

Context Connection:

Visual Indication of Food Backgrounds

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Introduction:

I eat.

Every day.

At least three times a day.

(But usually more often.)

Most of us in the developed world follow this biologically-necessary, cultural (and often mental) pattern.

Food affects every part of our lives. Of everyone in the world. Everywhere. Not only does this banana give me nutrients and energy (or an upset stomach if it's not quite ripe). But it affects the guy who sold it to me in the shop, the transport from Argentina that got it to the shop, the farmer and owner of the banana plantation, and all the people involved in between.

It's really an amazing feat of technology, logistics and globalization that brings me and this banana together in the ice-ripened Netherlands.

Of the three principles of sustainability (striving for a balance of social, environmental and economic aspects), the economic considerations are seemingly the most immediate

impact for me and my wallet as the banana bunches smile from the market shelf. This is re-enforced by the bright red sign listing bananas at .99 Euros per kilo.

But by looking at the entire life-story of this banana in purely economical terms, what is less obvious is that I am eventually lead around to long-term social and environmental impacts.

If I realize that this shipment of bananas, on voyage from its native Columbia, contributed a .5mm hole in the ozone layer due to the emissions of its transport – hole which will, in many years, give my future children higher probability of skin cancer – I might opt instead for the Dutch Elstar apple, grown in a nearby orchard. Especially if I knew that the Elstar was grown free of pesticides: chemicals which would otherwise infiltrate the city's drinking water.

If I knew that this banana had been picked by a 7-year-old in forced-labor conditions, being underpaid by a large multinational corporation, I wouldn't buy the banana either. On the other hand, if I knew that, in a world where the above dire scenario exits, this banana has been traded fairly and the profits have gone to help a community develop its elementary education program, and support goals to farm sustainably, I would be much more likely to buy it .

But I don't know all these things as I stand contemplating my purchase. There's no one waiting here to tell me all this. (And it's not like I have time anyway – I just want a quick snack).

In order to make a balanced decision, I need to know the who, what, when, where, why and how of this banana. But how can I find this information?

The shop employee only shrugs and looks at the crate they came in to say they arrived from Columbia. Nutrition labels are only required for foods that have been somehow processed. Not the raw produce in front of me. And they only tell part of the story – the part most immediately connected to my physical well-being (which comes just after the most short-term financial connection to my wallet). Which says nothing about the other questions that come from 'where?' and 'how did it get here?'

With technologies enabling easier access to information and pinpointed tracing of individual food products thru their life-cycles, I know the information is out there. With the growth of the numbers of consumers concerned about ethics and the environment, companies are anxious to communicate about what 'they're doing'. Such companies, in the pursuit of sustainability, attempt

to report on these issues through the increasingly-popular Corporate Social Responsibility or Environmental Reports. But that would require me to download and sift through a several-hundred-page report. I could call the company to interview in-depth about their policies and conditions. But in this grocery isle, neither phonebook nor internet is in sight.

I need a direct link between this banana and the information that surrounds it. I'm paying for it: I deserve to have the option to know more.

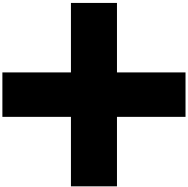
What if all of this information was presented up-front? If it answered my questions about the social and environmental circumstances in which this banana was raised, and provided insight into options more beneficial to me, my neighbors and the planet?

This would be the idyllic solution. But this is a huge step for companies

to make for a majority of people who aren't asking for it. Standing in florescent-glow of the produce isle, it's hard to understand what is relevant to the future of myself, my family, and my global community.

Education by providing clues about how the system works would allow for individual consumers to find their place within the system; and visualize how their small purchase makes a difference. And if someone starts to understand the depth and impact of what he eats; over time he can transfer this understanding to other products, and overall lifestyle.

If things are made visible to me about how each one of my food choices boils down to a global impact, to in turn affect me, personally, I will pay more for eco, bio, fair food. And I would know exactly which questions to ask of companies trying to sell me bananas.



"The long and complex evolution of moving away from being a hunting, gathering, farming society to a fast moving consumer goods society has resulted in rapid development, flourishing economies and better life expectancy. However, it has separated people from the natural processes that underpin their lives. Some might say that their food comes from supermarkets, not farms and not from soil. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it is harder for people to see the link between a healthy natural environment and the food they eat when the food comes pre-made in a plastic bag."

**- Sustainable Consumption Roundtable,
"I Will if You Will" 2006.**

Summary:

Context Connection: Visual Indication of Food Backgrounds

Public awareness and concern for social and environmental issues is increasing. But current systems of consumer information and labeling are inadequate for increasing transparency among companies that are striving to do business more sustainably.

‘Sustainability’ seeks to provide the best of all possible worlds for people and the environment; both now and into the indefinite future. “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”¹

At present, knowledge about the effects that foods have on personal finance and health are most widely spread among consumers. This leaves potential for visual communication on where food comes from, who made it, the cultural and social histories that go into it. But the vast amounts of

information available on transparency are not consumer-friendly, and no direct entry point exists between consumer and product information.

To encourage consumer awareness of how their food choices affect not only themselves, but also global environment and society, **consumers need to feel a connection with the environmental, social, geographic, cultural and economical impacts of their foods.**

This position paper is a case for a new direction in product labeling, corporate communication and advertising in this era of globalization. For the exploration of this topic, discussion will focus on foods. As an industry, food already has a high level of trace-ability, due to growing food safety concerns and consumer demand.

The idea of ‘communicating backgrounds’ is not a form of traditional advertising but an extension: the company/product/service information will all be contained within it. It’s a medium to ‘advertise’ transparently: through

revealing a product's backgrounds and corporate social responsibility. Only companies who are truly interested in displaying ALL of their social, environmental, cultural, and health aspects would actually be interested in a system such as this.

I believe this is the future of communication: the direction things must go. Nutrition Facts already give insight into the product. It is a matter of time before a form of communication is needed to give consumers insight into the social and environmental impacts of the product.

