Looking Local: An Exploration of Texas Residents' Perceptions of the GO TEXAN Certification Program to Develop Brand Positioning Strategies

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Abstract

State agricultural certification programs allow consumers to knowingly purchase products grown or produced in their state. However, consumers may not be aware of or understand the concept behind these certification programs. This study examined Texas residents' awareness and perceptions of one state agricultural certification program, GO TEXAN. To position a brand and develop key messages, communicators must be aware of how the audience views the brand, its key qualities and characteristics, and the information channels to distribute the messages. To do so, we distributed a survey instrument embedded in Qualtrics to a panel of Texas residents. We found respondents were generally unaware of the GO TEXAN certification program; however, the results of this study provide evidence of the consumers preferred products and qualities of GO TEXAN's certified products. We suggest communicators use elements of brand positioning to develop strategic key messages that are relevant to target audiences. Specifically, messages should be developed with key frames highlighting product freshness, flavor, taste, and purchase convenience. Communication efforts should be developed to provide emphasis to these attributes on the product label, at farmers markets, and at places of purchase. Further, we recommend future research should explore how types of key messages impact brand awareness, loyalty, and willingness to purchase.

Keywords

Branding, Brand Positioning, Consumer Preferences, Product Attributes, State Certification Programs, Marketing

Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

Introduction

The local food movement has gained much attention in recent years (Ditlevsen et al., 2020; Gorham et al., 2016; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). Within the last 15 years, consumers have continued to increase their demand and seeking out of local food products (Ditlevsen et al., 2020; Ruth & Rumble, 2016; Sloan, 2021). During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, movement toward local food products increased in relevancy as consumers heightened the trend toward purchasing products with origin claims such as "Made in the U.S.A.," "regional local produce," "artisanal," "local," and "sustainable" (Nemes et al., 2021; Sloan, 2021) with approximately 25% of consumers seeking out products that are labeled as locally sourced (IFIC, 2022). Additionally, these consumers have also moved toward purchases from local industries, such as farmers markets, roadside and mobile stands, local food home delivery and box schemes, and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs (Nemes et al., 2021).

The local food movement has been attributed to the perception of social responsibility contributed to purchasing local (Hasanzade et al., 2022; Nemes et al., 2021). The idea of social proximity, or the perceived distance in the relationship among all agents of the supply chain (Eriksen, 2013), is a key driver of perception and choice (Hasanzade et al., 2022). Food and production attributes that align with personal norms, such as contributing to sustainable production practices or supporting the local economy, have a relationship with increased willingness to purchase (Hasanzade et al., 2022). Specifically, it has been suggested that locally-sourced food provides increased social benefits to communities and economies, these perceptions include that the food itself is healthier and safer, it is more resilient and sustainable to supply chain disruptions, and it is better for the environment (Chow-Ewing, 2020; Hasanzade et al., 2022).

One-way consumers may become aware of local products is through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) state licensing agricultural marketing programs (Ayres, 2010; Hanagriff et al., 2004; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). These programs serve to support local producers, farmers, and ranchers by allowing consumers to knowingly purchase local products in store or online (Ayres, 2010). Currently, local-based agricultural marketing programs exist in all 50 states in the United States (Onken & Bernard, 2010), with unique names and slogans for each; for example, Louisiana's state program is *Buy Fresh, Buy Local*, Florida's is *Fresh from Florida,* and Texas' certification program is *GO TEXAN*. Each program has their own logo or mark that specifically represents their state brand, which is placed on their partners' products to visually indicate to consumers that they are certified, local-produced products.

One state program, GO TEXAN, has been dedicated to connecting consumers with Texas-based businesses and their local produce and products since its establishment in 1999 (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2022a). GO TEXAN is unique when compared to other state programs, as many state programs focus only on certifying local food and produce. However, GO TEXAN certifies products across 10 categories, such as food, textiles, pets, home, beauty, and others (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2022b). To promote these products and encourage consumers to purchase them, GO TEXAN provides a multitude of opportunities for consumer purchasing such as product placement in local and big box stores, in-person events, and online (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2022a). Consumers can access the online GO TEXAN Market on its website, which is the easiest way for consumers to buy a certified products directly from a business online. Additionally, GO TEXAN holds events across Texas, usually during markets, fairs, or festivals, to promote the brand and create awareness. Each year, the organization also hosts the GO TEXAN Expo, which is a two-day event for consumers to meet and sample Texas-made products (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2022a).

