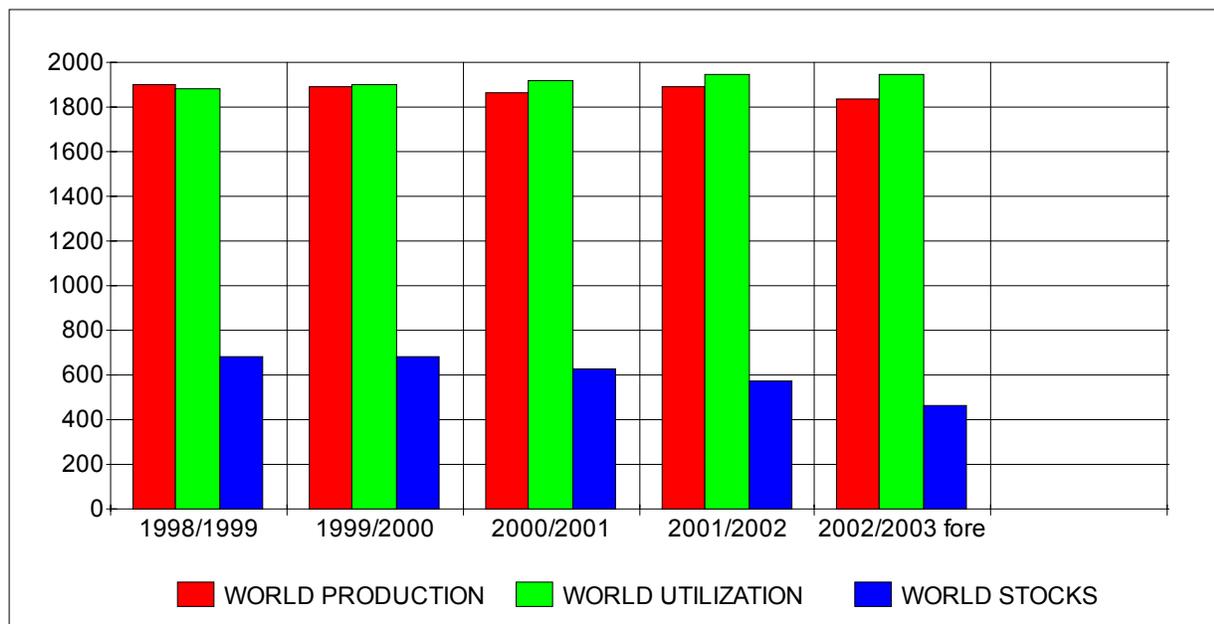
Presentation by Marjorie Willison, ACORN Conference, Halifax, March 15, 2003

Less than 20% of the food consumed in Nova Scotia (and likely other eastern provinces) comes from within the Maritimes. Most of our food travels long distances, which increases fossil fuel consumption and pollution. Furthermore, all sectors of the conventional food system consume huge amounts of fossil energy.

Energy Use in Food System



As well, the amount of food per person worldwide is dropping, and world grain reserves are decreasing. This is a result of the human population growing faster than the food supply.



From FAO data (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization – www.fao.org)

Sources (www.hubbartpeak.com, www.dicoff.org, www.egroups.com/files/RunningOnEmpty) assure us that data from the oil industry itself predicts the output from global oil fields will decrease by 3% per year, starting around 2009.

All of these factors - shrinking oil reserves, rising fuel prices, and increasing food shortages - will drive up the cost of food. What does this likely mean for the organic movement?

- ◆ Fuel shortages and rising fuel prices will make *local foods* less expensive.
- ◆ The price of *organic produce* that is less dependent on fossil fuels will become more competitive, making it increasingly attractive to consumers.
- ◆ Costs of food processing and storage will increase, making *seasonal, less processed food* more attractive to consumers.

It is time for us to start feeding ourselves closer to home. I think an achievable target is 80% of our food supply coming from within the Maritimes.