Food, being part of each of our lives, is an excellent vehicle for education about the impact we, as individual consumers, have on global environment and society.

The designs accompanying this theory demonstrate **how backgrounds can be made visible, through graphic communication.**

Designers are in a prime position to be able to communicate complex background information to consumers. Stefano Marzano of

Phillips Design said that as designers, "if we can't change the nature of people, we can affect their behavior: By designing the environment."² Much like the U.S. Nutrition Facts label changed consumer purchasing behavior because it made direct connections between the nutrients of the food and individual health, this position paper is based on the idea that – **over time – such communication on the backgrounds can change consumer purchasing behavior.** The 'dolphin-safe tuna' label is another example of connection established – between buying tuna and harming dolphins. Prior to the marketing effort put into communicating the message behind the 'dolphin-safe' mark, consumers were unaware of the connection. A study on the impact of the dolphin-safe label provides evidence that consumers respond to eco-labels and that "providing information to consumers through labeling can alter behavior". The study also found information to support "society's willingness to pay to avoid personally contributing to dolphin mortality as a result of tuna fishing" and that such changes in consumer behavior may

also alter manufacturer behavior (the manufacturers changed their fishing practices to meet consumer demand).³

As indicators to support this argument, social and environmental issues are growing in both the corporate sphere and in the public eye. Corporate violations of social responsibility have threatened consumer trust, thereby leading to a greater consumer demand for information, which thus causes increased transparency on the part of corporations. In business, there is a need to communicate on changes towards social-responsibility. In advertising, the changing role of the 'brand' and the continual evolution of advertising highlight a need for a new direction in marketing communication. Technology already allows viewing behind the product: using search and tracking tools such as Google, GPS, RFID and RFD tags, consumers can pinpoint and trace products through their virtual networks.

Why Communicate Backgrounds?

Why Communicate on Backgrounds?

The relevance of such a proposal to communicate on product backgrounds is based upon the current change I see in society. Specifically: the growing focus on social and environmental futures among consumers, the need for a new role for marketing, growing business focus on social responsibility and technology.

The following chapters address these areas, which are all inter-related, and conclude with further explanation of the 'communicating backgrounds' theory – an exercise in visual communication.

Sustainable Consumption for Social and Environmental Futures:

Consumption is the using up of a resource; also defined as “the selection, adoption, use, disposal and recycling of goods and services”⁵. The increasing **globalization** of goods has led to **disconnection** between consumers and their products. For Western consumers, this translates into a world where endless consumption can take place; seemingly free of consequences.

The origins and effects of a product’s use become ever-more removed from consumers’ perceived circle of influence. When it comes to contributing to the betterment of the world; things feel out the consumer’s realm of impact. (*global warming, drought and subsequent mass starvation in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Asian tsunami, the growing numbers of endangered species, air quality in cities around the world, sweatshops, child labor, ...*)

In order to reconnect with the impact of their purchasing decisions, consumers need issues put into the perspective

of their circle of influence. How consumers can “do something about it” must be communicated to them. To understand their role in the system, consumers must have an understanding about the ‘big picture’ of the system and the impacts specific products have within it.

At present, the personal economic impact of a purchase is most obvious to a consumer – after which comes personal health and nutritional impacts. The social and environmental aspects that balance consumption (sustain-ably) are often ignored in favor of immediate, individual economic impacts.

The Nutrition Facts label, relaunched in 1994 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture with an extensive campaign, made visible the connection between what people eat and their health. Although obesity continues to rise in the U.S., studies have shown that following the re-introduction of the label, 80% of consumers report checking the new food label when buying new food products.⁶

“Consumption clearly contributes to human development when it enlarges the capabilities and enriches the lives of people without adversely affecting the well-being of others, when it is as fair to future generations as it is to the present ones, when it respects the carrying capacities of the planet, and when it encourages lively, creative individuals and communities.”

- 1998 United Nations Human Development Report on Consumption

Just as “following the introduction of health warnings on the front of food packaging by major UK supermarkets, sales of certain products fell. In some cases, the drop was quite dramatic... While the government’s Food Standard Agency has been trying to introduce a ‘traffic light’ nutrition labeling program since 2004, individual supermarkets’ efforts are having an *immediate* effect on customers’ purchasing habits.”⁷ “Sales of “unhealthy” foods have fallen by up to 40% since supermarkets started revealing fat, salt and sugar content on labels.”⁸

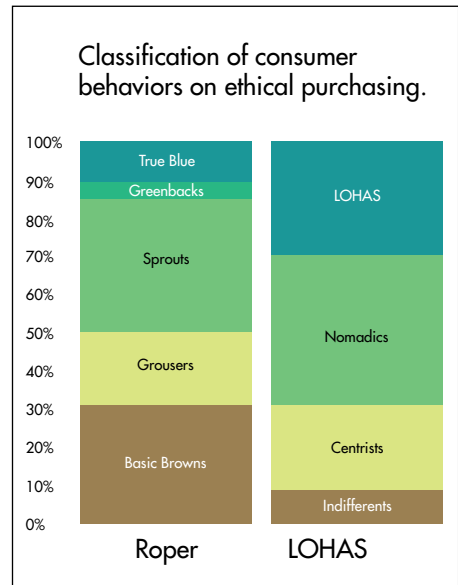
Addressing our own habits is a first step to reach global impact. The infamous phrase “think global, act local” attests to this. Even the word ‘customer’ itself comes from the root of ‘custom’; habit. The question becomes; how can individual consumer habits be connected with the global-scale changes that they contribute to?

Consumer Interest in Backgrounds

Though globalization has caused disrupt in many areas of society, it has also brought greater accessibility to information; by which consumers can police a corporation more easily, and quickly.

