

# Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Effects of Local Food on the Local Community<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Having a personal relationship with a local farmer and knowing where their food comes from can greatly heighten the level of trust and confidence a consumer has with the overall safety of their food (Ruehle & Goldblatt, 2013). Many individuals choose to purchase their food from local producers because locally grown products are perceived to be more dependable and wholesome (Draper & Green, 2002). A recent study found that consumers' level of trustworthiness in those involved with food production is considerably higher in local farms when compared to domestic and foreign farms, even if non-local producers advertise organic practices (Ruehle & Goldblatt, 2013). Locally-produced foods are perceived as more safe, pure, and natural than imported foods and are often assigned values such as being "homemade" and "traditional" (Draper & Green, 2002). These values are often attributed to the idea of having direct contact with the individual growing and harvesting the food to be purchased and consumed, a relationship impossible with modern-day grocery stores and supermarkets. The ability to understand the origin and authenticity of the product being purchased is of utmost concern for many individuals (Ruehle & Goldblatt, 2013). Despite the immense benefits, only 7.8% of farms in the United States are targeting local consumers (Low et al., 2015).

Since opinion leaders, individuals who have a large amount of influence within their respective social circles, play a strong role in diffusing new ideas (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), Extension professionals should consider leveraging their "power" to reach broader and larger audiences with greater efficiency. Identifying and understanding local food movement opinion leaders and creating targeted Extension programs for this specific segment may result in amplified results (Norwood, Oltenacu, Calvo-Lorenzo, & Lancaster, 2015).

This EDIS document is the second in a series discussing how Extension can more efficiently encourage citizens to join the local food movement by utilizing and leveraging opinion leaders. The entire series includes the following EDIS documents:

1. Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Health Benefits of Local Food (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc266>)
2. Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Effects of Local Food on the Local Community (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc267>)
3. Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Economic Benefits of Local Food (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc268>)

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## Community Engagement in Local Food

Farmers markets, U-pick farms, neighborhood community gardens, and the like are not only a great way to increase accessibility to healthy and nutritious options, but also a place to gather and socialize. These atmospheres offer recreational and social components as well as the strictly practical goal of purchasing food. Research finds that community gardens serve as a center for social activity and civic engagement (Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004). One study found that farmers markets are increasingly popular because of family engagement and that consumers spend more when they visit the market as a family (Hunt, 2007). The purchasing of locally produced foods helps promote local pride because community members perceive themselves as helping others by purchasing from and supporting their neighbors and friends (Roper & Rumble, 2014). An increase in natural human capital is also heightened with greater participation in educational opportunities about gardening and the food production process (Macias, 2008). Social entrepreneurship, leadership development, and personal empowerment can also be increased with the engagement of citizens in the local food movement (Dunning, 2013).

## Community Revival

There is a great diversity of individuals found at farmers markets and increased opportunities for people of different economic backgrounds, ages, races, and ethnicities to interact with one another in a unified public space (Dunning, 2013). There have been numerous studies highlighting the benefits of implementing farmers markets in low-income areas with a history of violence (Grubinger, 2004). A community garden or farmers market offering food provided through the hard work of fellow citizens serves as a place to not only find food, but also connect with others and peacefully join together in supporting one another in positive community action (Role of Community Gardens, 2010). The act of renting out plots in a community garden for personal harvesting gives individuals who have been previously impacted by psychological, physical, and social issues a sense of worth and stewardship for the land, as well as providing a venue for relaxation and stress relief (Role of Community Gardens, 2010). Participating in a local community garden, farmers' market, or U-pick operation, whether through volunteering or purchasing, is also found to be related to greater fruit and vegetable consumption (Litt et al., 2011). Research also shows that the level of public participation in purchasing farm goods can be associated with lower levels of morality, obesity, and

diabetes (Salois, 2011). Therefore, the increased presence and access to healthy local food could indirectly increase the overall health of a community.

