

# Opinion Leadership and the Perceived Health Benefits of Local Food<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

A desire for local food has been increasing in the past decade because of concerns about sustainability, local economic development, food safety, nutrition, and environmental impacts (Hodges & Stevens, 2013). In a recent Agricultural Resource and Management Survey and Census conducted by the USDA, it was estimated that local food sales totaled \$6.1 billion in 2012, a noted increase from the \$4.8 billion reported in 2008 (Low et al., 2015; Low & Vogel, 2011). Additionally, this same study indicated that in 2012 only 7.8% of farms in the United States were targeting local consumers (Low et al., 2015). Public perception plays a crucial role in whether or not the public supports local food initiatives.

Opinion leaders, or individuals who have a large amount of influence within their respective social circles, can play a vital role in the diffusion of new ideas because they “influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of others” (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007, p. 881). Extension resources are limited; therefore, Extension faculty should utilize opinion leaders in order to reach a larger audience with greater efficiency. Opinion leaders serve as role models and informants and have a large influence on their peers. In the case of the local food movement, they may be able to motivate their peers to join in purchasing local food (Norwood, Oltenacu, Calvo-Lorenzo, & Lancaster, 2015).

This EDIS document is the first in a series discussing how Extension can more efficiently encourage citizens to join the local food movement by effectively 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>)

Extension professionals can utilize the information provided here to more efficiently encourage citizens to join the local food movement. This series can also be used to help local farmers recognize the various perceptions the general public often associates with locally produced goods and how to work with these ideas to shift and optimize purchasing behaviors.

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## Use of Opinion Leaders in Eliciting Change

In a world where citizens are becoming skeptical of their ability to trust advertisements, a face-to-face conversation with an opinion leader can be much more effective in changing behaviors and attitudes (Keller & Berry, 2003; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). The impact of opinion leaders within different communities has the opportunity to lead to increased adoption and consumer demand for locally grown products (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Collective action can be better managed by targeting these individuals within communities because of their networking opportunities. Extension should consider utilizing opinion leaders to disseminate information and promote the local food movement, thereby increasing the demand for local products and thus the number of farms participating in local markets.

## Perceived Health Benefits of Local Food

The recent influx in consumer interest in locally grown foods can be attributed to the reintroduction of community farmers markets, U-pick farms, roadside stands, non-chain grocery stores, and personal/ neighborhood gardens (Low et al., 2015). Public demand for locally produced foods can be furthered by stressing its health benefits—for example, produce has a larger nutritious value when sold locally (Frith, 2007). Kaplan (2010) stated that the majority of produce grown in the United States travels an average of 1,500 miles before being placed on a shelf for purchase. When produce is harvested at the peak of freshness and flavor, optimal nutritional value can be maintained with less time in transport (Norwood et al., 2015). Local farmers are better able to gather produce when fully ripened and their crop can be sold and on a dinner plate within 24 hours (Frith, 2007). More large-scale farmers that export their food long distances to meet their consumer base may be required to pick fruit earlier so they can distribute the produce in one large batch and allow it to ripen during the extended transportation refrigeration period (Frith, 2007).

## Understanding Opinion Leaders' Role in the Local Food Movement

A recent national study conducted by the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education sought to further understand opinion leaders' roles in the local food movement and how to target Extension programming to optimize their use in disseminating information about local food. Questions assessing the respondent's engagement with,

values about, and perceived importance of local food were used to understand opinion leaders and to examine how they information can be utilized to encourage large-scale participation in purchasing local food. A web-based survey was conducted using non-probability opt-in sampling techniques in collaboration with Qualtrics, an online survey research company, to obtain 1,023 responses representative of the US population age 18 and older. The responses were compared to the US census data and weighted accordingly to ensure they were representative.

To identify opinion leaders, respondents were asked a series of questions and prompted to select where on a five-point semantic differential scale their attitudes most aligned. Some of the questions included

- During the past six months, how many people have you told about the proper safe handling of food...;
- In general, do you talk to your friends and colleagues about the proper safe handling of food...;
- When you talk to your friends and colleagues about the proper safe handling of food, you....;

A score of one represented a low-level of opinion leadership. Examples of these phrases were “told no one,” “never,” and “gave very little information,” respectively. A score of five represented a higher level of opinion leadership. Some of the phrases these individuals responded with were “told a number of people,” “very often,” and “gave a great deal of information,” respectively. Results from the opinion leadership questions were averaged to create an overall leadership index score deemed as reliable with a Cronbach's alpha greater than .80. A respondent with an opinion leadership score greater than one standard deviation above the mean was considered an opinion leader. Of the 1,023 survey respondents, 156 individuals (15.2%) were identified as opinion leaders and used for further analysis.

Respondents were asked a variety of questions including how often they participated in local food related events and activities during the past year using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Often*, and 5 = *Very Often*. Respondents were also asked to respond to a series of statements about their values about overall healthy eating using a five-point scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree* and then asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with several value statements about the importance of local food in their respective lifestyles. An example statement is “It is necessary for people to have access to local food.” Respondents were asked to indicate their answers on a

five- point scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

## Demographics

Opinion leaders were more likely to be female (60.3%) and exhibited a higher level of racial diversity than the respondents overall (Table 1). They also tended to be younger and were more likely to identify themselves as being Democrats. Opinion leaders were also more likely to hold a higher level of education than overall respondents. When looking at the location of residency, fewer opinion leaders indicated living within city limits compared to the overall respondent population.

## Engaging in Local Food Related Activities

Respondents were asked how often they engaged in certain activities during the past year. The results are shown in Table 2. Seventy-nine percent of the opinion leaders indicated they purchased locally grown foods from a grocery store. Fewer indicated experiencing local food related events and activities (52%) or learning about local food through various education outlets like documentaries or social media platforms (14.3%).