A 2005 survey says Americans are quick to identify polluting companies as “socially irresponsible” and make their purchasing decisions accordingly. The poll also found that consumers between the ages of 18-29 are more likely to spend more on organic, environmentally preferable or fair trade products than other age groups.¹⁰ Marjorie Thompson, co-author of *Brand Spirit: How Cause Related Marketing Builds Brands* said “Based on the findings, Generation Y is obviously more environmentally conscious and socially savvy, which is expected given that many are aware of the issues surrounding globalization and trade and how this can negatively affect the environment, labor pool and the local communities.”¹¹

Echoed in the food sector, these findings are strong indicators of growing consumer awareness and demand for more socially and environmentally-responsible products.



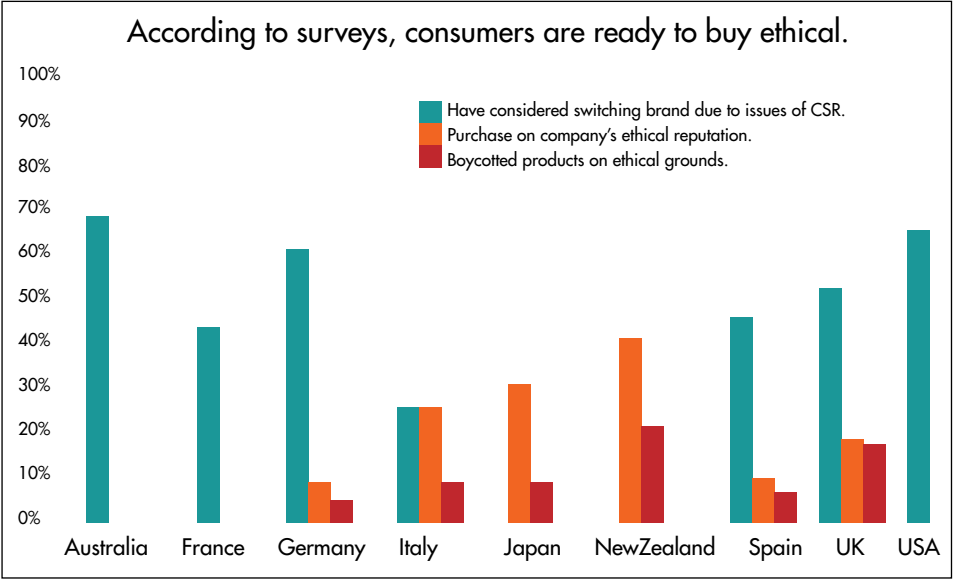
Comparison of consumer classification systems. [Talk the Walk: Advancing Sustainable Life-styles through Marketing and Communication]

"The impacts of our consumption patterns are no longer vague and invisible. People are beginning to understand the effect they are having on this world...and that they have a responsibility to look after it."

-Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme.

- World sales of **organic** foods increased from \$10 billion U.S. dollars in 1997 to \$17.5 billion in 2000¹².
- Seventy-eight percent of 25-45 year olds in the U.S. are likely to buy products that **benefit a cause** they support: 54% prepared to pay more.¹³
- **Fair Trade** sales in Europe have been growing at an average 20% per year since 2000. The annual net retail value of Fair Trade products sold in Europe now exceeds EUR 660 million. This is more than double the figure five years ago. Fair Trade has thus become one of the fastest growing markets in the world.¹⁴
- **Farmer's markets** have "experienced phenomenal growth in recent years, as producers respond to consumers' demands with new and alternative marketing strategies for their farm enterprises."¹⁵ Farmers markets provide direct contact between farmers and consumers, provide farm-fresh produce and step over the middle-man. Governments are interested to support this trend as a way of supporting small farms.
- There are increasing concerns about **pesticide residues** and **food safety** throughout the world.¹⁶
- In the UK, the proportion of **fair-trade coffee** in 2006 is around 20% of the market (up from 14% in 2002).¹⁷
- Sales of U.S.-manufactured **organic** products grew 38% during 2000. (growth rate for the conventional grocery industry for the same year was 3-5%).¹⁸

There is a lot of consumer concern, but seemingly little action. These things are happening within a select group of informed consumers: estimated at the top 15% to 25% of all consumers on Roper and LOHAS classifications of consumer behavior on ethical purchasing. Many other consumers feel powerless in the face of the seemingly distant environmental issues, or do not care about to see their impact because they do not feel it is relevant to them.



Consumers and ethical purchasing.
[Talk the Walk: Advancing Sustainable Lifestyles through Marketing and Communication]

In the middle of the Roper classification fall roughly 55% of the population: people who feel concerned and are willing to engage when little effort is involved, and those who are not inclined to act for the environment because they feel they have no real power. These are considered “swing groups”, who could act more sustainably if

provided with enough information on how their individual purchases directly impact global issues.

Immediately available on the product or product packaging, labeling is an essential medium with which to establish consumer knowledge. As the majority of people do not observe

“As long as the individual cannot learn from what he does and sees, whenever such learning requires that he go outside the framework of his basic preconceptions, then his action will ultimately be directed by some idea that does not correspond to the fact as it is.”

-David Bohm Source: On Creativity, 1996.

where and how foods are produced, labeling is the only clue to a product's history.

A 2003 survey of American consumers found that nearly everyone (92%)¹⁹ wanted labels on genetically-modified foods. This demonstrates that people want information that they perceive as relevant to their future health and safety. The same survey found substantial support for the statement ‘I would be willing to pay more for food if it meant that it could be produced in ways that protect the environment.’