Consumers can distinguish GO TEXAN products through their unique "mark" or logo, a bolded outline of Texas (Hanagriff et al., 2004). GO TEXAN takes pride in ensuring consumers can be connected with their partners Texas-based businesses and their products (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2022a). However, there is a need to understand GO TEXAN's consumers' awareness of the brand and its attributes. This is important to note because if consumers do not have an understanding or knowledge of a brand, company, or organization, it is unlikely there will be any repeat purchases (Malik et al., 2013). In addition to assessing the consumers' awareness of the brand, it is essential to understand which consumer purchasing behaviors and attributes are most influential when seeking out local products. The knowledge of these behaviors and attributes will enable communicators to create marketing strategies that will increase [Program's] visibility and ultimately its sales. The findings from this study will help GO TEXAN more effectively reach targeted audiences by understanding how it could position the brand and communicate the brand's key attributes to its consumers.

Literature Review

It is important for a consumer to have an accurate perception of the GO TEXAN brand because a consumer's accurate perception may allow them to differentiate GO TEXAN certified products from others. Today, markets are crowded with various brands competing against one another. To effectively distinguish a company's products from its competitors, marketing teams should strive to provide brand associations for consumers as they may connect value to a brand (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Once consumers understand the brand's value, companies have an advantage because consumers will continue to purchase products from that brand that meet their needs (Day, 1984; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). By using effective marketing strategies such as brand positioning, local and state marketing programs will be much more likely to effectively reach their target audiences by distributing key messages that resonate with them.

Brand and Branding

This study was guided by the conceptual framework of a brand, and how perceptions of brands are shaped and viewed by members of the public. A brand can be described as "a name, symbol, design, or combination of them, which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Kotler, 1991, p. 442). GO TEXAN and other organizations develop brands, such as the GO TEXAN mark, to attract consumers and help them maintain their loyalty to purchasing the organizations' products through the promotion of the brand's image and value (Rooney, 1995). Consumers attach a certain amount of value to brands that they are exposed to, which in return will directly influence consumers' future behavior toward purchasing their products (Malik et al., 2013). Having a brand that is popular, appealing, and distinguishable among its competitors can influence a consumers' attitude toward products associated with that brand (Gwin & Gwin, 2015).'

Brand Awareness

Consumers' familiarity with a specific organization's products, characteristics, availability, and accessibility is known as brand awareness (Malik et al., 2013). Brand awareness is crucial for state agricultural marketing programs because consumers are much more likely to continue purchasing certified products once they understand the program and its characteristics.

Creating brand awareness may also increase the demand for local products. Brand awareness is considered a main key to success when it comes to state certification programs (Onken & Bernard, 2010). Without awareness, a brand is far less likely to see success compared to brands who have active awareness campaigns. Therefore, ensuring consumers are aware of the GO TEXAN brand, its value, and its unique qualities is essential for its survival against competing brands.

Brands can potentially create additional awareness for their products, enabling easier identification of certified products for consumers in stores (Witzling, 2021). A consumer's level of knowledge and their own perception of a brand can influence their decision on selecting items to purchase. Increasing awareness and identification of GO TEXAN and its certified products could have a direct impact on demand for its products, leading to an increase in producers' sales or premiums (Witzling, 2021).

Brand Loyalty

Once consumers are aware of a brand, its characteristics, and their products, their degree of closeness to a brand, or brand loyalty, will be shown through repeated purchases (Malik et al., 2013). If programs do not increase their brand awareness, loyalty and repeat purchases are unlikely (Malik et al., 2013). There is a need to look further into the evaluation of state certification programs and their effectiveness at influencing brand loyalty and ultimately willingness to purchase (Hanagriff et al., 2004). Additionally, consumers may simply not be aware of GO TEXAN and its mission; therefore, consumers may not have a specific reason to seek out these products or create loyalty to its branded products.

Brand Positioning

Scholars indicate the importance of brand positioning and how it is essential for creating awareness of a brand's products. According to Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010), how a brand is positioned significantly contributes to its success. Proper positioning of a brand will help it appeal to consumers' specific needs, putting the company at an advantage and increasing consumers' willingness to repurchase items from that brand (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Keller, 1993; Wind, 1982). If a brand is positioned well, it has the potential to build a powerful image that consumers resonate with (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Haig, 2005; Ries & Trout, 1986).

