

Alaska Grown Brand Discussions:  
Consumers



**SOLSTICE**  
**ADVERTISING**

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Craciun Research (Craciun) was contracted by Solstice Advertising (agency) on behalf of its client the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to support recent efforts for desired research services. Initial meeting discussions were shared with Jean Craciun, Research Director, Craciun Research by Lincoln Garrick, President of Solstice Advertising. This is the second of two focus groups. The First session was intended to ascertain what the target market understands Alaska Grown to be, specifically what farmers' understanding of the market is, and how the program can be used to better assist Producers, Farmers, Growers (producers). The Second Focus Group session is reported here and was determined to gain insight as to what Alaska Grown means to "consumers" and how they should be marketing to this target audience.

### **Research Design**

The qualitative research project design was to conduct two Focus Groups with selected audiences. The first group was conducted in April with Producers/Farmers/Growers. This second group July 9, 2012 with target consumers. A secondary goal was to develop a better understanding of the Consumers market value of Alaska Grown logo. Issues explored were: Reasons for buying AK grown; Meaning or value of AK Grown logo; Where consumers get their produce; Most important factor in determining where they buy groceries; What if anything would encourage them to buy more Alaska grown goods; How much more would they be willing to pay for Alaska Grown vs. outside grown products; Visibility of the Alaska grown logo. This second group was conduct July 9, at the Craciun Research Focus Group Facility. Nine members of the target audience participated; some present in the room and some on the telephone. A lively discussion was held with these key consumers and this report completes our Focus Group project.

Jean Craciun, Research Director, collaborated with the client's representatives on development of the screener and the focus group discussion guide to ensure a successful project.

Ms. Craciun moderated these focus groups; she holds a Master's degree in Sociology from Cleveland State University and has completed course work on a doctoral degree in Human Resources Education from Boston University. She currently serves on the national board for Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA).

Dr. Tracy Dudley assisted Jean Craciun and served as the Assistant Moderator for this qualitative study. She has extensive advertising, marketing, and qualitative research experience.

### **Focus Group Research Background**

Focus group research, by design, provides quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weed out false or extreme views. The group dynamics typically contribute to focusing on the most important topics and issues being discussed. Trained qualitative analysts can assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view of the discussion topics among the participants.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patton, Michael Quinn, How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation, Sage Publications, November 1987.

The focus group interview is an information gathering process that seeks to discover the perceptions, feelings, and experiences of the selected participants about a particular topic. Focus groups help to determine the ways that participants structure their world around the particular topic. Focus group participants respond to the questions in their own words and trained observers can learn much from the group interview. The unit of analysis for this type of research is “the group” and not the individual. From the focus group interview we learn how people view the particular topic or experience, hear their terminology and capture the complexities of the individual experiences in a group interview environment.<sup>2</sup>

A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. A trained professional moderator conducts each group with six to eight people. The discussions are relaxed, and often participants enjoy sharing their ideas and perceptions. The group discussion is conducted several times with carefully selected participants so the researcher can identify trends and patterns.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes to Readers

The participants’ verbatim comments are indented rather than set off in quotation marks. Brackets set off the analyst’s explanations of some of the participants’ comments.

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<sup>2</sup> Gredler, Margaret E., Program Evaluation, Prentice Hall, September 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Krueger, Richard A., Casey, Mary Anne, Focus Groups 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition - A Practical Guide for Applied Research, Sage Publication, Inc. 2000.

## A. Awareness of the Brand is Minimal

### Limited brand awareness

Many respondents say they are aware of the Alaska Grown name, definitely associate positive feelings with it, but rarely can go into accurate detail of what the name stands for exactly. Many believe that it is solely associated with being born in Alaska and not about produce grown in Alaska.

I have been in Alaska for 17 years. I don't deeply know about Alaska Grown, but what I do know is positive.

I don't know a lot about Alaska Grown, but I've been very impressed with the markets in the area and the produce that's there.

I don't necessarily think that the wear-ables are helping marketing of the produce.