Results from a study on the consumer science of ecolabeling suggest that American consumers value the benefits created by products which do not harm the environment. And that “a compulsory display of detailed information about price and environmental impact would be more beneficial for consumers than simple eco-seal disclosure policies and than most voluntary regimes”²⁰

Consumer Information: Product (Eco)Labeling

Food labeling originates from when people moved into cities where individuals did not personally know their bakers. One of the earlier forms of advertising, product labeling conveyed the quality and benefits of a product to consumers. “The individual service and purchasing negotiations between the housewife and the butcher, fishmonger, and fruit or vegetable seller were replaced by the general purchase of packages standardized by weight and type...”²¹ This was an indication to the growing distance between consumers and the source of their products (and perhaps a precursor to globalization). With the advent of in-home refrigeration, “the responsibility for one’s own nutrition was passed on, and cooking degenerated into following the preparatory instructions printed on the package...Groceries turned into standardized branded products with homogeneous quality guaranteed.”²²

A glance at today’s grocery shelves reveals numerous types of labels, containing a multitude of points of information: *ingredients and ingredient percentages, geographic location, nutrition information, expiration date, quantity or volume, brand, company information, import information, bar-code...not to mention any additional story behind the brand the company may want to advertise.*

There are multitudes of environmental labels that brands can choose from. Different types of labels include endorsement, categorical comparative, Type 1 Labels for overall LCA, and Single Issue.²³ Endorsement is a first-party label, generally issued by the manufacturer, and typically have no independent review. Categorical comparative labels evaluate products of the same type with each other. Type 1 labels are an indication of overall Life Cycle Assessment – this corresponds to ISO 14024. Single Issue labels include those used for certified organic cotton, dolphin-safe tuna and sustainable forestry, among others. They correspond to ISO

"Public communication has a key role to play to build on these emerging trends and to make sustainable development approachable and understandable.....however, communicating effectively about sustainable lifestyles is a challenge. One needs to consider not only what to communicate, but how to communicate it."

-Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme.

14000 Type IV. Second party-labels are issued through trade or industry associations. Third-party labels are truly independently-certified.

Complexity:

As part of their construction, eco-labels generally focus on only a few elements of the big picture. Reviewed by an external board (as with third-party labels) or by the company itself (as with first-party labels), eco-labels are awarded to products based on evaluation by a group of criteria on a selection of issues. This narrowed-scope of issues to address simplifies the level of complex criteria for products that are members of a specific eco-label. However, this simplicity makes itself more complex when the consumer is faced, all at once, with a range of eco-labels based on different criteria for different issues. Confronted with an ever-growing multitude of ecolabels on the market, it's impossible for consumers to conclude the credibility of a product based on eco-label, logo or product claim, while in the supermarket aisle.

According to Dr. Jason Clay, the acting VP at the Center for Conservation Innovation there are too many eco-labels. In his view, trends in eco-labels include "increased competition between ecolabels, increased confusion for producers and consumers, increasing disparity between what is measured and market claims, and increasing distrust of ecolabels by consumers."²⁴ All eco-labels are different, and not all are created equally. Website eco-labels.org is a database from which consumers can access information on the background criteria and indicators of thousands of eco-labels.

As a general rule, eco-labels are based on criteria that relate to only a few aspects of the process of production of the product itself. However, because the entire system is not evaluated in eco-labels, the difficulty lies in comparing the impacts of different social and environmental issues. "For example, it is difficult to compare a product that is biodegradable but produced in an energy intensive process with a product produced with less energy but has a half-life of five million years."²⁵

Around the 1980, when the flood of eco-labels noticeably started; such a 'mark-of-environmental-approval' was the answer to many issues of the time. However, to keep up with the changing needs of sustainable development, the issues that eco-labels ought to address have also changed. In her 1998 paper on "Welfare Effects of Eco-Label Proliferation: Too Much of a Good Thing?", Luanne Lohr wrote about the over-abundance of confusing claims by manufacturers and argues that this led to the proliferation of environmental labeling schemes, the sheer number of which threatens consumer confusion and confidence in them.²⁶ The goal of eco-labels is to bring consumers information about the product's environmental impact. Yet the rising number of eco-labeling schemes confuses consumers and prevents them from being able to recognize or trust any particular label.²⁷ Overall, this leads to consumer distrust, even cynicism²⁸ of ecolabels.

Aiming at simplifying information to consumers, a recent initiative of retailers in the UK provides a traffic

light system of red, yellow, green nutrition indicators. Similar to a Dutch inauguration of gold, silver and bronze stickers for sustainability in foods that will enter the market late this year, these methods of comparison help consumers with quick decisions in the grocery isle - but they do not promote long-term understanding of the system behind. And, as in the case of the traffic light system, each food requires several stickers to cover all the elements important to maintaining a healthy diet (fat, sugar, sodium, etc.).

To promote the global perspective of social and environmental causes, eco-labels need to be more big-picture oriented: outlining more of a systems approach than focusing on one sole element of product differentiation. As Wesley Nimon and John Behgin state in their analysis of eco-labels in textiles: "This highlights the need for eco-labeling schemes to incorporate enough flexibility to reward different environmental goals as long as the net effect on the environment is positive."²⁹ I believe this comparison should be brought into the open and left for the consumer to decide, if

they so choose, rather than hidden behind an eco-label that relies on the opinions of others. Transparency can help clear up complexity. In exploring a new format for the evolution of the eco-label, a structure could be provided for companies to place information about what they are doing within the life-cycle of a product.

As currently structured, eco-labels provide little learning material for consumers. Although more complexity is likely to result from such a system that acts as a structure for more information; if it contributes to long-term learning about the impact that food purchases have on global society and environment, such density can be welcomed. Sustainable purchasing done in this manner is more meaningful than a purchase based on a eco-label because it allows the consumer to take part in the process, by which they can learn about, understand and connect to the bigger picture.

Standardization:

An eco-label is a standard; in terms of the way it needs to be implemented. But standards are difficult to apply globally due to intricacies and variation around the world in production, distribution, framing practice, environmental conditions... everything.

Although rigid standards can seem more clear in the eyes of consumers (providing a clear-cut yes/no answer), I believe that standards go against the big-picture aim of sustainability because they do not foster flexibility. “The difference between positive and negative globalization is this: ‘bad’ globalization imposes a fixed standard on the regions it conquers (McDonalds, Starbucks...etc) without any regard for local customs. Beneficial globalization act as information exchange and has the flexibility to adapt to differing situations.”³⁰

Individually, eco-label schemes (in their current format) need standardized frameworks so that

they produce information that is comparable. Third-party eco-labeling organizations use criteria to dictate which products to award certification to. The structuring of criteria in such eco-labeling organizations is not unlike the legislative process in governments.