## Fostering Food Security and an Optimistic Future

Supporting local food production can act as a foundation for a safer food supply by fostering farms for future generations to continue to use (Grubinger, 2004). Community pride is higher when individuals recognize their reliance on the hard work of their fellow community members for the fresh and healthy food that they feed their family (Macias, 2008). Localization efforts support the concept of using local natural resources to drive community development and lessen reliance on foreign goods while also advocating for a more sustainable food supply (DeWeerd, 2011; Grubinger, 2004). The "public goods aspect" can also be broadened to support the idea that those who purchase locally grown foods do so to reduce their ecological footprint and benefit the environment. (DeWeerd, 2011; Edwards, 2008; Thilmany, Bond, & Bond, 2008). Having a more personal connection with the food production process could also therefore inspire an individual to take a greater interest in climate change, larger agricultural issues, and land use dilemmas (Grubinger, 2004). Strengthening the connection between consumers and producers is an investment in the community (Grubinger, 2004). The more that younger generations purchase food from local farmers and understand the process behind growing foods, the more they will want to support and be a part of their local neighborhood community (Grubinger, 2004; Macias, 2008). Some studies show that supporting the local food movement can also be seen as supporting moral and ethical issues like food transparency and security, social justice and fair labor, social and natural human capital relationship building, agricultural revitalization, and environmental stewardship (Deller & Brown, 2012).

The UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education recently conducted a national study to further understand the role of opinion leaders in the local food movement. Details on the survey itself, the methods, and the resulting demographic characteristics of the identified opinion leaders can be found in the first EDIS document of this series found at (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc266>).

This EDIS document specifically looks at opinion leaders' thoughts regarding local food and its connection to their local community. Questions assessing the values and importance associated with the impact of local foods on

the local community were provided to see how opinion leaders can be used to encourage others to participate in local food purchasing behaviors. Respondents were asked a variety of questions including their level of agreement with several statements about the values they place on relationships within their neighborhood communities using a five-point scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. Individuals were also prompted to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with several value statements about the importance of local foods in their respective lifestyles. An example statement is “Locally produced food is more valuable than non-locally produced food.” Respondents were asked to indicate their answers using a five-point scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

## Demographics

A table displaying the survey respondent demographics can be found in the first EDIS document of the series titled *Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Health Benefits of Local Food* found at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc266>). The majority of opinion leaders were female (60.3%), and 45.5% described themselves as Caucasian/ White (Non-Hispanic). The greatest amount of survey respondents fell between ages 20–39 (60.9%). Fifty-three percent of respondents identified as Democrat, and 38.4% of respondents listed that they identified with moderate political values. Thirty-five percent of individuals received a 4-year college degree, followed by 35% having attended some college but not receiving a degree. In addition, 38.1% reported earning \$75,000 to \$149,999. When opinion leaders were asked to indicate where their home was located in relation to the city center or town nearest them, 67.4% indicated living within the city center compared to the 74.2% indicated by the overall respondent population.

## Community Connections and Relationships

Respondents were asked to identify their level of agreement with several statements, including how they value the importance of neighborhood community relationships and connecting with the local area using a five-point scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. The results are shown in Table 1. Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is valuable to listen to different opinions from people in their neighborhood community, while 47% disagreed or strongly disagreed with

the statement that there is little value in interacting with others in their community.

