

Use of Collective Trademarks in Consumers' Choice of Foods – Preliminary Results

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This paper is based on a qualitative pre-study gaining insight into consumer experiences and attitudes towards various collective trademarks (CT) as an on-pack "endorsement" on branded foodstuffs. A CT is a non-company specific symbol certifying that a product has certain characteristics. These marks are used as a differentiation strategy in the food sector. However, according to field interviews and a focus-group study in Norway, CTs presently seem insignificant as regards influence on consumers' buying behaviour. Findings from in-depth interviews with 11 managers in diverse functions, levels and businesses, and focus-group interviews with 27 consumers suggest prospects and limitations for CTs as an aid to consumers in their decision making regarding choice of branded foods.

In many sectors, particularly in the food sector, brands often *coexist* with non-company specific symbols (Kapferer, 1997). These symbols are all generic marks and will hereafter be referred to as *collective trademarks* (CT) (Menard & Valceschini, 1999; Phelps, 1949). This is a term unifying several distinct non-company specific symbols on foodstuffs which communicate various product-related attributes like, for example, quality, origin, ecology, environment or fair trade. These aspects are not necessarily directly related to the measurable food quality but, nevertheless, are important for the overall impression of the foodstuff. A CT certifies certain attributes of the product or certain characteristics of the activity of the production. *Non-company specific* means that one and the same mark is used by several independent producers agreeing on common rules for producing their products (*cf* Menard & Valceschini, 1999). Thus, identical products would be eligible for the mark "regardless of the brand name under which they are sold" (Bennett & McCrohan, 1993:405). The term *mark* is used to distinguish from mandatory product labelling policies (*cf* product declaration).

The establishment of CTs is a well-known strategy to try to create differentiation from substitute food products (Barjolle *et al.*, 1997; Kapferer, 1997; Trijp *et al.*, 1997). According to Menard and Valceschini (1999) more than 2000 of these marks are identified in the European agro-

food sector alone. Despite the proliferation of such marks, remarkably little is known about when an "alliance" (*cf* Rao & Ruekert, 1994) between a brand and a CT may influence consumers' choice of branded food products (*cf* Simonin & Ruth, 1998). As with the point made by Hillyer and Tikoo (1995:123) regarding a "need to know the conditions under which cobranding can enhance consumer brand evaluations", it is reasonable to request empirical validation of the implications for consumer behaviour of potentially synergistic alliances between a CT and a brand physically integrated on a product.

From the consumer's perspective, most aspects of the environment are potential information, like the kind of raw materials (texture, colour and so on), the brand name, the pricing and other product characteristics. This stems from the idea that products may be conceived as a "cue mix" or an array of informational cues (Cox, 1967) and each cue, intrinsic or extrinsic, provides a basis for developing impressions of the product (Steenkamp, 1990). However, the consumer's task when evaluating a product is to identify cues with *informational value* about product attributes that may have different consequences and values for them (Peter & Olson, 1996). Further, a prerequisite for any information to influence consumers' decisions, is that "it must be *processed* (taken in, interpreted, and used) by their cognitive systems" (Peter & Olson, 1996:59).

If a CT is actively used as a source of information, it must be because the consumer perceives some value added to the product of interest by virtue of it having the mark. In other words, if a "mark evaluation" is favourable it may lead or contribute to the purchase decision. When is a CT a cue? An examination of the literature reveals little effort to contribute to an answer by looking at the *characterization* of various aspects of the actual marks as factors that may make marks be perceived as useful for consumers' decision making.

Speculating about the usefulness of a mark, it is not unreasonable to think that an imagined mark "A", as opposed to a mark "B", is considered by more consumers as relevant for decision making - partly because it is perceived as more reputable, and - partly because it conveys an image of greater personal relevance. By analyzing different important characteristics of CTs *together* with several important contextual factors describing consumers' information search, it is expected that linking these two approaches represent a more complete way of looking at whether marks are used by consumers as a support for making a choice. To the best of my knowledge, such studies of consumers' use of CTs in food purchasing decisions have not been conducted. What has been lacking in previous investigations is focus on the characteristics of the mark itself as a more or less successful stimulus to influence consumers' decision making.

Research objective

The purpose of this paper is to explore under what conditions a CT may represent a signal that guides (or "cues") consumers' behaviour when they have to choose from alternative brands.

From a brand manager's point of view it is a need to know the conditions when entering into an alliance with a CT can enhance consumer brand evaluations. For the owner/issuer of a CT it is important to know how to design and, thereby, position the mark to make it attractive to brand managers as well as to attract consumers' attention (*cf* the image consumers have of a given mark). Therefore, from academic as well as mana-

gerial perspectives, the question of a CT as an "endorsement" on branded foods is an issue that deserves attention.

The remaining part of the paper is organised into five parts. In the first part it is given a brief presentation of selected literature on the effects of non-company specific symbols and also literature in the marketing discipline that is relevant to brand management, *ie* information economics and information processing/search. The second part describes the method. This implies giving the arguments for designing an exploratory-oriented approach with two types of interviews, individual and group interviews, and describe how these were carried out. In the third part the views that emerged from the in-depth and focus-group interviews are presented. The fourth part includes a discussion of the findings. In the final part concluding comments are presented.

Literature review

Only limited research has so far been devoted to CTs and their significance to consumers. Articles comprise studies of: 1) existing and potential seals and certifications of approval (Beltrami & Stafford, 1993; Bennett & McCrohan, 1993; Parkinson, 1975), 2) third party certification marks (Kamins & Marks, 1991; Laric & Sarel, 1981; Phelps, 1949; Taylor, 1958), and 3) quality labelling (Trijp *et al.*, 1997; Verbeke & Viaene, 1999) including regional quality labelling (Alvensleben & Gertken, 1993). Five of these studies involve marks for food only, two includes food among other products, while the three remaining do not specify products for the analyzed marks. Common for most of these studies is that parts of them can be summarized according to the usefulness of the marks to consumers in relation to the purpose of their rise.

Objectives of marks. The articles try to highlight different aspects of the fundamental question: does the topical mark achieve its purpose? The common view is that a CT is a source of information having the *potential* to assist consumers in their buying decision. Broadly speaking, this function is

stated as a general aid at the time of purchase (Phelps, 1949; Taylor, 1958), a protection of consumer rights with regard to product evaluation (Laric & Sarel, 1981) and unbiased product information (Bennett & McCrohan, 1993). For quality labels in particular the purpose is perceived as a guide for selection of products with quality attributes above some general level (Kamins & Marks, 1991; Parkinson, 1975). Verbeke and Viaene (1999) consider a CT as a quality indicator that also serves to protect the consumer against confidence reducing product quality. Moreover, quality labelling is considered as a possible means to create preference for food products of particular geographical origin (Alvensleben & Gertken, 1993).