The overall feel from consumer respondents is that the Alaska Grown brand is familiar, but most do not actively seek it out. Instead, they only know about it from previous 'chance' exposure. People just do not know where and when it can be found and consequently do not feel knowledgeable enough to seek it out. Rather, many only are aware of Alaska Grown if they have accidentally happened up on it somewhere.

I've been in Alaska for 23 years. My experience with Alaska Grown locally grown produce is what I stumble upon.

And yes, I'm with you. It's what I stumble across. I feel the perception of the people of Anchorage is very positive for its Alaska Grown.

I think (Alaskans buy local) if it is accessible, but I don't think they know where to find it.

Further, only some consumers will go ahead and opt for Alaska Grown over alternatives when they happen to see it. And, price is more likely to be the determining factor.

If you've got a cucumber in the grocery store with a sticker on it from Washington or California or whatever, I think people are going towards the local stuff...depending on price.

### Logo recognizable but not Understood

While several respondents can recognize the Alaska Grown logo, many of them attribute their own meaning and do not necessarily know it is referring to a specific brand of produce grown in Alaska. People who do not know the actual meaning seem to automatically assume it means the person wearing the Alaska Grown logo on their clothing was just born and raised in Alaska.

I see a lot of people with sweatshirts with Alaskan Grown logos. My kids say, 'what does that mean?'

I was wondering about the sweatshirts made with the logo...are the people aware of that? If my kids saw the sweatshirt, they would say does that mean they were born here? That's what I thought.

I think it's a really cool thing; it's a sweatshirt company with a growing problem. The marketing is great, everybody wears it, so the word's out.

### **Difference in quality not always apparent**

Some respondents can say they have tasted produce grown in Alaska (the Alaska Grown brand or other) and notice a difference in quality compared to stuff that is shipped in from elsewhere. One respondent even did a taste test of several brands of tomatoes at various price points to see if paying higher prices for locally grown really led to higher quality/better tasting produce.

I've been here since 1979, and I've experienced good produce here in Alaska.

I've lived here for 33 years. I'm very positive about Alaska Grown, especially in the last year...I've been really impressed with the quality and variety.

I was really impressed.

Unfortunately, a few respondents say they have tried the more expensive locally grown and been disappointed in the perceptible difference compared to cheaper brands. Poor quality in Alaska Grown, of course, is very dangerous as it can turn customers away from the brand forever. No one wants to pay higher prices for food that does not taste as good as that with lower prices.

For some reason I was not very satisfied, it was so tasteless. I cannot believe this is expensive! It looks very beautiful, like picture perfect, then you cut it and it is tasteless.

I had that experience. Not only one time, a couple of times.

### **Alaska Grown linked to organic**

Some consumers consider Alaska Grown quality comparable to organic quality. Because organic is consistently linked to higher quality in their minds, there is a perception of higher quality associated with Alaska Grown.

I appreciate the comment about putting local and organic on the same plane. I hadn't thought of it or articulated it that way, but I think I do tend to do that when I'm shopping.

My thinking is that the local produce, I assume, is not sprayed with pesticides and not grown using the industrial farming practices as much because it's right here in the valley.

If it's organic, it's healthy.

Only a few responders get into the topic of how quality and taste diminish with the passage of time and with packaging. There is a definite need for consumer education on the real benefits of buying locally grown produce. One consumer buys Alaska Grown due to a belief that more purchases of the brand will eventually drive the price down.

I typically will try to buy local over organic because of the distance thing, and I kind of put those on the same playing field as far as quality usually (organic and local). But, I figure my dollar is like my vote—more people buying local organic is going to lower the price. If I stop, then I'm just like everybody else who is making the price go up.

For me I will pay the extra... I want that price to drop for everyone, so I'll buy the local organic as much as I can.

### **Consumers highly value 'fresh' produce**

There is a huge opportunity to match the benefits Alaska Grown offers to one of the key decision factors involved in consumer selection of produce. When asked what the most important quality issue is for them, nearly all agree that freshness is a top priority—and that is precisely what Alaska Grown offers over alternatives.

I am looking for freshness.

Similarly, consumers want their produce to be ripe and come from a reputable source. Some actually do check to see where the product was grown in order to ascertain their impression of the overall quality. These are even more positive traits that Alaska Grown produce offers over any other Outside brand.

