

Direct Marketing as an Adaptive Response to BSE and Rural Decline

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Introduction

Since May 2003, Canadian farm families and rural communities have been adapting to the added challenges of a post-BSE farm landscape. In the first phase of this study (Anderson & McLachlan 2007), we found that many farmers perceived direct marketing (DM) as an important response to BSE (Figure 1). Intuitively, consumers have viewed locally produced direct-marketed food as an alternative to the industrial food system that provides healthy, fresh food. However, little is understood how and to what degree participating farm families benefit from DM. Globally, a growing demand for locally produced food has prompted and supported the emergence of a wide variety of local food enterprises yet little farmer-centered research has been conducted on these initiatives.

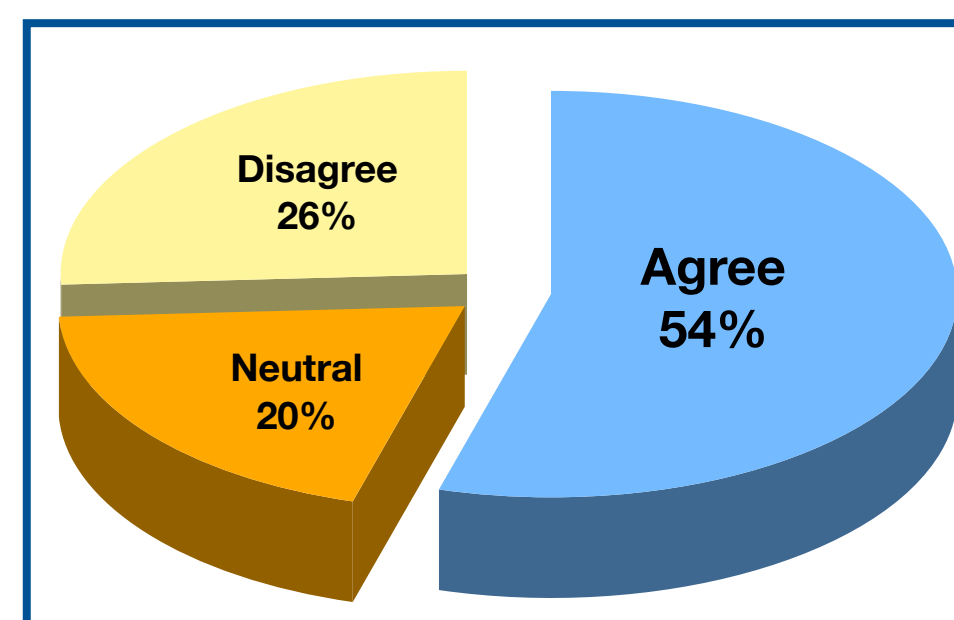


Figure 1 - Farmer perception of direct marketing as an effective response to BSE.

Objective

- Explore the degree to which DM can mitigate the adverse affects of the BSE crisis and more generally rural decline.
- Compare and contrast individual versus collective DM initiatives
- Evaluate the degree to which these initiatives are positioned as effective points of resistance to the dominant agro-food system

Methods

Using a participatory action research methodology (Reason & Bradbury 2007), Colin Anderson took a lead role in helping to establish the Harvest Moon Society Local Food Initiative (HMSLFI). This nascent marketing collective is in the process of developing a local brand and distribution network for their farm products. Data was collected using participant observation, one focus group interview, and semi-directed interviews with each participating farm family (n=17). All data were transcribed, coded and emerging themes identified using NVivo (Bazeley, 2007).

Results and Discussion

1 - Control

With the consolidation of corporate power in the agro-food industry, farmers have experienced a concomitant erosion of their independent on-farm decision-making capacity.



Figure 3 - Don Guilford

"What I don't like about that is I don't have any control over the pricing that I'm getting for my animals... Even before BSE we were at the mercy of basically 2 or 3 multinationals that control the packing end of the beef business." – Don Guilford

HMSLFI members see DM as an opportunity to reduce or eliminate intermediaries and ultimately gain more control over production and price.

"I think we are going to end up with a little more in our pockets and be able to sustain longer on less land. Have more control." – Fran Deruyck

Farmers recognize that consumers have more immediate control in DM. By creating a direct link between producers and consumers, the terms of food production, purchasing and consumption can be negotiated on an ongoing basis and benefit both.

"I think we as the Harvest Moon have to be sensitive to the needs of the consumer." – Dave Koslowky