Consequences of marks. There is disagreement as regards benefits to consumers. Four of the studies conclude that consumers do not seem to know the actual meaning of CTs (Beltramini & Stafford, 1993; Laric & Sarel, 1981; Parkinson, 1975; Verbeke & Viaene, 1999). In some cases consumers attribute more meaning to the presence of seals and certifications of approval than is justified by the issuers of the symbols (Parkinson, 1975). It is speculated that the influence of seals and certifications of approval on consumers' choice behaviour and the credibility associated with such marks is to some extent related to the misunderstanding of their meaning (Parkinson, 1975). Moreover, possible conflicting views are pointed out. According to Beltramini and Stafford (1993) the presence of a seal of approval in an advertisement is not readily employed in assessing the believability of the claim in the advertisement. This conclusion seems to contradict Kamins and Marks (1991) who state that the kosher claim (*cf* Jewish dietary laws) in an advertisement for a familiar brand, resulted in a negative attitude toward the advertisement. However, Kamins and Marks (1991) speculate that this negative effect is related to the kosher claim in particular, and cannot be expected to arise from other endorsements of a more general character. - Despite this reservation, the question remains if different CTs will influence the intention to purchase an advertised object and if the answer to this depends on whether

the actual object represents a familiar or unfamiliar brand to the consumer.

Several studies present conclusions *rejecting* the idea that a CT represents an aid to consumers. According to Beltramini and Stafford (1993) consumers do not comprehend what seals of approval mean and they do not associate the presence of seals with increased credibility. Likewise, Alvensleben and Gertken (1993) point out that regional quality labels "are playing a minor role in the actual decision process of the consumer - probably because they are rarely perceived by the consumer" (p. 251). The main weakness of quality labels stems from consumers' uncertainty concerning the labels' quality criteria and their exact level of quality (Schleyerbach & Alvensleben, 1998). Likewise, a study by Phelps (1949) recognizes that if mistrust of certification marks prevails, *cf* degree of self interest involved and doubt of testing procedures, this undermines such marks' significance to consumers. Bennett and McCrohan (1993) conclude that consumers would not benefit to any great degree from seals of approval for food, as exemplified by the American Heart Association's HeartGuide Seal, "because there is no evidence that the seal leads to better consumer information" (p. 412). More critical comments result from Taylor (1958). Based on an analysis of eighty certification marks, representing a classification of five types of certifying agencies, Taylor concludes that the benefit to consumers of most marks is merely secondary and indirect.

Considerably fewer studies conclude that CTs have a positive and apparently direct influence on consumers' buying behaviour. The seemingly positive influences take effect under certain conditions. These are: 1) Presence of a *familiar* seal or certification of approval, *absence* of informational cues other than the seal/certification, and prevailing *misunderstanding* concerning the meaning of the seals/certifications (Parkinson, 1975). 2) Consumers using third party certification marks perceive them as providing *valuable* information (Laric & Sarel, 1981). 3) Consumers associating *assets* with the quality labels (Trijp *et al.*, 1997; Verbeke & Viaene, 1999).

Trying to understand the above-mentioned perspectives and thus how and

why consumers search for and use marks as a source of information in their purchase decision making, *economics of information* and *information search* may contribute as a theoretical basis.

Information economics. In most theories of consumer choice product attributes are the basic elements (Peter & Olson, 1996). According to the information economics literature, the attributes of goods are comprised of three categories of properties: search, experience and credence qualities (Darby & Karni, 1973; Ford *et al.*, 1988, 1990; Maute & Forrester, 1991; Nelson, 1970, 1974). The classification is based on a continuum (*cf* Rao & Ruekert, 1994) which implies that *all* three attribute qualities are commonly represented, but to varying degrees, within a single product (Maute & Forrester, 1991). The properties describe the point in the purchase process when consumers, potentially, can assess a product's performance. Credence quality describes a situation where consumers' lack expertise, or the cost of acquiring sufficient, accurate information to check the veracity of the claim is prohibitively higher than its expected value (Darby & Karni, 1973; Ford *et al.*, 1988; Maute & Forrester, 1991). Because credence characteristics are difficult to detect and prove, they are considered as "less tangible, 'image' type of attributes" (Trijp & Steenkamp, 1998:47). When trying to differentiate food products by credence characteristics, problems arise with regard to creating credible systems for assuring consumers of the *presence* of such characteristics (Andersen, 1994). Intangible factors related to process characteristics, like animal welfare and environmental considerations, can be of overriding importance in the purchasing policy of some consumers (Dekker & Linnemann, 1998; Henneberry *et al.*, 1998). For example, a possible consumer benefit with an ethical brand may be "satisfaction linked to the responsible behaviour of the brand in its relationship with society" (Kapferer, 1997:30). Despite their importance, such characteristics cannot easily be verified (*ie* seen, tasted or smelled) in the final product and therefore they pose special problems with regard to communicating their presence to customers in a credible way (Andersen, 1994). In that respect, informa-

tion asymmetry (Rao & Ruekert, 1994)¹ is a problem for credence products as it is for experience products and consumers have demonstrated to be "skeptical of claims that cannot be evaluated prior to purchase" (Ford *et al.*, 1990:439).

Information search. In economic behaviour "decision making is a process of evaluating alternatives and selecting one or more (or none) 'optimal' alternative(s)" (Raaij, 1988:76). The decision may be whether to buy food, which type of food, or which brand or price level, *ie* decisions at generic, modal and specific levels respectively (Raaij, 1988). Generally modal and specific decisions require specific information on the attributes of the alternatives acquired from *external* sources (Raaij, 1988). As opposed to internal search and retrieval of information stored in memory (*cf* previous learning and experience), search for information from external sources employs, among others, "information obtained (...) from one's own observations" (Raaij, 1988:76). According to Pinson and Roberto (1988), a review of research on external search behaviour proposes: 1) consumers' external information search is quite limited, 2) the more the brand choice involves a selection from a set of differentiated brands, the more information search takes place, and 3) personal information sources are more important to consumers than non-personal sources. A fourth proposition on how consumers' experience influence their search is stated as: more experience leads to less search. However, this conclusion is disputable as the opposite is also found (*eg* Raaij, 1988; Selnes & Troye, 1989). Although some disagreements prevail, each of these insights has implications for marketing communication strategy.