I look at whether it's ripe. Some of the attraction of the Alaskan Grown is that you can pick one that should more or less be ready. I know some of the ways things are shipped; if they ripen on the way... I'd much rather have something that's ripened here in a greenhouse in an open field, opposed to (ripening) on the way in an open barge.

There are certain types of produce that consumers are more apt to buy local due to a very perceptible difference in taste. Some examples where brand seems to make the biggest difference include: tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce and carrots.

I was really impressed (with tomatoes). They have all the sweetness, they ripen right here.

Tomatoes...I always buy locally grown. The other ones just are not tasty.

I grow my own lettuce. I grew my own carrots last year.

### **Emphasize positive environmental impact**

Consumers do not seem to realize the environmental implications of buying from the outside versus buying local. An education campaign for Alaska Grown, must include the environmental aspect.

What is the economic impact of a certain number of acres of farmland in the Valley?

They need to know what kind of fossil fuel it takes to get food up here. And if anything happens to the food system, what are we going to do?

That could be presented, what would we do up here compared to the fossil fuels to ship everything up here. If that could be like laid out to people...wow! Holy cow, you're saving 20,000 gallons of fuel just by purchasing this.

Well that's worth the extra dollar a pound. I'm in.

### **Stores need to do more**

Most respondents feel that awareness of Alaska Grown is too low, and that local stores can do more to promote the brand. Signage and tags are a good visual reminder, as long as people are educated on what they stand for overall.

It would be helpful to be constantly reminded at the grocery store why I buy this as opposed to this. I like some of the ideas about making us aware of what the product is.

There is a card that says the 'Alaskan Grown' section, and that's helpful. You say wow, and you go over there. That helps. They could do more.

These things I think are the best. These are the twisty ties that go on the vegetables in the stores. I do gravitate to that on the item.

Most definitely it would encourage me, because I'm reminded about it. When I'm not reminded, I'm busy. If every time I walk into the grocery store I was reminded why this is a good choice...

The brand name actually needs to be on it; somewhere on the item.

There are some concerns over stickers on produce, as some respondents prefer other more temporary ways of designating which products are Alaska Grown.

Just don't use stickers; stickers get goeey stuff on your fruit, and it kind of ruins lettuce.

Education at the store level could include easily seen information/literature regarding the superior nutritional quality of Alaska Grown. Parents, especially moms, are very attracted to things that are better for their families.

Bridge the gap between why is it better for you nutritionally.

I think people need to start getting educated on nutrition.

What about a study on the nutrition value of stuff that is brought in and stuff in Alaska that would offset the expense of buying an Alaskan Grown tomato? It might be a little more expensive, but you're getting more minerals and vitamins out of it. More nutrition out of that one tomato would offset seven cents.

Of course, education that starts in the schools is paramount to making a universal, widespread, and long-term change in perception toward more favoring of Alaska Grown products.

I think my kids were introduced to Alaskan Grown in school.

## **B. Limited Variety and Availability**

The fact that Alaska Grown produce is only available a limited time of the year significantly contributes to the overall lack of awareness that it exists. To make matters worse, variety of locally grown produce is also limited.

I have lived here 13 years. I definitely have a positive feel from Alaska Grown, although I think the season is short and what's available is limited.

I'd tell them to focus on quality and distribution. Get the distribution all over the state.

### **Farmers markets underused**

Patronage of local farmer's markers seems to be minimal. Consumers are all about convenience, and if the local grocery store is closer, they will go there over a farmers market. The real problem according to these Consumers is that no farmer's markets are apparent, and they would have to put forth an effort to research locations, days and times available.

I don't go out of my way.

It's by chance. If I'm in Anchorage, and I see a sign ...

Some of us live in areas where they don't have a market.

Further, traditional stores tend to have much more convenient hours of operation. Due to personal or work schedules, some people have a hard time visiting farmer's markets if they are only open on certain days at certain times.

It's an effort to be there when they are open, and so you get the good selection. You have got to go at certain hours on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in the middle of a work day. Then, what do you do with the produce all day when you're at work?