Government and legislative recommendations can be the same across the board, but details in implementation are bound to differ because all circumstances of production are different for different companies. Environmentally, Consumers Union clarifies what makes a good eco-label in 5 criteria: meaningful and verifiable, consistent and clear, transparent, independent and protection from conflict of interest, opportunities for public comment.³¹ However the interpretation of this set of guidelines could mean something entirely different from one company to another. Trying to force different companies through the same mold is a strong characteristic of mass production, and fosters neither the diversity nor the innovation on an individual company basis that aids in the pursuit of sustainability.

By providing indication about what companies are doing in general about issues in the production cycle that they see as important, a more flexible structure which can accommodate the needs of any company can be developed.

Credibility:

When it comes to environmental claims, too often advertising-slant deceives consumers. According to an analysis of selected food products by Consumers International, "Disappointingly we found a large number of different logos and claims that were vague, meaningless, non-transparent, lacked standards and/or third party verification. Besides being intrinsically misleading, such a proliferation of claims undermines consumer trust and confidence in valid claims thereby stifling progress towards real sustainable food production and consumption."³²

Even labels and claims which are regulated by government can be deceiving: a Consumer's Union study of U.S. consumer perception of labels found that 74% of consumers

do not expect food labeled as “made with organic” to contain artificial ingredients.³³ In reality, this label allows the use of synthetic ingredients in 30% of the product.

First-party labels are typically established by companies to communicate the benefits of their products. Often, consumer recognition and understanding of the background criteria of a particular label is an indication of the marketing budget that went into advertising the significance of the label. For example, the ‘dolphin-safe’ tuna label was developed by legislation which was pushed forward by the Heinz Company, to establish a new niche for their tuna. The marketing effort (along with the popularity of dolphin-themed TV programs) that went into the introduction of this label made consumers aware and the label successful. This label is also one of the most prominent examples of establishing connection between a product and an environmental impact. Prior to the marketing campaign, consumers would not have expected their tuna sandwich to be directly connected with the killing of Flippers

around the world. Due to consumer reaction on this issue, today nearly all canned tuna in the U.S. has this label.³⁴

The criteria behind individual eco-labeling schemes often lack transparency. As all labels from different labeling organizations differ in their criteria, keeping up with the differences becomes too complex for true consumer understanding. The consumer cannot be expected to learn everything behind a label, as well as keep up with changing legislation and criteria. The database on www.eco-labels.org was started specifically to help consumers deal with the problem of deciphering the background meaning and credibility of different labels.

Conclusions

Eco-labels brand “goodness” according to an outside group of individuals, based on specific criteria which are not immediately visible to the consumer at point-of-sale. As an alternative to this sort of system, the ‘context connect’ proposal is intended

to communicate backgrounds; the transparency of which will reinforce consumer trust. Although this sort of label is intended to be used by companies voluntarily, it would also need some sort of external watchdog organization. In divulging their own corporate social responsibility on the packaging, companies would be expected to play a greater role in their own accountability and self-governance – otherwise fall under the heading of mis-leading advertising.

Till now, eco-labels have filled a need in the quest towards sustainability, but another, more education-based mode of communication is also possible – and may help remedy some of the problems that eco-labeling schemes, as we now know them, have encountered.

Product Information and Consumer Learning

The problem with existing eco-labels, other than that they are becoming more and more, is that they do not facilitate consumer education. They provide a standardized stamp of approval: An endorsement which leaves no room for consumers to form their own connections, nor to take ownership of the idea: Two elements which according to the Constructivist philosophy of learning, are necessary in order to establish lasting change. In Constructivism, parts must be learned in the context of wholes. The purpose of learning is for an individual to construct his or her own meaning, not just memorize the “right” answers and regurgitate someone else’s meaning.³⁶

According to a study on what drives the organic shopper³⁷, both organic and non-organic food shoppers think more about the food product than the production process when they were actually in the store. Overall, the study found that organic shoppers had a higher level of awareness about

food production issues. And those who had stronger organic food-buying habits were generally able to describe a number of environmental issues related to food production, whereas those “who purchased little organic food had limited knowledge about the risks faced by farm workers related to agricultural production practices”.³⁸

This case highlights the idea that “people’s concerns as citizens are often not reflected on the shop floor.”³⁹ Information on a product’s background needs to be presented so consumers can make choices based on the entire impact of the product. The information should provide a global view so that consumers can understand the ‘why’ behind their purchase.

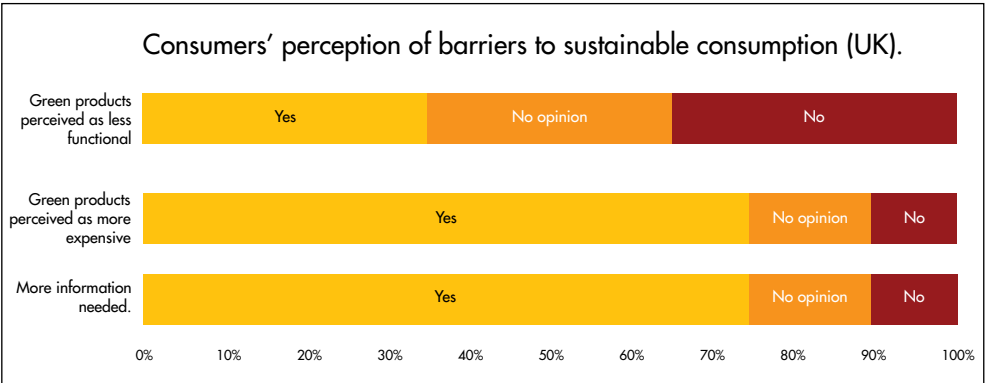
There is debate on whether the consumer really *wants* to know in-depth details on the backgrounds of labels. In this sense, eco-labeling as a tool for the scanning of supermarket isles has its benefits. When consumers are faced with the huge array of product choices, they generally want a quick (red or green

light) indication to what is “good”. They don’t want to spend time reading complicated labels. People only want to know more about the specific areas that they are interested in. The United Kingdom’s new label scheme, appropriately named ‘signposting’, plays on this with its green, orange and red indicators for the low, medium and high contents of fats, sugars and salt in foods.

