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Consumer Covid Crisis Edges Back – A Little

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Covid represented a significant shock in 2020 to the U.S. food system as well as to consumer perceptions about food. While many consumers were forced to rethink where and how they sourced food, these sourcing options were also framed by values and perceptions consumers held about their food. Issues of affordability, safety, local food economies, and choice were measured against rapidly emerging options to source. On-line shopping, home delivery, and store pick-up options quickly became widely offered and, to a significant extent, have become a normal part of how consumers shop. To some extent, Covid accelerated shopping trends that already had been emerging.

There is some initial evidence that some of the initially acute demand and values driven by Covid around food have edged back, at least a little. Emergency conditions that shuttered restaurants and mandated masking and social distance have lessened. Covid-related concerns have also become somewhat less acute.

Two similar national consumer studies about food preferences and values were conducted with colleagues from Colorado State University. Not surprisingly, affordability and safety were among the leading factors choosing where to shop. Local sourcing and having options about purchasing were also important.

While the importance of some values has edged back slightly, so have some of the perceptions of evidence of affordability, worker safety and purchasing options – including access to local foods. Belief in how food choices can impact personal health and society also have edged downward.

We know that different consumer segments (income, urban-rural, race, etc) have felt these impacts differently. Research continues to help us better understand how Covid has disrupted our food system, and further, how we can continue to work toward creating a food system that is both resilient and high performing for our national food community.

Table 1: Food Purchase Perceptions and Values, 2020 vs. 2021

Suppose you are shopping for food, and are deciding what to buy. Please indicate how important the following factors are in your decision:	Fall 2020	Fall 2021
...that it is affordable.	5.93***	5.71
...that I feel confident in the safety protocols of the retailer/store where I am shopping.	5.77***	5.4
...that workers were treated safely during harvesting, processing, delivering, and retail service.	5.35***	4.96
...that it supports the local economy.	5.08**	4.87
...that I have options about my purchasing method (e.g. online ordering, delivery, in-store pickup, etc.)	4.88***	4.62
...that it is locally grown.	4.73***	4.42
...that it meets my traditional/cultural preferences.	4.57***	4.33
...that it is organically grown.	4.32***	4.06
I believe that by purchasing certain kinds of food, I can have a substantial positive impact on my personal health.	5.61**	5.56
I believe that what I choose to buy and where I choose to buy food can have an impact on the local economy.	5.42***	5.25
Each consumer's behavior can have a positive effect on society by purchasing products sold by socially responsible companies.	5.19**	5.03
I believe local food products are easily available.	4.82**	4.73

Note: Summaries from two national surveys conducted Fall 2020 (N=5,000) and again Fall 2021 (N=5010); Responses measured on a scale on 1 = 'Not at all important' to 7 = 'Very important' and the last 4 questions as 1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 7 = 'Strongly agree'. Mean responses reported.

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