Method

This qualitative pre-study was conducted in the form of individual, in-depth interviews prior to a focus-group study. The purpose of the personal interviews was to establish a broad basis for developing questions for focus groups. Thus, it was important to tap a range of experiences and perspectives in the

course of data collection. Accordingly, respondents were selected to gain impressions from different managerial levels. After these informants had, among others, described *assumed* attitudes on behalf of the consumers regarding the usefulness of CTs, it was then desirable to learn about certain consumers' *real* attitudes to such marks (*cf* Pearce, 1998) and, by so doing, gain a more complete understanding. In that respect, the objective of the focus-group study was to describe how consumers "interpret reality in their own terms" (Calder, 1977:360). The acknowledgement that "scientific theory [viz. social science] consists of constructs and the interrelationships among them" (p. 354) recognizes that "there must be an *external origin* at some point in theory development, and this origin is the world of everyday thought and experience" (italics added) (p. 354). According to Calder's distinction of three approaches to qualitative marketing research, the focus-group study presented here follows a *phenomenological* approach. From a philosophy of science perspective, the rationale for such an approach is "to understand the everyday experience of the consumer" (p. 355) by having "consumers to talk to each other about product-related issues" (p. 359). In a more practical sense, the arguments for using a phenomenological approach was - partly that I was not familiar with the consumers' thoughts about CTs, and - partly that I did not know if particular demographic segments more than others consider CTs as influential in their decision making.

In-depth interviews

Informants. Key informants represented three retail outlets (two grocery shops and one supermarket), three umbrella chains of grocery shops and supermarkets, three manufacturers of branded products and two issuers of CTs. In each of the eleven organisations one person was interviewed. Of these, four individuals held marketing positions, three held non-marketing positions and four held senior management positions. Apart from the retail outlets located in Tromsø, northern Norway, all other companies and organisations were located in Oslo

and its environs. In general, the selection of informants was based on two criteria: 1) their assortment should include products bearing the marks of interest, and 2) the outlets should belong to different umbrella chains of grocery shops and supermarkets. Four umbrella chains of grocery shops and supermarkets control about 98 percent of the domestic market for groceries. One of these, which has the smallest market share, was unwilling to participate. All the manufacturers of branded foodstuffs represent well-known national brands. The use of the focal marks varied among the informants, from major users to minor.

Focal marks. Though the topic of this study is CTs for food in general, CTs had to be discussed using their real names in the field research. It was felt that identifiable marks would result in more fruitful discussions. The most widely used CTs on consumer products in Norway are the ecological mark *Debio's Ø* and the quality & origin mark *Godt Norsk* (*cf* Table 2). (The latter is denoted quality & origin mark according to the issuer's own description of the mark's characteristics.) These were the focal marks for the interviews, and issuers of CTs were selected accordingly.

Questionnaire. The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire structured around the questions why, when and how CTs are used, or thought being used, as sources of information by consumers. The "why" questions covered the following aspects: the types of product attributes that CTs communicate, the relevance of such attributes to different demographic segments of consumers, possible variable acceptability to consumers of exclusive versus easily accessible marks, and the perception of CTs as brand supplement or brand superfluity. Also included was a question asking for reasons why CTs perhaps not are used in consumers' choice process. The "when" questions turned on types of products suitable for CTs, and circumstances that may be expected to increase the significance of CTs to consumers. The "how" questions focused on how and to what degree consumers consciously take advantage of CTs in the choice process. One of the interviews was conducted by telephone, while the remainder were done face to face. The interviews in the grocery

shops and in the supermarket, as well as the telephone interview, lasted for 30 minutes each. The rest of the interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes each, the majority lasting approximately one hour.

Focus-groups

Recruitment. Based on the importance of intersubjectivity in the phenomenological approach, Calder (1977) argues that since "a shared perspective cannot be expected to emerge if the people are not similar" (p. 362), phenomenological groups should be composed of *homogenous* people. Accordingly, the criteria for recruiting to the focus groups were that the subject was responsible or shared the responsibility for doing shopping for the household s/he was a part of, was aged between 20 and 65 years, and spoke Norwegian fluently. Further, it was required that participants represented approximately equal numbers of men and women as well as equal numbers of single vs. married/cohabiting individuals. Additionally, some parents had at least one child between the age of 1 and 10. The assumption was that persons having responsibility for children would be more conscious about which goods to purchase and the content thereof. Participants were randomly selected from the telephone directories for the capital city, Oslo, and the adjacent county of Akershus, *ie* a geographically stratified sample.

Group composition. As a point of departure the composition should be based on groups characterized by: 1) age 20-30 years, without children; 2) having children 1-10 years old; and 3) age 50-65, without children in the same home. With the exception of one Swede, all participants were Norwegians. Table 1 gives an overview of how the groups (each consisting of 9 persons) actually were composed.

Accomplishment. The focus-group interviews were carried out by a major market analysis agency. The agency recruited subjects to the groups, phrased and ordered the questions in the discussion guide, and moderated the groups. A professional moderator was preferred owing to my lack of appropriate skills, experience and objectivity (*cf* Pearce, 1998) as the researcher. However, I

personally decided over the segmentation of groups, prepared the discussion guide, identified questions and – of particular importance - observed the discussions from a viewing room. The focus-group interviews took place in a professional focus-group facility with recording equipment (microphones and video camera) and a one-way mirror. Each focus-group interview lasted for two hours.

Table 1 Group composition

Group number	Composition
1	- 5 women, 4 men - 5 single, 3 cohabiters (marital status unknown for one person) - 22-30 years
2	- 5 women, 4 men - 6 married/cohabiters, 3 single - 28-37 years - 1-3 children, 1-17 years
3	- 6 women, 3 men - 5 not married *), 4 married - 50-65 years

*) Marital status is based on the participant's own definition. 'Not married' means most likely single.

Discussion guide and focal marks. During the interviews the participants mentally walked through a grocery buying experience. The discussion guide was structured into two main parts: Some *general* questions and some *specific* ones. In the general section the first questions were broad and began by asking participants to describe their own shopping behaviour and experience. Among the questions were issues such as criteria for product choice and uncertainty related to the purchase of foodstuffs.