When it comes to the point-of-sale, consumer purchasing behavior is largely influenced by price and emotion. But among some niche markets, one can find indication to support consumers’ desire

for increased information and transparency. The common belief that there is ‘too much information’ misses a point: it is not an issue of too much information; rather it is an issue of framing. “People need information that is relevant to their unique situation.”⁴⁰

The average American grocery store carries 64,000 products. Humans have a built-in classification system that allows them to deal with such an “overload” of information. People’s ability to decipher the benefits amongst brands or labels should not be underestimated.⁴¹



Demonstrates the consumer interest is in more information. [Talk the Walk: Advancing Sustainable Lifestyles through Marketing and Communication]

"The economy is currently monitored and managed through economic measures[price]. These fail to take account of the fact that the economy depends on underlying resources to make it work. What's needed is better information about the resources flowing through the economy. And that information needs to be at a level that can be used for decision-making."

-David Aeron-Thomas from Forum for the Future

Information needs to be designed in a way that facilitates to-the-point scanning. The problem is neither one of lack of information; but a lack of framing for the consumer's perspective makes products seem disconnected from their impact; so that one cannot visualize the affects of a purchase on the global environmental big picture. Globalization has not helped this: as systems globalize, they also get further removed from their initial contexts: and less reachable for the consumer.

The need for a technique which facilitates consumer learning becomes evident through studies about how people relate to, connect with and participate in issues of sustainable development. "Young people have low awareness of the term Sustainable Consumption, but have high interest once they know what sustainability means, notably in the following areas: environmental protection, animal testing, concern for poor and human exploitation."⁴²

An important element of this approach to learning is experience.

Hands-on learning, with which consumers can take part in the idea, and develop a feeling of connection with the system creates more long-term change. People need a connection to their own personal sphere; and who better to do this than the consumer themselves.

Conclusions and Design Directions

Although they are based on extensive research and selective criteria, Eco-label (or any other form of 'stamp') as manifested as a single mark on a product is too vague to adequately communicate the wealth of background information on products.

A new format for informing consumers is needed – more of an education tool – that will promote an understanding of the system. By understanding the system, consumers can connect with elements of the system; thereby attaining a deeper level of understanding, which can lead to more sustainable purchasing decisions (decisions based on more than just price).

But consumers cannot, and do not want to make all these decisions on their own – they must also be shown what is better. Relative scales need to be provided in a format that can be adapted to many different types of food products.

It is interesting that concern about food labeling's potential to mislead consumers seems to be focused around the definition of words and wording of claims. The only meaningful labels are those that stand for something; and then, in the end, it's what they stand for and not the label itself that's important. The visual nature of creating Context Connection is not meant to suggest a loop-hole for such concerns – it is not a way around the words – rather, it should be seen as a way to present truth that is difficult to define and/or explain in purely written text.

Context Connection is not about communicating specific percentages or in-depth details of every stage of a product's life. On such a scale, it is only possible to either communicate select details, or indicate to a general big-picture because of the amount of

information involved. This project will focus on the general big picture – providing indication to where you could look for more detailed information – in contrast to the current eco-labels which are all about specifics.

It can be noted that the communicating background approach to Context Connection is about re-enforcing common sense. If a consumer thinks long enough about their avocado, they will eventually come to think about where it was produced, and who picked it, how it got to their plate...etc. The purpose of communicating product backgrounds is to inspire such thoughts; to facilitate awareness of the social and environmental consequences that the consumer contributes to through their food choices.

Influence on the Consumer: Design for the Future of Advertising

Connection between producers and their customers is usually mediated by advertising. In outlining future directions for the advertising industry in 2000, former advertising executive Jelly Helm said, “People are beginning to understand the interrelated-ness of their buying and consuming decisions and the rest of the planet, and demonstrating that they are willing to make the right choice.”⁴⁴

Western consumer society is based on ‘the brand’. Brands are a necessary element of consumer trust – think of most shoppers’ hesitancy to select in the generic black-text-on-white-can “beer” or “tomato sauce”. A brand is a signature on the product so you know who is to fault if the product does not live up to expectations.

A look at the history of brands reveals their roots in consumer safety. At the same time that food labeling started becoming an everyday occurrence; so did brands. Brands ensure consumer protection. “In pre-industrial days, people knew exactly what went into their meat pies and which butchers were trustworthy; once they moved

to cities, they no longer did. A brand provided a guarantee of reliability and quality.”⁴⁵ This connection to the product is what globalization has put more distance between. As we know it today, the brand is removed from its roots of information: hidden under layers of slogan and flashy lights. But the ideas are being reborn in other formats: ‘Transparency’ is a word that is increasingly used in business seminars to refer to allowing consumers a view into the inter-workings of a business. Better access to information has come along with globalization: it’s easier, in real-time, more direct, and there is a hell-of-a-lot more of it. But it lacks reference - framing to make it understandable by consumers.

Based on its brand, a marketing message stands on an element of the information behind a product. This could be highlighting a unique service, flavor, or other selling point. These messages drive the advertising that populates our cities, TV and road-sides. It is estimated that the average American sees 1,500 to 3,000 advertising messages a day⁴⁶.

