

The new value paradigm in food

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Sustainability in the ecological and social sense is becoming a new quality criterion in food. Especially the younger generations among consumers define the value of food in a more holistic way. - An excerpt from the Food Report 2022 by Hanni Rützler.

Even before the Corona pandemic, customers were more critical than ever before. Now the crisis has clearly demonstrated the problems in the current food system and made health, hygiene, and safety even more important criteria in food choices. It has also changed our relationship with nature and encouraged a more reflective approach to our own use of resources: decisions are made more thoughtfully, and products are used for longer.

This new awareness is accelerating the changes in consumer behaviour that were already germinating before the pandemic: Consumers are increasingly looking for new channels, suitable products, brands, and communities that they can now trust and want to support. Digitalisation strengthens them in this process, because consumers can now decide more differentiated than ever before what, when how and where they buy, whether analogue or online, in the supermarket, at the farmers' market, directly from the producer or the processor. This gives them a new independence from the retail giants that have so far largely determined their choices, while at the same time being squeezed by new online giants like Amazon.

So, there is a lot of choice for consumers, which makes it all the more important to address their needs. Their desires and values were already changing, for example transparency, sustainability and quality were increasingly becoming the focus of consumers. The Corona crisis has given this change an additional boost.

Consumer decisions are always also value decisions based on attitudes and emotions. The former are essentially shaped by megatrends. They are the "deep currents of change" that unfold their dynamics across many social and economic areas: from individualisation to health to new work and neo-ecology. These trend dynamics are mainly triggered by seismic events, such as the current Corona pandemic. Taken together, they are the key to understanding current and future changes in consumer and dietary behaviour, which is characterised by a new paradigm of values.

The old paradigm was - apart from taste - mainly characterised by pragmatic factors such as price, quantity, safety, and convenience, i.e., consumer behaviour was predominantly oriented towards relatively simple cost-benefit calculations. In the new paradigm, many "soft factors" play a stronger role: even if the price remains a central purchase criterion, the benefit is no longer evaluated only materially. The quality of a food product is increasingly defined in a more holistic way.

Besides sensory and hygienic aspects, it is also about ecological, animal-ethical, and social aspects. It is about positive or negative experiences one has had with producers and about the visions they pursue with their companies. This is especially true for the younger

generations, whose attitudes and behaviour are decisive for future market developments and therefore need to be observed most closely.

Young generations seek responsibility

For example, according to a UK study, 53 per cent of Generation Z express concern about sustainability in relation to the products they buy; 58 per cent from Generation X say that waste and pollution are one of their biggest concerns when it comes to the products they buy; and 77 per cent of Millennials believe that companies have a responsibility to lead social and environmental change.

While these concerns may not drive every daily purchase, the focus of many young consumers in general is increasingly on personal empowerment: an awareness of their own responsibilities and their desire to influence change in our food system through their own shopping and eating habits. The social aspects related to food production and consumption are also more strongly considered and valued: This ranges from engagement in community-supported agriculture projects to crowdfunding for innovative businesses to vegan dating and friendship. In the future, all those companies will profit from this new movement that offer their female customers authentic connection possibilities and make it easier for them to live up to their own, self-chosen responsibility with suitable products and services in everyday life.

In the future, players in the food industry will therefore be asked more than ever to pay more attention to the interactions between society and business and to take socially and ecologically relevant issues more into account when making business decisions. And they are challenged to measure themselves by the impact they have on our society and our planet instead of only by KPIs and buyer personas - and, if in doubt, to reinvent themselves and their own business once again.

Consequences of the pandemic experience

Many people's consumption and especially their eating habits changed during the crisis. The restrictions forced by the lockdowns have led to a "re-acquaintance" with one's own environment, one's own needs and a rethinking of one's own values. Even if we succeed in overcoming the health crisis in the course of 2021 or 2022, we will have to adjust to economic, social, and cultural knock-on effects that make a complete return to the "old normal" unlikely.

And this is not only to be regretted. The (forced) shift of eating into one's own four walls has led to a more conscious examination of issues such as purchasing, storage, preservation and disposal. The focus of many people is now even more on health and sustainability, and regionality is becoming even more important.