## Values Associated with Healthy Eating

Opinion leaders were found to value eating healthy foods in general. Table 3 displays how opinion leader respondents rated the significance of healthy foods. Most agreed or strongly agreed that high quality foods provide benefits to overall personal health (92.1%), and the same percentage indicated that healthy eating should be a priority.

## Discussion

The results revealed that the majority of opinion leader respondents were young, racially diverse, and highly educated. They were also more liberal and more likely to be Democrats than the overall US population. These findings align with past research showing a trend of younger citizens exhibiting more risk-taking behaviors, a trait which plays a large role in the average characteristics of an opinion leader (Rogers, 2003).

With the number of articles and videos about food issues increasingly shared on social media platforms, the probability of opinion leaders and their peers being influenced

by this information has also increased (Hill, 2008). One visit to a farmers market by an opinion leader can warrant a Facebook check-in, a tweet mentioning the local food options they are presented with, a snapchat video capturing the market's atmosphere, and an artsy Instagram photo of their newly purchased fresh local produce. As opinion leaders indirectly market their personal experience at a local farmers market, their peers of a similar age group are likely to join in as well (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). This may form an explanation as to why younger generations are more likely to take an opinion leadership role in their community and influence others to join the local food movement.

When looking at the location of residency, opinion leaders were compared with the general public to determine if there is a difference between urban and rural purchasing behaviors of local food. Sixty-seven percent of opinion leaders indicated living within city limits, compared to the 74% indicated by overall respondents. Because there are slightly less opinion leaders inhabiting the urban area compared to the overall respondent population, this select group could be better connected to rural surroundings and therefore find it more natural to access and purchase local food.

The strategic use of opinion leaders could be extremely influential in furthering the purchase of local food in communities across the nation. Extension educators should encourage opinion leaders to inform the public by educating them to act as communication strategists within the community. Extension educators should empower opinion leaders to better communicate their messages with conversational techniques and genuine explanations of their personal endorsement for local food (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Those looking to utilize opinion leaders should consider how to focus messages on what they value and find most important (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). The findings of this study show that the majority of opinion leaders already value the importance of healthy local food in their diet and lifestyle. One way to improve the effectiveness of altering purchasing behaviors is to reach out to these individuals who already display their passion for consuming local food by frequently visiting farmers markets, U-pick farms, and neighborhood community gardens and encourage them to share their ideals with others.

Opinion leaders hold the power to shift the perceived product attributes of local goods in the eyes of farmers, producers, retailers, and most of all, consumers. In order for an increase in local food consumption to be successful, Extension educators should encourage more opinion leaders to attend local food-related events. By encouraging

opinion leaders to share their experiences with others, they can catalyze greater participation in the purchasing and consumption of locally grown food and alter overall behaviors to shift the cultural norm (Keller & Berry, 2003).

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Table 1. Demographics

	Opinion Leaders n = 156	Overall Respondents n = 1023
	%	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	60.3	51.2
Male	39.7	48.8
<b>Race</b>		
Caucasian/ White (Non-Hispanic)	45.5	66.9
African American	24.2	11.6
Asian	12.1	5.0
Native American	1.9	0.7
Multiracial	1.5	1.4
Other	14.9	14.4
<b>Age</b>		
18–19	0	0
20–29	29.9	18.2
30–39	31.0	17.1
40–49	13.5	18.6
50–59	15.7	17.9
60–69	7.3	12.5
70–79	2.6	7.1
80 and older	0	8.7
<b>Political Beliefs</b>		
Very Liberal	9.5	7.9
Liberal	12.7	17.6
Moderate	38.4	45.3
Conservative	32.2	20.0
Very Conservative	7.1	9.2
<b>Political Affiliations</b>		
Republican	24.3	26.3
Democrat	53.1	42.7
Independent	17.0	20.4
Non affiliated	5.6	10.6
<b>Education</b>		
Less than 12 <sup>th</sup> grade (did not graduate high school)	0.4	1.2
High school graduate (includes GED)	14.8	20.3
Some college, no degree	35.0	29.9
2-year college degree (Associates, Technical, etc.)	10.8	15.1
4-year college degree (Bachelor's, etc.)	35.1	23.0
Graduate or Professional degree (Master's, Ph.D., M.B.A.)	3.8	10.5
<b>Income</b>		
\$24,999 or less	12.9	25.2
\$25,000 to \$49,999	30.2	28.1
\$50,000 to \$74,999	12.3	19.4
\$75,000 to \$149,999	38.1	23.5

	Opinion Leaders n = 156	Overall Respondents n = 1023
	%	%
\$150,000 to \$249,999	4.8	3.3
\$250,000 or more	1.8	0.5
<b>Location of Residency</b>		
Within city limits	67.4	74.2
Outside city limits	32.6	25.8

Table 2. Opinion Leader Engagement with Local Food Related Activities (n=156).

	Never/Rarely %	Sometimes %	Often/Very Often %
Purchased locally grown foods from a grocery store	3.0	17.7	79.2
Purchased local foods from farmer's markets/roadside stands	8.9	19.0	72.0
Learned about local food from media channels such as documentaries/social media	14.3	22.2	63.6
Participated in local food related activities such as garden tours/projects	52.0	14.7	33.3

Table 3. Health values (n=156).

	Strongly Disagree or Disagree (%)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (%)	Strongly Agree or Agree (%)
Eating healthy is very important to me.	0.5	5.4	94.1
I try to make healthy eating an important part of my life.	0.5	5.7	93.8
I believe high quality food benefits my health.	1.2	6.7	92.1
Healthy eating should be a priority.	2.1	5.9	92.1
Too much of a fuss is made about healthy eating.	62.7	37.3	36.2
I hardly ever think about eating healthy.	60.8	12.3	26.9