## Discussion

In this study, opinion leaders (who are already known to be powerful voices within their communities of influence) place a high value on social interactions within their communities and appreciate feeling connected to their neighbors. Since previous research has shown that farmers markets and CSAs offer these opportunities, there is potential for engagement with opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders in this study were shown to prefer purchasing and consuming local food and expressed a strong level of value of their social relationships within their community. Therefore, it is recommended that Extension professionals work with producers to find ways for them to socialize with their customers personally and develop valuable relationships in order to increase confidence in and support towards local food. Whether a farmer is looking to market their product at local farmers markets or needs assistance in establishing a CSA program at their farm, Extension professionals can assist in encouraging producers to get more socially involved, create beneficial relationships, and communicate effectively with their consumer audience. Producers can use the social atmosphere of farmers markets, U-pick farms, or their neighborhood community to establish personal connections with those they are exchanging sales with. Many customers are interested in knowing more about where their food is coming from, and producers should take this opportunity to explain and discuss their practices to reassure these individuals. Increased transparency concerning origins of food could help generate trust and decrease skepticism related to the food production process (Onozaka, Nurse, & McFadden, 2010; Ruehle & Goldblatt, 2013). Developing relationships with frequent customers (who are likely opinion leaders) could be extremely beneficial in increasing future sales because those customers may be more likely to return and recommend that their peers visit as well.

In addition, Extension professionals should inform local producers that opening up their land to the public with a seasonal farm or garden visits could be influential in retaining customers and increasing their interest and investment. Offering farm visits can assist in the dissemination of the information and understanding needed to alleviate consumer doubt, solidify customer/producer relationships, and enhance perceptions that local food can be fresher and of higher quality than that purchased from non-local sources. Reaching out to opinion leaders with an opportunity for

a hands-on local food-production learning experience could be extremely beneficial in narrowing in on the target audience who can then more personally communicate what they have learned with others.

Extension professionals should also consider advertising local food gathering events as a social outing and something fun to do, whether its mingling with friends, neighbors, family, visitors, or the local producers themselves. To increase market business, Extension professionals should design a campaign that encourages customers to not only visit places like farmers markets to shop for local food, but also for entertainment and family time. Other findings suggested that encouraging visitors to come with friends and family could not only increase the number of shoppers but also increase sales (Hunt, 2007). Advertising local farmers markets, family farms, community neighborhood gardens, and U-pick operations in the local newspaper and in child-friendly places like the YMCA or community sports complexes could also be effective.

Extension professionals should also consider working with professionals in the civic engagement and healthcare system to promote the introduction of more community gardens. This concept has been implemented in many poverty-stricken neighborhoods and has had great success in improving a sense of community pride as well as assisting those with physical and psychological issues. Opinion leaders could be utilized to encourage groups of individuals who could benefit from getting involved in the local food movement to participate. Increasing access to local food, whether through U-pick farms, farmers markets, or community gardens, could all be beneficial to maintaining a community's overall health and pride in their regional area.

Greater amounts of individuals are deciding to support local food production with the intent to benefit local and regional resilience and enhance civic activity. It is important to consider what other factors influence a consumer's purchasing behaviors besides strictly convenience, freshness, and costs. Local food purchasing is oftentimes based on moral and ethical values, because supporting the local food movement can also mean supporting food transparency, fair labor, agricultural revitalization, and environmental stewardship (Deller & Brown, 2012). Because opinion leaders are seen as role models and have a large influence on their peers, they could be very influential in transferring these ideas and inspiring others to help the community by focusing their purchasing behaviors on local products. Developing an advertising strategy based on the more altruistic motivations of purchasing local could encourage opinion leaders and those they associate with to adopt

new attitudes and support locally-grown foods (Onozaka, Nurse, & McFadden, 2010).

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Table 1. Community connection (n=156).

	<b>Strongly Disagree or Disagree %</b>	<b>Neither Agree nor Disagree %</b>	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree %</b>
It is valuable to listen to different opinions from people in my neighborhood community.	0.9	12.7	86.5
It is valuable to interact with people who are different from myself in my neighborhood community.	0.9	12.7	86.4
It is important for me to discuss issues with others in my neighborhood community.	2.6	14.1	83.3
Connecting with the members of my neighborhood community is important to me.	3.9	12.9	83.2
I do not see the value of interacting with others in my neighborhood community.	47.1	11.9	41.1
Social interaction with members of my neighborhood community is irrelevant to me.	53.7	14.6	31.7