We've been to a couple here. I actually haven't made it to the big one yet. For some reason, I haven't made it on the weekends. Some of the Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday markets, I've gone to...

I don't know why I don't do it here. It doesn't work with my schedule.

Another issue associated with farmer's markets is limited selection. If it is a hassle to get to a farmer's market, it is hardly worth it if they do not have a large variety to choose from for purchase. Some consumers would even like to see a broader product line, beyond produce and into dairy.

I would like a much broader selection. One of the things I did purchase at the farmer's market was some cheese from the valley. I love cheese, so it got me right there. Parsnips and turnips just don't do it for me, and I'm not a potato eater.

There is a limited supply to what's out there and what's available when.

I went there two weeks ago, and there were only three stands: a lady with hand crafted Alaskan items, another guy with honey and meats, and another guy with mushrooms.

### **Need more education**

Education regarding farmer's markets and other sellers of locally grown food products seems to have an impact, as respondents mentioned some demographic groups are more aware than others. For instance, new moms seem to have a higher level of awareness, while senior citizens seem to have a lower level of awareness.

The new moms know about it; I think it's part of the WIC program.

This senior doesn't know about it. Thank you.

Respondents suggest that more advertisement and marketing regarding availability, location, and timing of products associated with farmer's markets would make a difference to increase patronage.

Usually they are not letting the public know when the farmer's markets are available... when the fresh produce does come in. People do not want to make a wasted trip.

Some marketing would help with awareness of getting where you need to go. Alaskans are busy in the summer so if you wanted to get traffic, put one on the highway. Everybody's going to go grab something.

### **C. Budget Does Limit Purchase**

#### **Alaska Grown costs more**

It is not necessarily just a stigma among consumers, as many claim to have personally seen that Alaska Grown is noticeably more expensive than produce that comes in from the Outside. Further, many consumers do not buy Alaska Grown due to that perception, whether it is accurate or not. They are looking for the cheapest brand of what 'looks' to be quality produce. Again, customers are only judging Alaska Grown on sight—how it looks and how much it costs. They are not educated or experienced enough to know that the true difference from other alternative products is on the inside (taste and nutrition).

I've lived in Alaska for 30 years next month. I love Alaska grown, but we want more and we want cheaper. That's the most important thing...cheaper.

I think cost is an issue and what really kind of gets me.

I would really like to support Alaska Grown; however, it does come down to a price point issue as far as what I am able to support.

Not that many customers truly believe that a higher price for Alaska Grown is worth the extra money. However, there are a few that see the benefit—which further illustrates the dire need for consumer education proving why locally grown produce is worth more than that which is shipped in from elsewhere.

I know the price is a little high but it's worth it. I grow my own garden so I understand what kind of gardening is incurred.

#### **Price must be comparable**

The key is that if Alaska Grown must be more expensive it cannot be priced too much higher than other less tasty alternatives. For some, it is not simply a preference to buy the cheaper produce, it is a necessity dictated by budget.

To me, it's worth costing more; but there is a point where it costs too much.

I know a produce company that tried to start an organic program. They set up all the signs and had all the same stuff but wanted a buck more. Nobody bought it. They couldn't sell.

I have two young kids, and there's only so much... We do make decisions as far as going to farmers markets and growing some of our own stuff; but as a norm, we shop by price.

This also ties back to the shorter growing season for Alaska Grown. Perception is that any locally grown produce for sale during the long off-season is often priced so much higher than other brand that price-sensitive consumers are strongly drawn to other options in the store.

It's kind of hard. In the summer it's more affordable, there's a lot more available... cucumber prices are down. In the winter though, which is the longest buying period, we buy produce at Costco.

We buy more Alaska Grown stuff when it's in season...we are trying to buy in-season items and store them, whether by canning or freezing. If they are in season, get them while they are cheap!

The farmers are struggling. We have rain, how do we get more growing? We need a longer season; it's the short season that kills us.

### **Consumers drawn to savings**

Whether or not the price is lowered for a sale, Americans are attracted to saving money. One consumer hinted that marking up an item, just so you can lower the price back down and call it a sale is a viable technique to increase purchases.