Determining the best way to position a brand is one of the main challenges a brand, company, or organization's marketing team faces (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). Brand positioning refers to the act of marketing a company's products, brands, and offerings to "occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market. The end result of positioning is the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition, a cogent reason why the target should buy the product" (Kotler, 2003, p. 308). Organizations may use brand positioning to build competitive advantages on product attributes in the minds of consumers (Gwin & Gwin, 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2006; Ruth & Rumble, 2016).

Positioning Brand Attributes. Because of how critical brand positioning is for a company, marketing teams should focus on two main characteristics when promoting a brand, favorability and differentiation, to enable complete success in positioning. Brands must be favorable, or liked by customers (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). Favorability has been defined within the literature as the degree in which individuals have a positive attitude toward a brand (Fuchs & Diamantopolous, 2010). Often, favorability can also incorporate facets of self-image,

that is someone may favor one brand over another to express themselves or gain social approval (Fuchs & Diamantopolous, 2010). For example, consumers tend to be more loyal to products that they like, such as Coke versus Pepsi, and they will choose to purchase the products they deem more favorable.

The second factor, differentiation, has been defined in the literature as the degree in which a brand is viewed as different or unique to its competitors. To establish differentiation, marketers must first establish who the brand's consumers are, their main competitors, and how to distinguish their product from their competitors (Ruth & Rumble, 2016). Marketers then must use this information to make their product seem unique or more valuable to consumers. The unique qualities and characteristics offered by a brand often helps influence a consumer's perception of the distinctiveness of that brand (Keller, 1998; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). If the product is not different or unique from another competitive brand, consumers are likely to continue purchasing products they are more familiar with (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010).

Differentiation is critical for brands as it demonstrates to the consumer how their organization or products can be relevant to their needs and are of value to the consumer (Gwin & Gwin, 1999; Urban & Hauser, 1993). A brand must be able to fully comprehend what consumers deem as value attributes to be able to differentiate the organization and its product from their competitors (Gwin & Gwin, 1999; Urban & Hauser, 1993). To differentiate their brands and products, organizations should evaluate which attributes, or characteristics, consumers derive utility from and assess their level of preference toward these attributes (Gwin & Gwin, 1999; Lancaster, 1966). For example, when purchasing a car, consumers measure car characteristics based on top speed, space, fuel consumption, safety, and standards (Zhu et al., 2010).

Positioning Local Attributes to Consumers. To better differentiate GO TEXAN products in brand positioning strategy, this research will seek to understand which attributes should be promoted or communicated to consumers. Previous scholars have explored factors that influence consumers' purchasing habits of local products. One study exploring Florida consumers' preferred attributes determined that personal preference, preparation, and versatility influenced consumers' decisions to buy local produce (Gorham et al., 2015). Ruth and Rumble (2016) found the attributes that consumers described as most important when purchasing Florida strawberries were freshness and taste of the fruit.

In addition to preferred attributes for taste and preferences, Cranfield et al. (2012) indicated attitudinal or perception-based attributes may also be a driving factor in the purchasing of food products. Local food has been perceived to hold the intrinsic benefits such as contributions to the local economy and community and environmental sustainability (Cranfield et al., 2012; IFIC, 2022), and these attributes have been connected to increased willingness to purchase (Cranfield et al., 2012). Further, Hasanzade et al. (2022) indicated food marketers and retailers should focus on communicating personal norms or values about local food to consumers. Specifically, products should be marketed or advertised with claims regarding the connection to social responsibility such as supporting the local community and economy, decreasing the effects of environmental impacts on climate change, and lessening the strain on the larger food supply chain (Hasanzade et al., 2022). Based on this prior literature, consumers sought out products based on specific attributes that made the brand's products unique and distinguishable from others. To better determine the reasons why an individual chooses to purchase local food and products, the specific appealing attributes that attract consumers and influence them to continue purchasing those were identified in the current study.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore Texas residents' perceptions of the GO TEXAN Certification program to discover how consumers perceive the brand and its attributes to more strategically inform future communications efforts. To do so, this study was guided by the following research objectives:

RO1: Identify the respondents' awareness of the GO TEXAN certification program.

RO2: Determine the respondents' purchasing habits toward Texas grown or produced products.

RO3: Examine the respondents' preferences when buying local products and their preferred qualities of Texas grown or made products.

RO4: Describe the respondents' preferences of information channels when buying local products in Texas.