Social Change

Based on what is coming in the future, and our desire to increase the consumption of organic food, I think it is important to start linking *ORGANIC* with the idea that

LOCAL, SEASONAL FOODS are GOOD for the ENVIRONMENT and the ECONOMY

In other words, convincing people of the benefit of local, seasonal foods will give us more tools to direct them towards organic produce. Thus, we would promote the ideas of

- ◆ **low food miles** (i.e. local foods are safe, we know where they came from, how they were grown, they haven't travelled far nor polluted the environment, etc.)
- ◆ **seasonal foods** (i.e. less expensive, grown close to home, less packaging and storage, reconnecting to the seasons, etc.)
- ◆ **good for the environment** (organic farming means less contamination of water, better soil conservation, higher biodiversity, less fossil fuel consumption, protection of wildlife)

and make sure we develop multiple methods of

- ◆ **neighbourhood food distribution** (on public and private lands, in convenient locations, to strengthen neighbourhoods, and to support farmers and rural communities)

This last one is important. What we focus on gets stronger. We can use negative energy to fight the current food system and try to change it, or we can channel positive energies into creating something new. I prefer to use positive energies!

Any social change begins with a small number of people. These are the people who already purchase organic produce. They have the potential to play a very important role in the coming years, and they are your best friends.

Eventually, the change may become the norm for society, with the majority of people consuming organic produce. To help this process along, we need to understand how individuals change, and why current customers are so important. Any health promoter who has tried to change human behaviour will tell you there are four stages to go through:

- ◆ raise awareness – posters, bumper stickers, etc.
- ◆ change attitude – pamphlets, news articles, see others doing it, etc.
- ◆ change behaviour – remove barriers, provide encouragement
- ◆ reinforce and maintain changed behaviour – see others doing it, provide feedback, etc.

The first two – raising awareness and changing attitude – aren't so difficult. It's getting people to change their behaviour, and continue to maintain that changed behaviour, that is so difficult.

In launching any campaign to effect social change, we need a clear picture of where we want to go. It is even more important, however, to understand what potential customers want, and what barriers there are that prevent them from buying local, organic produce. Many of my comments that follow are based on health promotion strategies from my work with the Public Health Association of Nova Scotia, and the work of Doug McKenzie-Mohr in the field of community-based social marketing (www.cbsm.com).

1) Identify barriers and benefits

This is the most important step but the one most likely to be skipped. We might think we understand why people do or do not buy organic produce, but in truth we'd only be guessing. The barriers that prevent people from buying organic produce may be internal to the individual or external, and the only way to find out is to do the research – in three steps:

- ◆ review relevant articles and reports
- ◆ hold focus groups to explore attitudes and behaviours in depth
 - groups of 6 to 8 people
 - both consumers and non-consumers of organic produce

- without giving them any information ahead of time, which could skew their responses
- ◆ do a phone survey with a random sample of residents

2) Develop the strategy, using tools that are effective in changing behaviour

This is where we want to

- ◆ raise awareness
- ◆ change attitude
- ◆ change behaviour
- ◆ reinforce and maintain changed behaviour.

People need to hear and/or see something 20 times before they are even aware of a message, never mind what the content and meaning are, and let alone creating a change in behaviour! Figure out what you as a group want to say, then repeat it ad nauseum:

- everywhere organic produce is sold
- on all your literature
- in all your publicity
- for news articles
- during press interviews
- using customers as travelling advertisements
- window signs
- bumper stickers
- shopping bags
- posters.

The real challenge, however, is changing behaviour. McKenzie-Mohr describes a number of change tools.

Commitment

Helping people to make a small commitment helps them to take larger steps at a later date. The Urban Farm Museum Society knows, for example, that people who buy raffle tickets on our quilt are more likely to give bigger donations when we ask later on. Purchasing a raffle ticket or attending Seedy Saturday helps people see themselves as supporters of the farm.

Making a commitment is effective because it

- ◆ alters the way people see themselves
- ◆ promotes consistency, in how they see themselves and in their public behaviour

For example, if people are willing to wear a button that says “I eat local foods”, they will tend to seek consistency by purchasing local produce when they buy food.

Another example is saying to customers, “You care about the environment. I wish more people bought organic foods.”

Commitments that are public are most effective. People have made commitments when they:

- wear a button
- carry a bag with a message
- use a car bumper sticker
- have a sign in their window.