For each advertisement to ‘stand out’ from the rest, the advertising world must be in a state of constant change. To keep from losing its edge, the advertising world must keep grabbing consumer attention. But consumers also become resistant to advertising; as increased information flows allow them to know more about the industry and the corporations behind. As noted advertisers Jonathan Bond and Richard Kirshenbaum said in their book, *Under the Radar*: “Consumers are like roaches; we spray them with marketing, and for a time it works. Then, inevitably, they develop an immunity, a resistance.”⁴⁷ As daily life becomes increasingly saturated with advertising messages, consumers increasingly adapt by blocking them out. Therefore advertising is going undercover. So-called ‘guerrilla’ marketing or viral advertising outline marketing strategies in which the recipient has no idea that they’re being advertised to. “Driven by both cost constraints and the necessity to invent new marketing approaches to support their specific irreverent positioning, most of these companies used what marketing experts now call ‘guerrilla’ marketing.”⁴⁸

In much of current advertising, the company, logo or product doesn’t matter as much as the image around it does. It is the ideas attached to, and created around the product or service that the consumer buys. Since somewhere in the middle of the 1900’s, there is a change taking place in the role of brands: towards fulfilling people’s emotional needs and brands represent a way of life. “Companies deliberately concoct a story around their service or product, trying to turn a run-of-the-mill purchase into something more thrilling.”⁴⁹

The products serve as a representation of the brand image. But the image cannot stand alone; it must be backed-up by something inherent to the product or service. The former director of a Dutch design foundation, Dingeman Kuilman said, “No one will trust you on the basis of image. The image has to fit the expectations of the consumer.”⁵⁰ A marketing message cannot invent its own reason for being.

“Because consumer trust is the basis of all brand values, companies that own the brands have an immense incentive to work to retain that trust.” - Economist⁴³

But even if its performance lives up to its promises, companies are finding they must do more to hold onto consumers. “Brands of the future will have to stand not only for product quality and a desirable image. They will also have to signal something wholesome about the company behind the brand.”⁵¹

The attempt by brands to adopt a social component—to embrace a lifestyle—is giving consumers a lever to influence the behavior of the companies that stand behind them.⁵² If consumers know what they want, they have the power over brands to demand it.

Conclusions and Design Directions

Brands constantly evolve: the current emphasis on images is starting to lose its meaning in the eyes and minds of consumers. Brands have gotten disconnected from the roots of the product or service; too far from their true origins. Advertising

agencies continue inventing stories around products that cannot speak for themselves.

The field of marketing, including advertising public relations and communication, has always been built on the story behind. But concentrating on intense image-promotion, the field has gotten further away from this. A renewed approach to showing background information is what marketing has to return to: A mark (logo, label, etc.) is no longer enough. The focus is shifting to the story behind because transparency can lead to greater consumer understanding, if it is communicated in a clear manner. **Communicating the backgrounds of foods is a step towards re-establishing consumer trust: reconnection between the activities of companies, consumers and the impacts of their consumption in an era of globalization.**

The best way of making background processes visible to consumers would, of course, be to have all of the processes happening local – so the

consumer could see, in person, all the details of how a product is handled and experience first-hand the impacts immediately. This would be ideal, however is not always possible in today's globalized society. Therefore, we have to find a way to communicate these aspects across distance: Create connection between the consumer and the greater world of the product's life.

What is needed is more consumer involvement. Consumers need to feel part of the process, or they will reject the system, which will be viewed as always outside the consumer's circle of influence. People are smart and can draw their own conclusions. An essential rule of communication is that the creator should leave room for the viewer to make the jump – this act of participation in the process further involves the viewer – so that they then take the story on as their own. Advertising knows this and manages to find a smart balance between framing the context, providing information, and leaving space for consumers to make the connection. Some direction is required in this:

the stage must be set, the actors supplied, and the story line defined. The dialog needs to be established, but the viewer should insert the key points, thereby making it their own.

Transparency in Business: Corporate Social Responsibility

Communication Gaps in the Globalized System.

Corporations are disconnected from their customers. Hiring marketing firms and advertising agencies to bridge the gap to reach their consumers, audience participation is not a standard business model.

But in recent times, **business is becoming more transparent**; both in the wake of scandals like Enron that rock the corporate world, and due to society's demand. In an act of regaining consumer trust, companies recognize the importance of making information on their inter-workings available to the public. Also known as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), transparency has become an increasingly important concept both globally and within the EU.⁵⁴ The most common methods businesses employ to communicate on transparency are websites, reports, and advertising. Organizations such as the United Nations-facilitated Global Compact, offer support and guidelines to help businesses transition to, and communicate on, progress towards CSR and sustainability.

Reporting, via print or web, is a tool for businesses to communicate on their progress towards more sustainable business. The Annual Report, traditionally a vehicle to report purely financial status, now frequently includes, or is accompanied by, CSR and Environmental reports. This generally covers corporate governance, environmental performance, customer satisfaction, charity and employee relations among impacts of the company. Normally targeted toward investors and stakeholders, these in-depth reports are often considered a form of business-to-business or business-to-investor marketing on their own. But they miss an opportunity to use this same information to reach consumers.

Many companies cite fear of being accused of 'green-washing' – exaggerating claims in order to appear more environmentally-responsible – as the prime factor in altogether avoiding consumer-targeted communication about their CSR and environmental progress. It is a pity that the expanding use within the corporate world of CSR

also has its consequences: those that stretch their environmental truth ruin it for the other players by instilling consumer distrust. “Recklessly executed and misleadingly promoted corporate visions undermine the credibility of those who play it straight.”⁵⁵ It’s a thin line between talking the talk and really walking it. As echoed from advertising’s portrayal of brand image: if a company’s claims don’t live up to the image it is trying to portray, that image is false in the minds of consumers.

Within many reports, the highly technical Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA), developed by SETAC (Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry), is a tool that is increasingly employed, at quite a cost, by companies wishing to analyze the exact impact of a specific product on its surroundings throughout its life. At the moment intended for industry, this cradle-to-grave analysis of a product or system is used to gain understanding of the impacts of a product; which can

help the company identify areas to improve upon.

Naturally, a company will only disclose information that shows them in a positive light. In a competitive market, the theory of competitive disclosure, also known as the unfolding process, suggests that the presence of a claim signifies quality; whereas the lack of such a claim leads to consumer suspicion about the product’s quality.