Methods

An online survey research design was used to understand Texas residents' perception of GO TEXAN. A third-party company, Qualtrics, was consulted to obtain a non-probability, opt-in sample of Texas residents 18 years or older. Non-probability sampling approaches are commonly used in online survey designs to make population estimates (Baker et al., 2013). Non-probability sampling is a type of purposive sample that attempts to gather study participants or respondents that meet specific quotas set by the researcher (Lamm & Lamm, 2019). This technique has been used more commonly in research examining public opinion on emerging issues and organizations due to increased access to the internet, relatively low sampling costs, higher response rates compared to probability-based methods used for random digit dialing of landline numbers, and overall ease of reaching members of the population of interest (Lamm & Lamm, 2019).

Study Respondents

Respondents were recruited through Qualtrics research panels, where the population of interest was sought out through actively managed market research panels and social media platforms. Respondents were also given an incentive through Qualtrics to participate in the study. To verify unique responses and ensure validity, Qualtrics employed a digital fingerprinting technology and internet protocol (IP) address checks.

An online link to the survey questionnaire was distributed to a total of 1,053 respondents during the second and third weeks of August 2021. We sought to identify respondents who matched Texas census data for age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Respondents who did not complete all items of the instrument, those who failed a quality check (i.e., sped through the instrument), and those who did not meet our parameters of being Texas residents aged 18 years or older were eliminated. Useable responses were obtained from 856 respondents, for a response rate of 81.3%. Additional demographic information (e.g., income, education, etc.) was also collected to better describe the respondents and ensure the sample was demographically representative of Texas residents. The demographic characteristics of the respondents can be found in Table 1. Non-probability samples have biases and limitations (e.g., potential exclusion, selection, and participation bias), and readers should be cautioned when attempting to generalize the findings of the current study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 823)

Variable	*f*	%
Age		
18-34	289	33.76
35-54	286	33.41
55+	281	32.82
Education		
Less than high school diploma	23	2.7
High school graduate	201	23.5
Some college	218	25%
Two-year degree	94	11.0
Four-year degree	181	21.1
Master's degree	87	10.2
Professional degree	17	2.0
Doctorate degree	16	1.9
Prefer not to say	19	2.2
Race/Ethnicity*		
Caucasian	412	48.1
Hispanic or Latinx	333	38.9
Black or African American	122	14.3
Asian or Asian American	50	5.8
Native American/Alaska Native	16	1.9
Other	1	0.1
Prefer not to answer	1	.01
Gender		
Male	423	49.4
Female	415	48.5
Non-binary/Third gender	7	0.8
Prefer not to answer	11	1.3
Income		
Less than $10,000	78	9.1
$10,000 – $19,999	74	8.6
$20,000 – $29,999	102	11.9
$30,000 – $39,999	85	9.9
$40,000 – $49,999	97	11.3
$50,000 – $59,999	85	9.9
$60,000 – $69,999	54	6.3
$70,000 – $79,999	53	6.2
$80,000 – $89,999	25	2.9
$90,000 – $99,999	24	2.8
$100,000 – $149,999	78	9.1
More than $150,000	43	5.0
Prefer not to say	58	6.8

Note: *Race/ethnicity was asked as a check all that apply question

Instrumentation & Data Collection Procedures

We developed an original questionnaire that was distributed to the respondents. This questionnaire was reviewed for face and content validity by an expert panel that consisted of faculty at Texas Tech University and staff members at GO TEXAN who have expertise in agricultural communications research and topic knowledge of the program. Further, the expert panel reviewed the questionnaire for content accuracy, clarity of wording, readability, and survey flow (Ary et al., 2019). After the development of the questionnaire and University Institutional Review Board Approval, we conducted a pilot test with 50 respondents to examine the preliminary data's distribution (e.g., normality, reliability of constructs) and the functionality of the questionnaire. The data presented in this manuscript are part of a larger study, and these items were analyzed independently from the remaining constructs.

Awareness of the GO TEXAN

Research objective 1 sought to measure respondents' awareness of the GO TEXAN certification program. Brand awareness, or the individual's overall familiarity with the brand, was measured using bipolar measures with a 5-point scale to the statement "The program name GO TEXAN is_____." with the following items 1) *very unfamiliar to me/very familiar to me*, 2) *not known at all to me/very well known to me*, 3) *not visible at all to me/very visible to me,* 4) *I have never heard of it/I have heard a lot about it*, 4) *not known at all by people I know/well known to people I know*, and 5) *I cannot identify the GO TEXAN mark on products/I can identify the GO TEXAN mark on products* adapted from Settle et al. (2017) and Han et al. (2015). The Cronbach alpha for these items was .93.