Group commitments are highly effective. All 366 households in the 1st Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon committed to eating local foods 5 times a week, organic produce 5 times a week, and meat one less day per week. Church groups and schools are small, manageable nodes from which change can spread to the rest of society.

Prompts

Prompts are little reminders. Even with raised awareness, a change in attitude, and a willingness to change behaviour, people often don't act differently simply because they forget. To be effective, prompts need to be

- ◆ vivid, brightly coloured, and eye-catching
- ◆ self-explanatory
- ◆ close in time and space to where the action is to take place
- ◆ encourage positive behaviour, to help people feel good about what they are doing

When we have enough produce to sell at the Farm Museum, we will put our own grocery pads in neighbourhood mail boxes.

Norms

Make your message “the right thing to do” and “the way people should behave”.

- ◆ make the norm visible and explicit e.g. bags, buttons, bumper stickers, posters
- ◆ publicize involvement e.g. “More consumers are eating local foods in season” “The number of people attending the weekly Farmers’ Market has increased by....”
- ◆ use personal contact to reinforce norms e.g. working with group leaders, who model behaviour for the rest of the group.

For example, the Urban Farm Museum Society developed a poster that uses the phrase, ***“Eating local foods in season fosters environmental health, strengthens our social fabric, and enhances economic well-being.”***

We figure people want to be good citizens by supporting these things. When we do radio interviews or write articles for the local newspaper, we incorporate these phrases.

Communication

Put as much care into how you say your message as you did in developing the message.

- ◆ Use captivating information. This grabs people’s attention, so that they might better hear the rest of your message. “Only 20% of what we eat comes from the Maritimes.” “80% of our food dollars leave Nova Scotia.” “We’re not feeding ourselves.”
- ◆ Know your audience. Your message should be only slightly more extreme than the beliefs of your audience. I think that “eat local foods in season” is ahead of the farm museum audience in Spryfield, but not as far ahead as “eat organic food”, which many Spryfield residents would consider extreme. On the other hand, for a small group of customers to whom organic is important, we will target them with the organic message.
- ◆ Use a credible source. An individual or organization that people trust will carry the message more strongly.
- ◆ Make the message specific and easy to remember. *What* to do, *when* to do it, *how* to do it. “Buy local foods in season at the Farm Museum on Saturday mornings”
- ◆ Provide feedback. People need to hear that their actions are having an effect, so report on community goals. “In 2001, nobody was fed from food at the Farm Museum. In 2002 at the Harvest Fair, 97 people ate potatoes grown on the Farm.”

External Barriers

From the initial research, it will be clear what barriers prevent people from changing. Take steps to remove those barriers in order of priority. From my perspective, one of the biggest barriers to people purchasing organic food is inaccessibility.

In Spryfield, we are working to make it very easy for people to purchase local foods in season at the Farm Museum. This has more positive energy for us and feels better than butting our heads against local grocery stores to carry our produce. I hope that the organic movement will work with city groups to develop neighbourhood food distribution systems on public and private lands.

Yes, Farmers’ Markets are wonderful, but the one in downtown Halifax, for example, doesn’t meet the needs of poor people in Spryfield. We see the Farm Museum as just one piece of a neighbourhood food distribution system that we hope will eventually include many pieces.

Having appropriate recipes removes another barrier. That’s part of the reason the Urban Farm Museum Society produced a cookbook that uses local foods in season. We want to make it easy for people to prepare a meal when only peas and lettuce are ready in the garden or at the Urban Farm, or when the green beans need eating up. You are welcome to reproduce our recipes for your customers, provided you always site the Society and the name of the cookbook.

3) Pilot the strategy

After doing the research to understand barriers and benefits, and after developing the tools to change behaviour, test your strategy on a small number of people – one group that receives your intervention tools, and one group that does not, to serve as a comparison or control group.

Focus on changes in behaviour, rather than changes in awareness or attitude. It is what the grocery money is spent on that really matters! If you didn’t get the change you wanted with the small group, revise your strategy and test again with different test and control groups.

4) Evaluate the strategy

Obtain base-line information before implementing your strategy on a community-wide basis. Then measure community change at several times afterward.

Thank you so much for inviting me to share my views with you. We're in for a lot of changes to the food system in the coming years, and I'm proud to be part of positive change with my friends in the organic movement.