The more specific question section of the guide asked about attitudes towards CTs. Participants' knowledge of such marks was tested as unaided and aided recall. After giving some characteristics of CTs in general, participants were asked to name marks on food or drinks that matched the given description. If not mentioned by the participants, the Nordic environment label (the *Swan*) was given as an example matching the description, - although this is not a CT on either foodstuffs or beverages. After the participants had revealed their insights into

the concept of CTs, they were shown examples as probes to provide ideas for further discussion (*cf* Krueger, 1998a). By using aided recall, the participants' task was to try to identify four marks (with true colour and shape), relate each of them to food or beverage products and then describe their associations to each mark.

In the exercise set, one of the marks is not used anymore (*Superior Norsk Laks*²⁾), but the rest are in existence (*Debio's Ø*³⁾, *Max Havelaar*⁴⁾ and *Godt Norsk*⁵⁾). Except for the pre-existing mark, the symbols are the only ones nationally available in the grocery trade that match the definition of a CT. Although few in number, they represent variation with respect to communicated attributes, type of certification (*cf* factual, evaluative and warranty certification in Laric & Sarel, 1981), number of product categories, and range of accompanying brands and/or private labels. An overview of the variation is presented in Table 2.

Following the recognition and association test, the groups continued with a ple-

nary discussion covering the meaning of each of the marks to the participants, the believability of the marks, and their relevance to target groups. The next part of this specific section focused on the influence of CTs on the decision process, *ie* marks as a choice criterion, taken into consideration the apparent proliferation of such marks. Finally, the specific question section of the guide asked for more depth. This included a question on what participants thought of the content of marks in terms of what such marks ought to communicate if they were a choice criterion. Another question asked if a CT could add value to a product. Furthermore, two final questions asked whether such marks and brands are perceived to complement each other or – on the contrary – whether marks are perceived as superfluous, and what types of products are assumed to be most suitable for CTs. Finally, each group was given the opportunity to sum up and add things participants felt had been omitted from the discussion.

Table 2 Characteristics of the focal marks

	Attribute	Certification type	Product categories	Brands/private labels
<i>Debio's Ø</i>	Ecological	Factual	Many (different degree of processing)	Many brands, some private labels
<i>Superior Norsk Laks</i>	Origin & quality	Factual (origin) Evaluative (quality)	Few (whole and processed salmon)	Several brands
<i>Max Havelaar</i>	Ethical	Factual	Few (some blends of coffee)	Few
<i>Godt Norsk</i>	Origin & quality	Factual (origin) Evaluative (quality)	Many (different degree of processing)	Many brands, some private labels

Depending on the way the groups were proceeding, some minor adjustments were made to the moderator's interviewing procedure. Among others, many of the participants in group 1 and group 2 had revealed some knowledge of the *Swan*. So, it seemed suitable for group 3 to dwell on aspects of the well-known *Swan* as a point of departure and catalyst for the discussion on CTs. Therefore the moderator showed two product samples to members of this group. These were two identical brands of detergent, one a washing powder *with* the *Swan* on the package and the other was a new product: washing tablets *without* the *Swan* but with the

manufacturer's own environmental declaration printed on the package. In this "show and ask" session, the interesting thing was to find out if respondents had more confidence in the *Swan* than the manufacturer's own environment declaration, or vice versa.

Results

Findings from the two phases of the pre-study were analysed separately. Here they are structured for a joint presentation of the main topics discussed. Though the idea be-

hind the individual interviews was to contribute to a basis for the focus-group interview guide, views from these interviews are included where appropriate to provide a balanced presentation. Findings from the eleven in-depth interviews were structured according to the discussion guide's questions of why, when and how CTs are used, or thought to be used, by consumers as a source of information in their purchase decision.

In making sense of the group interviews, summaries were made for each of them from transcribed tapes. Patterns have been sought in the discussions by comparing findings within and across groups. An assessment of group similarities and differences, awareness of comments that supported or weakened my own assumptions, and reflections on things that remained unsaid but might have been expected, are all aspects taken into account during this interpretation (*cf* Pearce, 1998). Opinions, ideas or feelings that were repeated (even though they are expressed in different words and styles) have been identified. In some cases, single noteworthy responses were also recorded (*cf* Krueger, 1998b). Where appropriate, verbatim quotes⁶⁾ are selected to illustrate the points. Basically, my presentation is a classification of comments according to the subheadings of the moderator's guide (*cf* Pearce, 1998). On this basis, inferences are made from the discussions.

Though much insights emerge from the interviews, the focus here is on the more interesting ones having potential for stimulating future research (*cf* Kohli & Jaworski, 1990).

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First the view that emerges from the in-depth and focus-group interviews are compared according to common topics (*cf* the interview guides). Then a summary of the findings is provided. Eventually the findings are compared and contrasted with the literature.

Business and consumer perspective

The questions in the individual and group interviews have given a status picture of

how CTs are perceived by the interviewees at present as regards: understanding of the main messages communicated by the issuers of the marks, types of products believed to be suitable for CTs, and types of consumers believed to be attracted by such marks. With regard to the significance of CTs in the choice process, this is illustrated by two perspectives. Firstly by contrasting such marks with other influential sources of information (*cf* relative importance) and having an indication of consumers' perceived uncertainty as regards food. Secondly by revealing consumers' knowledge about CTs, having business representatives' and consumers' opinion about the value added to brands (or private labels) by virtue of them having a mark, and finally by asking all interviewees (excluding issuers of marks) to evaluate the present importance of marks. Prospects for increased importance of CTs in consumers' decision making have been related to the impact of: attributes of relevance, credibility, and food production associated with increased perceived uncertainty. Accordingly, in what follows, findings are reported under the main headings: 1) how are CTs perceived, 2) what is their present importance and 3) what could improve their role.

Prevailing comprehension

Message. The principal message communicated by the registrants of the marks is expressed as a "guarantee for method of production" and "truthful and honest communication", *cf* the ecological mark and the quality & origin mark respectively. Informants in the individual interviews believed that consumers associate both of these marks with safe food, but at the same time these informants considered the ecological mark to be more palpable and objective (unbiased) than the other. The quality & origin mark was felt as having a vague/diffuse content and, consequently, was difficult to define. Consumers were supposed to have faith in the origin of products with the *Godt Norsk* mark, but were believed to be sceptical about such products being superior to similar products without the mark.