I sometimes wonder... If they have Keebler on sale advertisement, do they raise the price and then they say they are on sale so people will rush there and buy some? Sometimes I just wonder if they are really sales?

## **D. Breaking Habits**

### **Old habits die-hard**

Some respondents say they do not buy Alaska Grown because they are simply in the habit of buying other brands. It not necessarily a matter of brand loyalty, it is more of pure habit—habit that needs strong inspiration to be broken.

You know a lot of it is habits. I guess how people eat is changing. We are a very much a 20th century family...I mean honestly, we consume a lot of garbage. And, it's more of a habit. I'd love to say we eat organic this and that, but we really don't. So what I'm saying is that it is not necessarily a price thing, maybe it's more of a habit of what we're used to buying.

We buy what we're used to buying.

I think I'm still on the habit thing...changing our habits as Alaskans or society, so that we seek that healthier alternative.

### **Convenience leads the way**

It will take much effort to show consumers that getting what is easiest is not always what is best for them and their families. In today's society, purchasing patterns are driven to a great extent simply by what is most convenient.

It's too easy to get food elsewhere.

One stop shop at Costco, and you get everything and your oil changed! That's our society! [Debate as to whether or not Costco has Alaska Grown.]

That's what I'm saying about habits. Our family is in that habit; we buy what we buy. I don't buy organic cereal, we get frosty O's or whatever.

If common knowledge is not enough to break habits, it is extremely important for an Alaska Grown marketing campaign to include emphasis on high quality and the magnitude of what that means for personal and family health, nutritionally.

I think the local produce is more...it's got to be more healthy. The soil up here is so fertile, there's got to be more nutrients in a tomato grown in fertile soil in Alaska than a tomato grown in California.

### **E. Feedback on the Alaska Grown Program**

Consumers identify with the Alaska Grown logo and feel positive about it due to a strong sense of Alaska pride, regardless whether or not they understand what the brand signifies.

To me it's like Alaska pride.

People are definitely proud of Alaska.

We like to own Alaska.

### **Add some produce to the logo**

However, something is needed in order to conjure up an image of the produce the logo signifies because many people see the logo and assume it just means Alaska pride coming from someone who was born and/or raised here.

We need a plant in there, like a bushel of carrots or something.

Some vegetables around the boarder or something.

This is yet another reiteration that education on the Alaska Grown brand is much needed, as there are numerous misconceptions amid the rampant lack of awareness for the brand and what it stands for overall.

I think that we hit on it earlier, I think education and being more specific about what Alaska grown means.

I would say education, making us aware of what all is in that group of Alaska Grown products. Is it carrots? What can we buy? What's available? And then of course, where can we get it?

### **Radio campaign to raise awareness**

Respondents suggest that radio spots are a good source for educating the public on the Alaska Grown brand and what it stands for, including the ultra-important nutritional and environmental implications.

Radio stations. Get hype out there a little bit more.

### **Offer rebates**

Rebates for buying Alaska Grown might not have a huge impact when offered directly to consumers, but if there were discounts for restaurants that purchase the brand, the reach would be more widespread.

Is there any government involvement in giving a rebate back to the grocery stores or the restaurants or the other places that utilized the Alaska products?

As a restaurant, if I could get my higher case price back in a rebate...I would definitely have (Alaska Grown) if it was available.

### **Get samples out there**

Similar to the Producers Focus Group, consumers believe the higher quality taste of Alaska Grown products will sell itself. Somehow consumers just need to be exposed to the superior taste, and they will be hooked.

What I was thinking was what about demo? Let them try Alaska grown.

Great idea. Get samples out there.

## **F. Recommendations**

### **Education on the brand is paramount**

Consumers desperately need more education on what the Alaska Grown brand stands for and the tremendous benefits associated with it. Education needs to dispel any misconceptions; but more importantly it needs to show the consumer why they should buy Alaska Grown. Again, education can come in many forms, including store signage and labeling, prominently available literature, radio advertising, and through the schools. The key is to get the education to provide exposure to a wide spectrum including current adults (especially seniors) down through young children who will grow up with this knowledge and use it wisely.