Local Product Purchasing Habits

Research objective 2 sought to identify respondents' purchasing habits toward Texas grown or made products. Respondents' willingness to buy Texas products was measured with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat disagree*, 3 = *Neither agree nor disagree,* 4 = *Somewhat agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*) to the statements: 1) I buy Texas products when available, 2) I will go out of my way to buy Texas products, 3) When buying products, I will look to see if they are from Texas. The Cronbach α for these items was 0.84.

We also asked respondents to indicate their perceived ability to purchase Texas products (Cronbach α = .88). To measure perceived ability, we used a 5-point bipolar semantic differential with six statements: *not possible for me/possible for me, not important/important, not affordable for me/affordable for me, not easy for me/easy for me, not affordable for me/affordable for me, not in my control/in my control, not up to me/up to me.*

We asked a series of questions relating to respondents' preferences when purchasing local products and their perceived qualities of Texas grown or made products. First, we asked respondents to determine their likelihood of purchasing products in specific categories that were mentioned on the GO TEXAN's website. Respondents were given the instructions of "From each of the categories below, please indicate your likelihood of buying products grown or produced in Texas in the coming year if they were conveniently available and priced within your budget" and were asked to indicate their likelihood with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Extremely unlikely*, 2 = *Somewhat unlikely*, 3 = *Neither likely or unlikely*, 4 = *Somewhat likely*, and 5 = *Extremely likely*). The Cronbach α for these items was .94.

Local Product Preferences and Preferred Qualities

Research objective 3 sought to determine respondents' preferences when buying local products and their preferred qualities, which were measured via a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat disagree*, 3 = *Neither agree nor disagree,* 4 = *Somewhat agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*) to the statement, "Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements related to your beliefs on the benefits of buying products grown or produced in Texas." Respondents were shown a series of items related to their beliefs: *"1) I prefer products grown or produced in Texas over items produced elsewhere, 2) Having access to products grown or produced in Texas is important to me, 3) To me, products grown or produced in Texas are more valuable than those from other states, 4) It is necessary for people to have access to products grown or produced in Texas, 5) Products grown or produced in Texas are more appealing to me than products from other states, and 6) Products grown or produced in Texas are irrelevant to me."* These items were adapted from Qu's (2016) study focusing on local food and had a Cronbach α of .86.

Respondents were also asked to rank their most preferred product *characteristics* when choosing to buy local products. Respondents were instructed "When considering buying products grown or produced in Texas, which qualities are most important to you?" and were asked to rank their most important quality as 1 and their least important quality as 11. The qualities were as follows: *freshness, flavor, taste, purchasing convenience, budget friendly, product safety, product appearance, product quality, support local farmers and ranchers, supports healthy eating, and supports the state economy*.

Preferred Information Sources

The fourth research objective sought to explore respondents' preferred information channels relating to the GO TEXAN. Respondents were asked "Where do you go to seek out information about locally grown or produced products," and were allowed to select all that apply from a series of information channels.

Data Analysis

The results of this study are descriptive in nature, and we conducted descriptive statistical analysis outlined by Field (2013) in SPSS 28. The descriptive statistics were analyzed using means, standard deviations, and frequencies. To categorize the responses, we set real limit structures for each of the items as follows: 1 – 1.49; 1.5 - 2.49; 2.5 - 3.49; 3.5 - 4.49; and 4.49 - 5.

Results

RO1: Identify the respondents' awareness of the GO TEXAN certification program.

We found the mean *awareness* of the GO TEXAN certification program to be 2.44 (SD = 1.23) on a 5-point scale (Table 2). This finding indicates that respondents were somewhat unaware of the GO TEXAN program. Respondents indicated they somewhat disagreed that they felt GO TEXAN was known by people they knew (M = 2.41, SD = 1.33), they had heard about it (M = 2.39, SD = 1.33), they were familiar with it (M = 2.34, SD = 1.44), and that it was well known to them (M = 2.34, SD = 1.40). Respondents also indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed to being able to identify the GO TEXAN mark on products (M = 2.84, SD = 1.48) and

that the GO TEXAN was visible to them (*M* = 2.73, *SD* = 1.47).