The test carried out in the focus groups demonstrated that even though most partici-

pants understood what the symbolism (*ie* figurative marks with text) was intended to communicate, they did not always believe in the marks. As an example, most subjects associated the *Superior* mark for salmon with "good quality". Exceptions were some negative single responses in group 2: "simply a cheap style of the package", "something the salmon industry rekons is nice to have on their package – it's certainly in their self-interest" and "just an ordinary advertisement, *ie* not really a certificate of approval". Likewise, though many mentioned Norwegian origin as the dominant association for the *Godt Norsk* mark, some single negative remarks revealed scepticism: "protectionism and nationalism" (*cf* group 1), "propaganda" and "protectionism" (*cf* group 2). Other negative remarks about *Godt Norsk* were directed at questionable quality and even poor quality. Moreover, in some cases more meaning was attributed to marks than is justified by the issuers of the marks indicating that consumers form impressions of marks extending beyond the information available to them. For example, some subjects in group 3 imagined that products having the ecological mark were more wholesome.

Products. As regards origin, the majority in the individual interviews considered this attribute to be increasingly important the less processed the product is. The argument was: for primary produce there is few if any other cues discriminating between seemingly identical products. Ecological, which was the other emphasized attribute, was considered to be equally applicable to both lightly processed products and manufactured products as it was to primary produce, although the message was felt to be most easily accepted by consumers for primary produce. A likely reason is that many informants expected consumers to associate crops, *eg* fruit and vegetables, with the use of pesticides as far as traditional (conventional) agriculture is concerned.

Participants in the focus groups made reference to CTs in general when they considered fresh food as the most important category for which such a mark could possibly make a difference.

Target groups. According to the registrant of the ecological mark, it is known that

ecological products are purchased by the elderly, parents with small children, and people with higher education (even though no effort has been made to direct communication towards these particular demographic segments). The understanding given by this registrant is that the ecological mark is important to demographic segments who are conscious of the environment and the origin of the raw material. Such values are associated with people living in towns, health-conscious people, those with higher education, and young adults. In the individual interviews, almost none could pinpoint the most important target segment for *Godt Norsk* who, according to the issuer, is represented by women under the age of 50 living in towns. However, from a retailer's point of view the elderly were assumed to pay more attention to the origin of products and, thus, to a certain degree prefer products having the quality & origin mark.

The impression gained from discussions in focus group 2 is that the ecological and ethical marks are expected to attract the attention of idealists. This is illustrated by a statement from a father in group 2: "I think they [*viz.* CTs] are aimed at idealists, and it's very good that idealists exist – if not, the world would be a completely different place. So, CTs *do* have a purpose, but I think your average person give a damn." In group 3 many participants argued that *young* people are expected to be more engaged in environmental issues than adults, and therefore marks like the *Swan*, the \emptyset logo and *Max Havelaar* were all expected to be most important to young people. A lady in group 3 argued: "I believe such marks are aimed at young people because they are so aware that everything should be labelled ecological and all that. Our generation, on the other hand, isn't convinced just because of a mark."

Importance

Criteria for product choice. The representatives for retail outlets assumed the most common criteria among consumers for product choice to be price, private labels and brands. As regards processed products in particular, important sources of information were expected to be brand, taste, practicality and range of use. From the consumers' side,

the factors mentioned most frequently for choosing one product in preference to another were, in no particular order: perceived quality and taste⁷⁾, functionality (product characteristics), price, appearance, packaging, and brand/private label. Other factors mentioned by fewer participants were product declaration, explanation of preparation and results of product tests in newspapers. Uncertainty is often reduced by tasting, if allowed, or by purchasing products which are familiar to the buyer, *ie* known manufacturer or known brand/private label. Certain flavourings, other additives (the *E* substances) and calorie content were examples of reasons people gave for *not* choosing a product.

Perceived uncertainty. Focus-group participants reported a strong feeling of trust as regards the safety of products available in the grocery trade. This trust is mainly ascribed to a strong faith in the public food control. However, reduced to its essence, the issue of uncertainty may be characterized by a few extrinsic conditions and - more important - some intrinsic conditions in relation to the product. Extrinsic factors are related to price, shelf life (use-by date), (meal) preparation and taste. Intrinsic factors associate with the physical product itself. Subjects expressed concern regarding quality, residue of antibiotics, residue of pesticide, genetically modified (GM) foods and imported meat (*cf* BSE and growth hormones). Another intrinsic factor was additives (*ie E* numbers). In terms of the number of aspects, group 1 expressed most concern. Unexpectedly, it was revealed that although subjects in group 2 seemed to focus more on the wholesomeness of food (for the sake of their children), this did not imply concern for other food-related uncertainties than additives.

Knowledge and recognition. The introductory test in each focus group, conducted as unaided recall, revealed that the knowledge of CTs is rather low. After providing a general description of CTs, participants were asked to name examples of such marks for food and drinks. Among the examples mentioned, only the quality & origin mark *Godt Norsk* was correctly given (mentioned by some in groups 1 and 2). Although the Nordic environmental label (the *Swan*) matches

the definition given, it is neither used for foodstuffs nor beverages (although mentioned by some in groups 1 and 3). Other (wrong) suggestions were categorized as labels, for instance labels for recycling. Moreover, according to the aided recall, the recognition of CTs was varying. The two marks whereby each was recognised by more than half of the focus-group participants were identical with the ones appearing on a wide range and/or large volume of products and having been extensively promoted (*ie Superior Norsk Laks* and *Godt Norsk*).

Added value. The general impression given by the majority of informants in the individual interviews was that the ecological mark much more than the quality & origin mark represents a supplement and, thereby, added value to brands or private labels. The argument given by informants representing the issuer of the ecological mark, an umbrella chain and all the manufacturers of branded products was that the ecological mark means *credibility* in a different way than individual companies' own claims. The quality & origin mark was perceived to have a weaker image with different consequences for different brands. Manufacturers reasoned that if a brand has low market share, then the quality & origin mark is expected to be supportive as regards a strengthened quality *and* origin profile. Conversely, for a leading brand the requirements for the production process are expected to be satisfied at any rate. In this case, the quality & origin mark merely strengthens/reassures the origin profile of the brand as product quality is already expected to be at a high level (*ie* above the level represented by a quality mark). From one particular manufacturer's point of view, CTs more serve to standardize products than to differentiate them and this is particularly a disadvantage to high equity brands. Consistent with the manufacturers' view regarding a CT's effect for a brand with a low market share, a representative for an umbrella chain reported that the chain intended to launch an assortment of meat with a new private label and this initiative was considered to combine well with the quality & origin mark as an element of recognition.