### **Incentives to change are mandatory**

Consumers are creatures of habit, and consumers like to save money. In order to get them to change to a brand that is more expensive, Alaska Grown has to do two very important things. First, it must give consumers a reason to change to Alaska Grown. This includes tremendous education on the benefits of the brand, including better taste, superior nutritional quality, and positive environmental impacts. Second, and perhaps more difficult, is the need to break consumers of deeply engrained habits. While some people purchase based on careful consideration of many factors, the vast majority are buying based on what they bought before. Alaska Grown must find a way to make its products the easy-to-decide-upon choice in the grocery store. Things in its favor already are that it is familiar, and consumers feel safe with it. Alaska Grown must become an everyday choice, the right choice due to health reasons and because we in Alaska endeavor to take care of our own and ourselves and this is a graphic example of that engrained philosophy. A captivating marketing campaign to break the status quo and get consumers onboard is essential at this time.

**AK GROWN Discussion Guide Group TWO**

Craciun Research Group Focus Group July 9, 2012

[TARGET SEGMENTS: Consumers Focus Group Noon on July 9th. **All sessions held at the Craciun Focus Group Facility 405 E Fireweed.**]

**I. INTRODUCTION:** Today we are here to gain a better understanding of the value of Alaska Grown products and brand as well as your opinion about the current marketing to you the consumer. I know some of you represent restaurants here today and others just yourself and family....we are focusing on the consumer aspects of locally grown produce. We are seeking your opinion in an effort to make this local agriculture program even more successful. We appreciate learning from each of you, as well as from the group as a whole.

**II. WARM-UP: General Discussion about Alaska Grown Produce**

Let's begin with the big picture. We really do not need any detail at this time, but rather general comments.

- 1. How long have you lived in Alaska?**
- 2. What do you think is the current word-on-the-street; and I mean gut feeling here about locally grown produce?**
- 3. Did anyone see this front page on the Alaska Press a while back? Not on topic exactly but it brought to mind growing food and eating it ... in Alaska! [SHOW ARTICLE "Eat Alaska" and flyer from Market.]**

**III. IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION**

- 1. LOYAL CUSTOMERS:** Now we are going to move into the marketing portion of our focus group. Let's begin by talking about you the customers.
  - i. Take yourself into a grocery store right now. What do you think is the most important quality issue for you when you walk over to the produce section?** [WATCH FOR: Consistent availability, known price, freshness, to know where it came from? And specifically, Why not Alaska grown products when doing your shopping?]

- ii. **Do you think most Alaskans seek-out locally-grown produce? What aspect of it do you think consumers care most about?**

[PROBE:

\*As consumers or for your restaurant?

\*How do you think the quality of Alaska Grown products compares with equivalent products shipped in from the Outside?

\*How do you think the price of Alaska Grown products compares with equivalent products shipped in from the Outside?

\*How much more, if any, would you pay for Alaska Grown products over equivalent products shipped in from the outside?]

- C. **Do you seek out Farmers Markets NOW to buy produce? How does that happen for you? What do you specifically want to buy? Where do you go?**

**AK GROWN PROGRAM:** Let's talk about the overall Alaska Grown brand and explore what a truly loyal customer looks like.

- 2. **What do YOU think the value (to consumers) is for Alaska Grown?**

- i. **Do people in Alaska understand things such as availability, quality, seasonality and economic benefits?**
- ii. **What do you think would encourage more Alaskans to buy Alaska grown goods? (PROBE: non GMO, convinced of a better taste, to know the farmers?)**
- iii. **What is the most important aspect of this brand that will sustain it over time?**

- 3. **AK LOGO:** Let's take a look at Alaska Grown logo. Just give me your general impressions at this point:

[PLAN: Show visuals of AK Grown logo]

- i. **Initial reaction? Message received? Where have you seen the logo?**
- ii. **What does it mean to you? What does it mean to the regular Alaskan consumer when they happen upon it?**

iii. Does it leave consumers with questions or thoughts?

**IV. WRAP - UP**

Finally, what do you think those working to improve the AK Grown program should do to grow the AK Grown Brand?

After this discussion what is your single most important piece of advice for Alaska Grown program implementers and DNR?