Table 2

Respondents' Brand Awareness toward GO TEXAN

Variable	M	SD
I can identify the GO TEXAN mark on products	2.84	1.48
GO TEXAN is very visible to me	2.73	1.47
GO TEXAN is well known to people I know	2.41	1.33
I have heard a lot about it	2.39	1.33
GO TEXAN is very familiar to me	2.34	1.44
GO TEXAN is very well known to me	2.34	1.40
Grand Mean	**2.51**	**1.23**

RO2: Determine the respondents' purchasing habits toward Texas grown or produced products.

We asked respondents their perceptions of their *willingness* to buy Texas grown or made products (Table 3). We found the respondents overall neither agreed nor disagreed (*M* = 3.30, *SD* = 1.03) that they would buy Texas labeled products. Respondents somewhat agreed (*M = 3.58, SD* = 1.11) that they would buy Texas products when available; however, they neither agreed nor disagreed that they would not go out of their way to do so (*M* = 3.09, *SD* = 1.17).

Table 3

Respondents' Willingness to Purchase Texas Grown or Made Products

Variable	M	SD
I buy Texas products when available	3.58	1.11
I will go out of my way to buy Texas products	3.09	1.17
When buying products, I will look to see if they are from Texas	3.22	1.25
Grand Mean	**3.30**	**1.03**

We also asked respondents about their perceived *ability* to purchase products made or grown in Texas. As seen in Table 4, we found respondents overall somewhat agreed that they had the ability to purchase these products (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = .94). Respondents indicated they somewhat agreed the products were possible to buy (*M* = 4.00, *SD* = 1.15), their ability to purchase was up to them (*M* = 3.99, *SD* = 1.18), their ability to purchase was in their control (*M* = 3.66, *SD* = 1.22), the products were affordable to them (*M* = 3.63, *SD* = 1.14), and the ability to purchase was easy for them (*M* = 3.62, *SD* = 1.78).

Table 4

Respondents' Perceived Ability to Purchase Texas Grown or Made Products

Variable	M	SD
Possible to buy	4.00	1.15

Variable	M	SD
Up to me	3.99	1.18
In my control	3.66	1.22
Affordable for me	3.63	1.14
Easy for me	3.62	1.78
Important	3.52	1.27
Grand Mean	**3.74**	**.94**

We asked respondents a series of questions to determine their *likelihood* of buying products grown or produced in Texas within various categories in the coming year, depending on availability and budget (Table 5). Respondents indicated they somewhat agreed they would purchase products in several categories including fresh vegetables ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.01$), fresh fruits ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.05$), fresh meats and poultry ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.11$), fresh dairy products ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.07$), food mixes ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.06$), condiments ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.05$), sweets ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.06$), beverages ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.12$), and health products ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.03$),. Respondents indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed they would purchase local products in the home ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.05$), textiles ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.03$), beauty ($M = 3.42$ $SD = 1.06$), accessories ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.07$), and pets categories ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.21$).

Table 5

Respondents' Preferred Product Categories

Variable	M	SD
Fresh Vegetables	4.09	1.01
Fresh Fruits	4.04	1.05
Fresh Meats and Poultry	3.99	1.11
Fresh Dairy Products	3.93	1.07
Food Mixes (i.e., dip and soup mixes, salsas, jerkies, nuts, meats, etc.)	3.86	1.06
Condiments (i.e., spices, rubs, sauces, relishes, jams and jellies, honey, oils, etc.)	3.77	1.05
Sweets (i.e., nut mixes, sweet treat mixes, candies, ice cream, cookies, cakes, popcorn, etc.)	3.68	1.06
Beverages (i.e., beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, etc.)	3.67	1.12
Health (i.e., essential oils, vitamins, CBD products, deodorant, etc.)	3.50	1.03
Home (i.e., home décor, candles, stationary, home fragrance, holiday décor, glassware, kitchenware, etc.)	3.46	1.05
Textiles (i.e., clothing, lines, heats, etc.)	3.45	1.03
Beauty (i.e., soaps, salts, lotions, etc.).	3.42	1.06
Accessories (i.e., small leather goods, bags, jewelry, etc.)	3.35	1.07
Pets (i.e., pet treats, pet products, etc.)	3.28	1.21

RO3: Examine the respondents' preferences when buying local products and their preferred qualities of Texas grown or made products.

Respondents were asked about their *preferences* when buying local products. As seen in Table 6, we found respondents overall neither agreed nor disagreed that they preferred to buy local products ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .84$).