While businesses continue spending huge budgets on CSR and LCA reports, it is unknown how effective they are in getting information across to the public.⁵⁶ It is highly doubtful that many consumers, while enjoying their yogurt, will have the urge to Google the parent company’s website for detailed information about the background of the product. Not that this information isn’t hugely beneficial, but it lacks public accessibility: a public face. **Using existing research and information from LCA and CSR reports, the link between background information and consumers needs to be strengthened so that**

"The problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically good direction is itself an ecological problem"
 – Gregory Bateson⁵³

consumers can understand the context from which their products come.

Technology is one potential way with which to disseminate such complex information. With an already a high level of trace-ability and track-ability using online information systems, detailed background information can already be referenced, and is often used to make statements on the inter-connectedness of corporations, such as in www.theyrule.org. As technology creates a world without physical boundaries, it offers emerging possibilities for forging the link between a product and its background. In his book about establishing linkages between atoms and bits (linking the real world with the digital realm), Howard Rheingold said wireless communications can have quite an impact on society.

"When you add a barcode scanner or radio frequency identity tag read to a handheld device, it becomes easy to link a web page or other online process to a tag that is physically associated with a place or object...For a consumer society, the transformation of consumption may be profound...When people find out how the Christian Coalition or Greenpeace rates a product or a place, the collective political power of consumers could shift in unpredictable ways."⁵⁷

Connections being established through technology come by a multitude of names. Among them: shotcodes, SMS codes, QR codes, UPCODES and the open source semacode. Part of the 'ubiquitous computing' movement which seeks to bring the computer into the every-day environment, these mutant barcodes have the potential to connect real-time product information to the actual product via a camera phone.

Conclusions and Design Directions

More can be done to connect products and the inter-workings of a product's life-cycle to the consumer and global environment and society: And design can aid in this. Communicating product connections fills a gap in the system – the gap between the product and the consumer, and their combined impacts on the world. In reaching consumers, it is important for companies to create a **link between extensive product information, CSR reports and LCA studies and the consumer as an individual**. Just reminding them that this information is accessible to them will be enough, as long as it is attached to the consumers' own perceived realm of influence.

What Design Can Do for Transparency

“[Gregory] Bateson expressed the hope that by becoming more conscious of connectivity, new information can emerge, and the larger system will, in fact, change subtly. Bateson said “There is something called learning at a rather small level of organization. At a much higher gestalt level, learning is called **evolution**”.⁵⁸

Helping people understand the processes behind products by making the connections visible is intended to work as a learning tool. “We [designers] have to enhance the ability of all citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue about their environment and context.”⁵⁹

As a mode of consumer education, visual communication can connect consumers with the unseen backgrounds of a product or service, thereby filling a need in society’s progression towards sustainability. Visualizing product backgrounds, in graphic form, can also be an interesting story-telling medium, in the representation of complex systems.

“To understand is to know what *cause provokes to what effect, by what means, at what rate.*”⁶⁰ In his book exploring how to represent such knowledge, Edward Tufte analyses the impact of information visualized. This text is backed by some examples of visual information (including some of Tufte’s) which serve as inspiration for this project. An expert on information design, Tufte states, “Fine detail activates viewers, as they search and edit, looking to turn a heap of data into a bit of relevant information.”⁶¹

Stefano Marzano of Phillips Design says that it is a fact of sociology that people are difficult to change. He said that as designers, “if we can’t change the nature of people, we can affect their behavior: By designing the environment.”⁶²

Designing communication within the context of future advertising, consumer demand, growing transparency, and for social and environmental backgrounds, is “A deliberate exposure of technical means”.⁶³

Design which communicates the internal re-affirms connections to the bigger picture and how the individual can participate. "The new age of education is programmed for discovery rather than instruction. Art as radar environment, radar feedback, early warning system: the antennae of the race."⁶⁴

Conclusion:

Designing Context Connection

The preceding text has reviewed problems and opportunities in the current system of consumer information (including eco-labels), looked at the past of branding, the future of advertising, current CSR reporting and transparency for inspiration. It has also indicated to design solutions within conclusions from the chapters and outlined the designer's role in such a project.

In conclusion of this analysis, Book 2 of this thesis (Background Stories: Building Context Connection in Foods) documents design research and explorations along this theme, and the process of creating such a system within the chocolate industry.

In brief, criteria for design, as established through the preceding analysis, research and personal experience, include:

- Information should be presented positively, both for the consumer about global issues and from the client, or company who employs the system.
- It is best to use a mix of graphic indication with written explanation. This same pattern is evident in language in general, as “all full writing systems are a mixture of phonetic and semantic symbols.”⁶⁵
- Focus around the individual consumer's realm of impact: the circle of influence.
- Start with the consumer's area of interest. (personal benefit or damage)
- Provide a clear hierarchy.
- Aim for an overall summary so the consumer can tell at-a-glance what they're looking at and make a comparison between different products with the same type of label.

With the right design, a new system can provide context to everyday products, and thereby positively influence consumer behavior.

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Annex:

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Personal Connection

This book is part of a 2006 graduate thesis project within the Man and Humanity masters program at the Design Academy Eindhoven, in The Netherlands.

Personally, I'm amazed that everything comes from somewhere – and has its own history. Using design as a form of consumer education, I'm interested to bring the backgrounds to the foreground and to reference the bigger picture of cultural, environmental, political and historical stories.

The daughter of a food scientist and avid gardener, discussions of nutrition have always been a main-stay around the family dinner table.

With roots in the Midwest U.S. and a background in journalism, advertising, sustainable development, graphic design and project management, I received a 2004-05 Fulbright grant to the Netherlands, where I focused on the visual explanation of product life-cycles. Prior to this, I was immensely inspired by food culture during a year study in Italy, and time working with the international retail and advertising sectors for Sustainable Consumption at the United Nations Environment Programme.

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