One focus group distinguished itself in terms of participants' opinions about the CT

as a potential support to the brand or private label and, thus, to the product. Provided that the CT of interest enjoys *confidence*, it has the potential to add value to the product. This was the point of view of some of the participants in group 1. Participants in the other groups did not share the idea of added value by a mark.

General impression. According to two of three umbrella chains of grocery shops and supermarkets CTs are not important for buying behaviour in industrial markets. This opinion was a consequence of these particular informants' perception that such marks, in particular the quality & origin mark, are of minor importance to consumers' decision making. On the other hand, another industrial buyer's opinion was that the ecological mark is well recognized as a guideline for conscious consumption, and this makes the mark a criterion for choice.

The majority of focus-group participants reported CTs to be of secondary importance for choice. Here are some examples: A father in group 2 said: "As regards food, taste is very important (...) but talking about detergent, I don't buy a particular product because it has the Swan - I buy it because it's name is ... [a national brand]." The importance of functionality of the product, in this case its cleaning effect in preference to the its environmental impact, was put into words by a lady in group 3: "In my opinion, the Swan means that the product's better for the environment, so it means something to me, but if my laundry doesn't get clean then I don't use it." Consumers' time resources clearly have an influence on their problem solving behaviour and lack of time leads to routine buying which restrain consumers from paying attention to marks. This is illustrated by a father in group 2 who expressed himself as follows while explaining why a CT was of no significance to him when shopping: "I'm in a hurry, so I don't bother to look very closely at the products. I buy it because it's named ... [a national brand] and that's what I'm used to buying."

Consumers' think that too many different symbols exist on food and this makes it difficult to differentiate CTs from other marks. This issue was best elaborated by participants in group 2. Those claiming that CTs were of no significance to them described

the situation as a confusing "jungle" of symbols and logos meaning "environment", "recycling" and such like. Consequently, the feeling was that too many symbols were perceived to be without real sense. This is exemplified by a statement from a father in group 2: "I feel they just put on a sticker with those arrows [meaning recyclable] and then they write 'environmentally friendly' somewhere, making it look like as if they belong together - but in fact they don't, do they?"

Despite many focus-group participants spoke unfavourable of CTs, their viewpoints were not exclusively negative. Under certain circumstances marks may have a positive influence. Provided the quality of the product is good and the fair trade message is better communicated, the majority of the participants in group 3 thought the Max Havelaar mark would persuade them. This citation from a man in group 3 may signify the willingness to try a product bearing the fair trade mark: "If the quality is okay, I wouldn't mind buying it, not at all. I'd never really thought about it [viz. *Max Havelaar*] before." As regards origin, several of the participants in group 3 claimed that this attribute would be important to them, but just in situations where Norwegian production has a comparative *advantage*.

Discussions about the position held by the Nordic environment label, the *Swan*, led to some interesting comments regarding credibility of public environmental requirements and "private claims". As regards environmental concerns, some in group 2 pointed out that this is the domain of public laws and therefore they considered an environmental mark as redundant. Moreover, entitlement to use of the *Swan* was thought to be too costly to many producers who were already required to take adequate environmental measures. As a consequence, these participants expected products without the *Swan* to be as environmentally friendly as those bearing the mark. A similar remarkable point is that a considerable number of people in group 3 perceived manufacturers' own environmental information to be just as credible as the *Swan*. Again, this was substantiated by the subjects' faith in "some public authority keeping an eye on everything". This statement from a man in group

3 is illustrative: "Indeed ... [name of manufacturer] has a senior official, or something of the sort, to ensure that the promises are kept. Among others, the Consumer Council is believed to keep an eye on things."

Improvement

Attributes. What CTs communicate if they were more important? In other words, what type of information is desired. The responses were vague and ambiguous. Taking as an example group 2, some participants expressed concern about the consequence of our consumption to the environment. Thus, responsible consumption and, hence, environmental awareness seemed to be *the* most important attribute. Participants in group 2 also hint at "quality" and "not injurious to health" (eg E numbers and GM foods) as attributes of directly personal relevance that could be communicated by a CT.

As regards quality, the majority generalized this primarily to be a matter of taste, but many participants felt this could best be evaluated by themselves. The apparently insignificance of a quality mark is illustrated by a statement from a lady in group 3: "After all, my perception of quality doesn't change even if there's a mark on it [viz. on the product]."

In general, personal relevance of a mark seems to be of vital importance. For example, participants in group 3 considered frequent product control and a guarantee (money back guarantee or another type of compensation for dissatisfaction) as important conditions for a mark to have significance. - Presumably, the fair-trade guarantee promised by the Max Havelaar mark is perceived to be a different type of guarantee.

Credibility. According to the individual interviews, credibility must be an absolute condition for a certification mark to be appreciated by consumers, and perceived credibility was said to be based on the consumer's personal knowledge and personal experience with the CT of interest as well as perceived impartiality of the registrant of the mark. Some related credibility to the *exclusivity* of the CT. In other words, a CT used by relatively few producers was perceived as more reliable in relation to an identical mark used by relatively many producers. If a mark

is awarded to relatively few producers, it was suggested that consumers would associate the mark with confidence-inspiring qualities like strict control and demanding criteria of award (*cf* the ecological mark). In particular, exclusivity was perceived as being very important for a mark emphasizing quality, such as *Godt Norsk*. However, manufacturers had different views regarding the impact of a mark as exclusive versus "common property". One producer thought the consequence of many products having a mark might be a lack of distinction for each producer (*cf* the mark as a point-of-parity), while another's opinion was that a relatively large number of branded products having a specific mark (*cf* *Godt Norsk*) would not weaken the status of the actual mark.

Confidence was also a topic called attention to by several participants in the focus groups. If the registrant of the mark is unknown, uncertainty arises as to the meaning of the mark. In the words of one participant in group 2: "Nowadays you can get a stamp on anything. You have to know who is behind it [viz. the stamp] before you can possibly accept that the product's all right." Credibility is achieved by making known the criteria for awarding a mark, as illustrated by a father in group 2: "It's a little bit unclear to me how the criteria are set and who's behind them." Further, the criteria must be defined by an independent body and they must be strict in order to avert the impression that the mark is easily obtainable (because it may then lose its value).