Table 6

Respondents' Preferences when Buying Local Products

Variable	M	SD
It is necessary for people to have access to products grown or produced in Texas.	3.62	1.09
Having access to products grown or produced in Texas is important to me.	3.55	1.09
I prefer products grown or produced in Texas over items produced elsewhere.	3.48	1.06
Products grown or produced in Texas are more appealing to me than products from other states.	3.48	1.11
I believe consuming food grown or produced in Texas has more benefits than those from other states.	3.43	1.14
To me, products grown or produced in Texas are more valuable than those from other states.	3.36	1.11
Products grown in Texas are irrelevant to me*		
Grand Mean	3.46	.84

*Note: *Reverse Coded*

Respondents were also given a list of preferred qualities and were asked to rank which were the most important to them when considering buying products grown or produced in Texas (most important = 1, least important = 11). As seen in Table 7, the majority of respondents ranked the highest was freshness (*n* = 390, 45.6%). The majority of participants ranked flavor as the second preferred quality (*n* = 235, 27.5%), and the majority of participants ranked purchase convenience as fourth (n = 155, 18.1%).

Table 7

Respondents' Preferences when Buying Local Products

Variable	Frequency (n) of participants ranking in this place	Frequency Percent (%) of participants ranking in this place
1. Freshness	390	45.6
2. Flavor	235	27.5
3. Taste	224	26.2
4. Purchase Convenience	155	18.1
5. Budget Friendly	191	22.3
6. Product Safety	182	21.3
7. Product Appearance	195	22.8
8. Product Quality	203	23.7
9. Support Local Farmers and Ranchers	307	35.9
10. Support Healthy Eating	343	40.1
11. Support State Economy	500	58.4

RO4: Describe the respondents' preferences of information channels when buying local products in Texas.

Respondents were asked to select their preferred sources for information when searching for content about local products in Texas. As seen in Table 8, we found respondents searched for information the most via the product label (f = 291, 33.40%), TV commercials (f = 277, 32.36%), farmers markets (f = 248, 28.97%), word of mouth (f = 264, 30.84%), point of purchase (f = 213, 24.88%), and online websites and blogs (f = 184, 21.50%).

Table 8

Respondents' Preferred Information Channels

Information Channel	f	%
Product label	291	33.40
TV Commercials	277	32.36
Farmers Markets	248	28.97
Word of mouth (i.e., friends, family)	264	30.84
Point of purchase	213	24.88
Online Websites & Blogs (not social media)	184	21.50
Facebook	135	15.77
Newspapers	109	12.73
Instagram	107	12.50
Radio	106	12.38
Magazines	84	9.813
TikTok	74	8.65
GO TEXAN Market e-commerce site	79	9.23
Billboards, Bus Advertisements, etc.	74	8.65
State Fair GO TEXAN Pavilion	57	6.66
Podcasts	53	6.19
Twitter	50	5.84
Other (Please specify)	32	3.74

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

State agricultural marketing programs provide an opportunity for consumers to purchase products that are certified as being produced or grown by local farmers and/or ranches within specific states and regions (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). However, many consumers may not be aware of the purpose of these programs or aware of the purpose behind mark or logo that is placed on the products it certifies. This study examined Texas resident perceptions of the GO TEXAN program regarding the respondents perceived brand awareness, product qualities and characteristics, and preferred information channels.

Our findings indicate consumers are lacking awareness of the GO TEXAN program and brand. Therefore, they do not have a reason to specifically seek out these products. Interestingly despite the local food movement (i.e., Chew-Ewing, 2020; Hasanzade, 2022; Nemes, 2021), the

respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that they preferred to buy local. Prior literature suggested to increase brand awareness and increase willingness to purchase, communicators and researchers alike need to determine the key characteristics and qualities brands attain in order to create salient key messages (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Witzling, 2021). Enhanced branding and brand positioning is crucial for state programs, such as GO TEXAN, as it will increase consumers' knowledge and familiarity with the organization's products and their characteristics, availability, and accessibility (Malik et al., 2013) and has been considered a main key to programmatic success (Onken & Bernard, 2010). In addition, increased brand awareness has been connected to stronger brand loyalty and willingness to purchase (Malik et al., 2013).

