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Testing Messages About Local Food

*A service learning project from the
University of Wisconsin-River Falls Agricultural Economics Department*

Do certain messages about local food appeal to Wisconsin consumers more than others? Undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls endeavored to find out. Students in the Agricultural Product Marketing class tested messages with Wisconsin customers at several grocery stores in western Wisconsin during the spring semester of 2016.

The class was challenged to test local food messages by researchers based at UW-River Falls and UW-Madison, who recently conducted a statewide public opinion survey about local food. The researchers found that consumers have a preference for defining “local food” as from Wisconsin, and that overall consumers prefer local food because they perceive it to be fresh and want to support local farmers.¹ The UW-River Falls students were encouraged to use those survey findings to shape their messages.

The Agricultural Product Marketing students designed messages, took their own photographs, and worked with a graphic designer to get the look right for the five final pieces shown here. Then, the students asked shoppers at five grocery stores, two food cooperatives, a student event, and an online survey through social media to rate each message.

Overall, the students collected 685 responses. An analysis of variance test found that there were no differences based on location. In other words, shoppers at one store did not rate messages differently than shoppers at another. While store location did not matter, consumers did clearly prefer certain messages.

Key results include:

1. Messages that featured the word “Wisconsin” fared better (first and third best), echoing results from the statewide survey that “Wisconsin” resonates strongly with consumers.
2. The message using the word “homegrown,” rather than the word “Wisconsin,” was tied for the least preferred. This may mean that consumers want to see words or images that more clearly guarantee that the product is from Wisconsin or local farmers.
3. Marketing local food should be done with care, as consumers demonstrated clear preferences. Along those lines, pre-testing is suggested, as the students anecdotally noticed that some consumers had strong, negative reactions to specific produce items pictured with their messages.

The Agricultural Product Marketing class was led by Dr. Sierra Howry in the Department of Agricultural Economics at UW-River Falls. The service learning project was a component of a grant through the University of Wisconsin-Consortium for Extension and Research in Agriculture and Natural Resources. The grant co-PIs were Dr. Bret Shaw with UW-Extension and the Department of Life Sciences Communication at UW-Madison, and Dr. David Trechter, with UW-Extension and the Department of Agricultural Economics at the UW-River Falls. They were assisted by graduate student Laura Witzling.



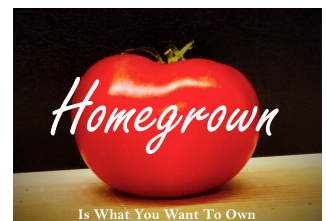
This message was most preferred.



Rated second best.



Rated third best.



These messages tied for least preferred.

¹ The report about the statewide survey is called “Wisconsin Consumers and Local Food: Public Opinion, Trends & Marketing Recommendations” and is available online from: <https://news.cals.wisc.edu/files/2016/06/Wisconsin-Local-Food-Report.pdf>