Uncertainty also arises as a consequence of vague claims. For instance, *Superior Norsk Laks* represents a situation where consumers lack a point of reference for being able to evaluate the quality or superiority. This point was made by a girl in group 1: "I think that this [viz. *Superior Norsk Laks*] is a quality mark, but quality in relation to what?" If consumers experience that products with a quality mark are not superior to comparable products, then the quality mark will be of no consequence. Some participants considered a mark used by many producers to imply unsatisfactory control and, thus, that the mark is easy obtainable. Finally, confidence is also related to willingness to pay more. This is exemplified by the statement that information about the fair

trade mark and its integrity is necessary for willingness to pay a premium price for a particular brand of coffee.

Other conditions. Some informants in the individual interviews thought that circumstances expected to increase the significance of the ecological mark to consumers would arise from scandals in agriculture (*eg* animal welfare). Greater significance of the quality & origin mark was expected if the import of agricultural products increased and/or if the mark denoted other characteristics than origin as a point-of-difference (*eg* animal welfare or environmental considerations). A condition for origin to be considered as a significant source of information was that the consumer himself/herself becomes aware that uncertainty is associated with the origin of certain products.

Summary of findings

The aided recall indicates that unless a CT is adequately supported by information and marketing efforts, it remains anonymous and unable to attract consumers' attention. Consistent with the result of the aided recall, participants frequently reported that they did not care about marks they had no knowledge about. Although such marks may have been noticed when taking a glance at products (*cf* eye movement), consumers maintained they are not affected by unknown marks and/or marks with a perceived questionable credibility. Comparing the points of view from the individual and group interviews as regards message associations, it is a general agreement that the credibility of some collective marks is questioned. In that respect, individual and group interviews were to a large extent consistent as to credibility as an absolute condition for a CT to be appreciated, and demanding criteria of award/strict control and impartiality as important confidence-inspiring factors.

Characteristics unifying consumers who appreciated CTs seem to be: a feeling of "personal values produced by relevant marks" and fulfilment of certain personal values as a desirable "side effect" of consumption. For example, one's choice could be guided by goals like a wish to maintain

national food production, save the environment, and the like.

The reasons a few people gave for caring about marks combined with what they or others said marks ought to communicate if they were personally important, indicate that valued product attributes communicated by marks represent a character that is difficult or impossible for the consumer to verify even after consumption. Accordingly, although not substantiated by many responses, some consumers' views suggested that marks conveying messages about attributes that can easily be verified after consumption will be superfluous due to the opinion that every single consumer is her-/himself best able to judge whether traceable attributes really are present as claimed by a mark.

Though consumers' impression is that food is safe, some elements of uncertainty exist. In particular, concerns apply to product intrinsic factors. A general impression was that marks ought to gain the confidence of consumers and be a vehicle for accurate consumer information and, by so doing, contribute to the elimination of consumers' perceived uncertainty concerning food.

Business representatives and consumers agreed regarding primary produce, *ie* fresh food, as most "appropriate" for CTs (*cf* discriminatory effect). As an element of recognition marks were suggested to combine well with *new* brands or private labels, *ie* products for which consumers lack experience.

Aggregated the interviewees clearly demonstrated the use of a variety of information sources to end up with a preferred product. The brand and private label were included and these cues were considered to represent predictable choices as regards product performance. Accordingly, some focus-group participants said they stick to certain brands or private labels for the sake of convenience (*cf* habits). In general CTs seem to be of minor importance. Based on an overall impression of the group interviews the relative importance of information sources for choice is suggested in Figure 1.

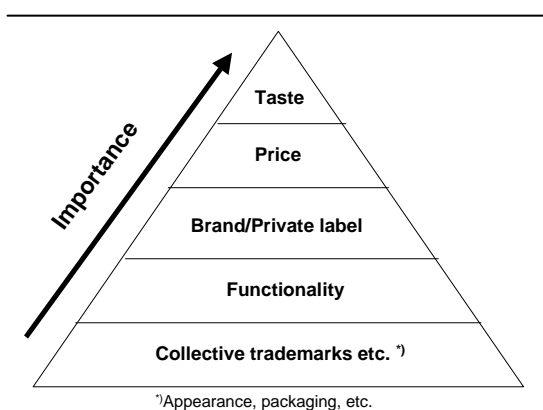


Figure 1 Relative importance of information sources for choice

Discussion

A review of the limited articles on non-company specific symbols has pointed out a number of findings which support the results from the interviews. Diverging personal understanding (*cf* beliefs) in contrast with the actual meaning communicated by the source of the message, questionable credibility, woolly criteria of award, anonymity, secondary importance, and need for knowledge are aspects of CTs reported by the majority of the interviewees. These findings are consistent with the selected literature on the effects of non-company specific symbols. According to Trijp and Steenkamp (1998) the potential value added to a product by virtue of it having a CT has to be related to the mark having attributes of its own perceived by the consumer to be relevant and trustworthy. Precisely, credibility and relevance of attributes were reported as some of the conditions which must be met if marks were a vehicle for consumer information. Especially the importance of possessing relevant attributes calls for attention in situations where processing by attribute, *ie* examining several alternatives on one attribute, is likely to occur. This is the case for routinized buying decisions (Pinson & Roberto, 1988) like much of the grocery shopping represents. When buying groceries a great deal of the interpretation and integration processes happens automatically (Peter &

Olsson, 1996). In this context, provided a CT has relevance, the mark may represent a prominent stimulus catching consumers' attention and interrupting their automatic problem-solving processes to make their decision making more conscious.

Some interviewees partly disagreed with what is suggested in the literature as reasons for why the acquirement of a CT ought to be worthwhile for the brand owner. According to literature such reasons are, firstly, the idea that the product will become more uniquely and convincingly positioned through the mark as a more compelling point-of-difference for the brand (*cf* Keller, 1998). Secondly, the idea that through a new product concept a CT may be considered by brand producers as "a base-line level upon which they build competitive equity through strong brands" (Trijp & Steenkamp, 1998:61). Statements by the representatives of two different manufacturers confirm that the purpose of being awarded the ecological and quality & origin mark was to make their branded products become more convincingly positioned as being ecological and having a national origin. However, by referring to the quality & origin mark in particular a representative of another manufacturer claimed that this mark represents a point-of-parity and, thus, would weaken the position of a *leading* brand. A market-leader brand was expected to represent quality at a level above a quality & origin mark, and for such a brand the mark was not expected to represent a "base-line level". What this point of view probably suggests is that the goal of bringing consumers from routinized choice behaviour into a more conscious and controlled level of limited decision making by introducing a mark as a stimuli, is an advantageous strategy for "new brands or brands with a low market share" (Peter & Olsson, 1996:219) but not for established brands because they already are in the evoked sets of many consumers. Consequently, in routinized choice behaviour where consumers engage in little or no search, the introduction of a mark is suggested to have different consequences for brands with a low market share versus leading brands.