Our findings on Texas residents' lack of brand awareness of GO TEXAN align with previous studies that have been conducted on local products, emphasizing the importance of increasing consumers' awareness of the state certification program and its products (Gorham et al., 2015; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). Although these studies are limited in this scope, each described the level of awareness consumers had of state certification programs directly impacted their program's success (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Witzling, 2021). In order to continue having a successful program, GO TEXAN should look for ways to increase consumers' and target audiences' awareness of the program, its specific attributes and branded products, and the GO TEXAN mark and logo. Contrary to prior literature highlighting that attributes supporting social responsibility should be used when discussing local food (Cranfield, 2012; Hasanzade et al. 2022), the least ranked attributes were those supporting social responsibility characteristics such as supporting the local economy and community. Although these may gain more awareness as consumers move toward sustainability and social responsibility efforts, our findings suggest GO TEXAN should be marketed in a different manner.

One recommended method of increasing brand awareness is to develop communication campaigns or position the brand through key messages that resonate with target audiences. As described by Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010), brands must be liked by consumers, and communicators should determine which qualities and characteristics of the brand consumers perceive as favorable (Keller, 1998; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). When information is salient, consumers are much more likely to pay attention to the message, leading to brand loyalty and repeated purchases (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010).

Our results suggest consumers are most interested in the product characteristics of freshness, flavor, taste, and purchase convenience. This aligned with previous studies that found freshness and taste being as dominant qualities consumers look for when purchasing products (Gorham et al., 2015; Ruth & Rumble, 2016). By developing messages based on these preferred attributes, we can create key messages that align with the favorability and desires of our target audiences. However, we also found our results to be different than past research on local products and their attributes because GO TEXAN certifies products across multiple categories. In comparison to other certification programs who focus on local produce only, GO TEXAN also certifies products in a variety of categories including textiles, household goods, and even pet products. This also provides a positioning strategy where GO TEXAN could develop unique messaging and distinguish itself as a unique brand. Therefore, the GO TEXAN team needs to clearly communicate to businesses and consumers that they have many categories for products to be certified in making them a unique brand within the marketplace. This strategy may allow consumers to be more aware of the GO TEXAN categories so they can actively seek out these certified local products when shopping.

Recommendations

Key recommendations for practitioners to consider are to develop key messages to ensure consumers are fully aware of and can identify products. The results of this study showed that there is a need for better communication to consumers about the attributes they find most appealing in GO TEXAN products. The communication of these attributes will present them with salient information they want and need to know to make purchasing decisions. Placing communication materials and marketing campaigns in accessible and visible locations for consumers can also help improve awareness of the GO TEXAN program. Based on the preferred information channels when learning about local food, the placement of communication should include providing information on product labels, creating talking points for word-of-mouth conversations with consumers, and developing strategies for point-of-purchase sales like at farmers markets. It is important to note that the respondents preferred to learn information about local products through word of mouth and farmers markets. Perhaps, local agricultural marketing organization would benefit from developing talking points to exchange with those at farmers markets to communicate verbally with consumers. These talking points could include key messages derived from the preferred attributes such as how these are fresh products.

Researchers should also be cognizant of the role of brand positioning in communicating about agricultural organizations. The results of this study indicated that respondents were most interested in buying products that were made or grown in Texas with the following characteristics: freshness, flavor, and taste. However, it would be interesting to explore how varying types of key messages on these characteristics are perceived by respondents. For example, researchers could test a series of key messages regarding 1) freshness, flavor, and taste, 2) purchasing convenience and budget friendliness, 3) product appearance, quality, and safety, and 4) support of local and state economy. Message testing experiments would benefit GO TEXAN to identify if these key messages were indeed the best and most salient for its consumers.

The GO TEXAN program is a unique organization in that it certifies local food and local products across multiple categories. Similar studies should be conducted with other state certification programs to determine if the desirable attributes found from this study align with other programs or if they are different than Texas consumers. Perhaps, consumers in different states have varying values or personal shopping motivators to guide their habits. Another aspect to investigate with state certification programs is to further assess if other state programs could benefit from certifying products in other categories other than food and produce. Similar to consumers in different states seeking different attributes, it would be interesting to see if other state programs can benefit from additional categories that consumers find more desirable or categories that are similar to GO TEXAN.

This study was descriptive in nature. However, further understanding consumer perceptions of branding is of importance for agricultural communicators. Researchers should seek to develop studies to help develop models to predict the impact of brand loyalty and willingness to purchase local products in an effort to increase marketing efforts toward consumers. For example, researchers should consider conducting hypothesis to predict how brand awareness and brand loyalty may predict willingness to purchase.

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