Noteworthy, views presented by the focus-group participants do not justify saying that marks have a positive influence on con-

sumer decision making as reported in the few articles on non-company specific symbols. However, the information obtained from both the individual and group interviews suggests that marks *may* influence decision making positively provided that certain conditions are met.

The articles raised some questions which have become revived by the interviews, but still remain unanswered. For example, does a CT's potential influence on a consumer's evaluation of a branded product depend on whether the brand is familiar or unfamiliar to the consumer? If familiarity and a brand's market share corresponds, the above-mentioned reflections on the introduction of a mark in a buying situation characterized by routinized choice behaviour may contribute to an answer.

One of the key findings of these interviews is that the perceived credibility of the issuer of a mark is suggested as one of the significant factors deciding whether the mark will be used in decision making. As previously noticed, the credibility of a message claim is discussed by the economics of information literature (*cf* search, experience and credence attributes) and further elaborated by studies on the differentiation of food by credence characteristics. Even if less tangible, so-called credence attributes may be of significance to consumers as a purchase criterion, information asymmetry prevails and makes communication of such attributes a question of credibility of the "persuasion factors", here represented by the source (transmitter) and the message (*cf* Andersen, 1994; Pinson & Roberto, 1988; Rao & Ruekert, 1994) – precisely as appears from the interviews. In other words, the findings agree with Ford *et al.* (1990) as regards consumers' scepticism of claims which are impossible to evaluate prior to purchase. However, according to the findings, trust in the source of the claim tends to reduce this scepticism.

For decisions about which brand of food to choose, theory of information processing is highly relevant. At this level of decision, information on the attributes of alternatives is generally obtained from external sources (*cf* Raaij, 1988), among others from own observations. Accordingly, the very first time a particular CT is used by a shopper to guide

choice between branded food products, the use of the particular mark may be regarded as a consequence of the shopper's own observation, *ie* her/his external information search, be it intentional (active) or incidental (passive) learning (*cf* Bettman, 1979). Besides, information processing theory of consumer choice also offers a perspective to understand the finding that consumers favour processing by brand when faced with uncertainty (Pinson & Roberto, 1998). Processing by brand may, however, also indicate brand loyalty whereby the decision happens without much information processing – as is the case for many low-involvement products.

As a final remark: in the interpretation and reporting from a focus-group study it is recommended that some explicit discussion of any concerns about the group(s) is included (Pearce, 1998). As regards the number of groups restricted to three, an explorative perspective aiming to gain extensive knowledge into a topic did not imply validation to be a critical issue. Therefore it was not deemed necessary to have control (comparative) groups. Three groups turned out to be enough. After the third group the point of saturation was reached (*cf* Krueger, 1998b; Morgan, 1998), *ie* the third group did not yield much new information. Moreover, nine participants proved to be a reasonable group size as well. A challenge was to gather a sufficient number of people that would have enough to say to keep the ball rolling. Although none of the participants were experts or knew a lot of the topic, in each group the reality was that some had more to say and others less. However, the moderator was successful in his effort to inspire a lively discussion. By keeping an eye on the dynamics of the groups the moderator quite often directed questions to a particular participant to encourage her/him to get involved and contribute.

Conclusion

According to the literature on branding and consumer behaviour, "almost any" factors and conditions explain whether consumers will use a CT as a source of information and support when they have to choose from alter-

native branded foods. In that respect the focus-group study proved to be helpful to focus attention on relevant issues and away from "all things possible" (Wade, 1988). Accordingly the most important factors influencing the use of a CT in purchase decisions are suggested to be made up of some components associated with the mark of interest and other components associated with the branded food of interest. As regards the mark, the consumer's *familiarity* with the mark, the mark's perceived *credibility* (cf source and message claim) and its personal *relevance*, as well as the *type of attribute* communicated by the mark (cf search, experience and credence qualities) are conditions reported to be of great importance. Likewise, important factors associated with the relevant food products are represented by a person's *involvement* in the product, her/his product *expertise* (experience), the perceived *uncertainty* of buying a product that fails to satisfy one's expectations, the tendency to buy a particular brand

repeatedly (*brand loyalty*), and the importance of particular cues among the variety of external and internal sources of information available to the consumer (*relative importance* of information sources).

The information obtained has given important insights about consumers' perceptions and practices, but *cannot* be generalized beyond the participants. – Nor was generalization the purpose of this pre-study. The focus-group study was conducted "in-depth" to gain a more complete understanding of how certain people think about a topic. In the next phase of this research, a construction of a model should be based on the factors which, hereby, are proposed. Subsequently, research should aim at testing empirically the relationship between variables to allow aggregation over individuals or segments of individuals. Only after testing it, the model can be proved false and changed – to conform with new insights – or discarded.



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Notes

- 1) The degree to which information asymmetry exists is determined by the extent to which products' "quality-related attributes can be evaluated (by the segment of interest) prior to purchase" (Rao & Ruekert, 1994:95).
- 2) *Norsk Laks* as the symbol depicting a medal does not exist longer. It was extensively promoted in the 1980s, but less so from 1992 and onwards. In the 1990s there was no active promotion. The mark was only displayed on packages through the initiative of individual producers. In the year 2000 the mark was abandoned. However, the text remains but in combination with a new logo. Note: a manipulated version was displayed for the focus groups (original text: *Superior Norwegian Salmon*).
- 3) The Ø logo was accompanied by the text *Godkjent Økologisk av Debio* - in English "Approved by Debio as ecological produce".
- 4) The *Max Havelaar* logo had the text *Max Havelaar Norge – Garanti – Rettferdig handel* – in English "Max Havelaar Norway – Guarantee – Fair Trade".
- 5) An approximate translation would be "Best of Norwegian".
- 6) Based on the fact that the language of the group interviews was Norwegian, the statements - in English - represent an *approximate* translation. (Thus, strictly speaking, a statement which is translated cannot be considered a direct quotation.)
- 7) According to many consumers, taste is considered synonymous with quality. What is quality then? One lady in group 3 claimed that: "something has quality when you *know* that you will have a good product, *ie* that the product claim matches the product experience after consumption".