Figure 4 - Rhonda and Dave Koslowky

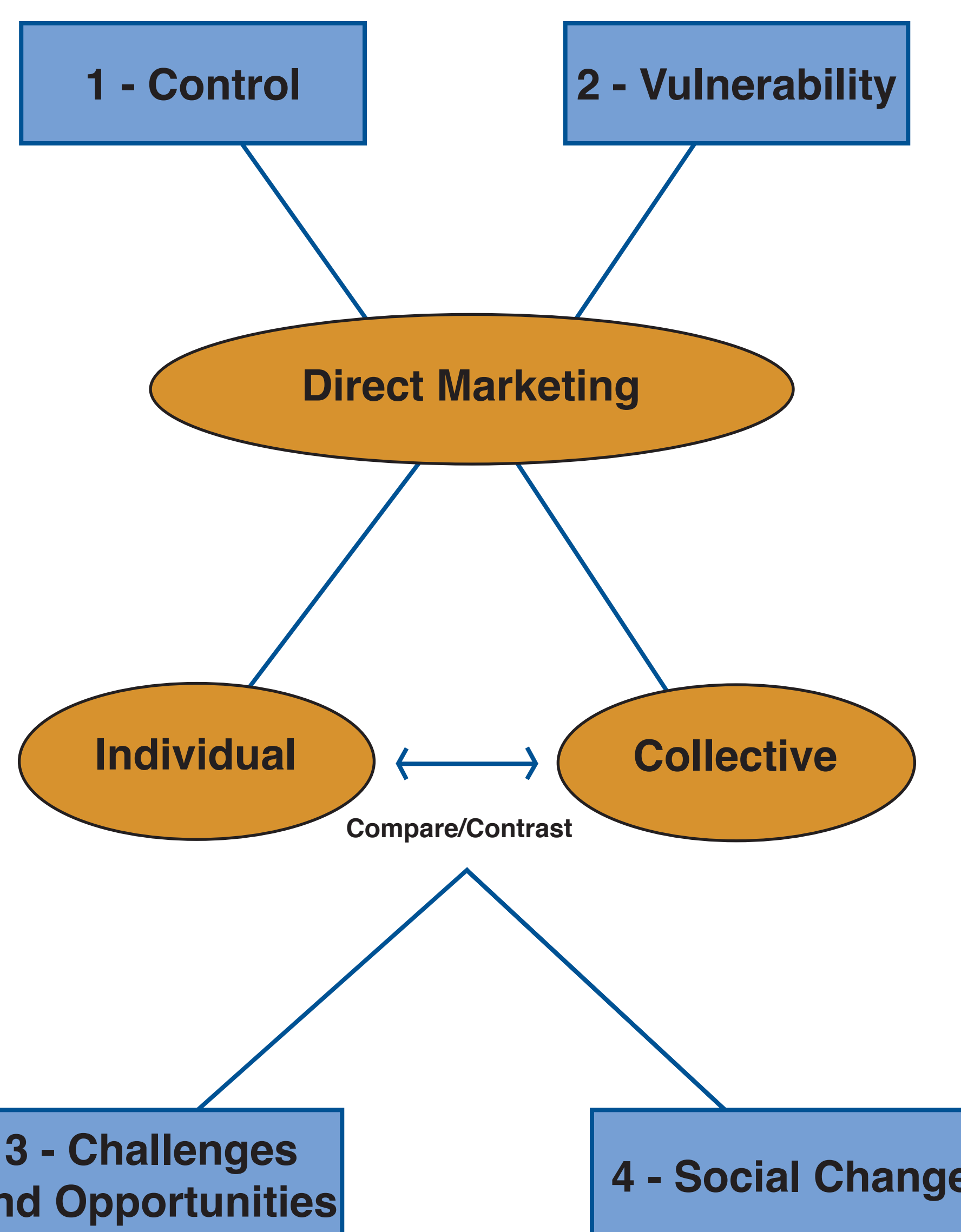


Figure 2 - Salient Themes

2 - Vulnerability

By avoiding a volatile beef commodity market and minimizing the role of intermediaries, farmers felt that DM reduces vulnerability.

"Doing what we did and developing a meat store to sell our product... we sustained our income somewhat. We did go down some but it wasn't nearly what other people who didn't have an outlet. If that [BSE] happened today instead of three years ago, my income would not change."

– Arvid Dalzell



Figure 5 - Arvid and Alison Dalzell

By developing relationships (social capital) with consumers, the HMSLFI hopes to build a loyal customer base that will provide support in times of boom and bust. Don Guilford speaks to the benefits of collective DM:



Figure 6 - Don and Dianne Guilford

"Nothing changed at Safeway and it wouldn't change for us either, because we're marketing directly to the consumer and the financial losses that beef producers have taken over the last 3 years for a group like this, it wouldn't have happened." – Don Guilford (Figure 6)

3 - Challenges and Opportunities

Taking on the additional roles required by DM can be challenging for farmers.

"There is only so much time that we have. We have the production end, we have the processing end, and the transportation end too, we're looking for a way to share it." – Dan Deruyck (figure 7)

One benefit of working as a group is that these roles can be shared between many. At the same time, Dave Koslosky relates the challenges inherent to farmer cooperation:



Figure 8 - Dave Koslosky

"Farmers are an independent bunch and that's our downfall." – Dave Koslosky

Despite these challenges, cooperation benefits farmers in many ways:

"If we work together, because these are some of the areas that we found too in marketing, that you don't want to undercut each other, if we can work together and have our price set, then we'll all win." – Dan Deruyck



Figure 7 - Dan and Fran Deruyck

Conclusions

- DM functions as an effective way of mitigating the impacts of BSE and reducing vulnerability to future disease related and other crises.
- DM represents an opportunity to build social capital with consumers that can be drawn upon in times of crisis.
- Although group decision-making is a difficult process for the independent farmer, the investment of time has the potential to payoff in terms of greater control, risk-sharing and accessing new markets
- By gaining more control over price in DM schemes, farmers should realize greater profit and have the freedom to employ production methods of choice.
- Although requiring a change in farmer-as-individual culture, the emergence of these collective voices will provide an alternative and ultimately a challenge to the dominant agro-food system.



Figure 11 - Harvest Moon Society Local Food Initiative Organizational Meetings

4 - Social Change

Undertaking alternatives in a landscape dominated by conventional agriculture is often isolating and stressful. The community built within the HMSLFI has acted as a support network for participating farmers.



Figure 9 - Dan and Fran Deruyck

"When you're sitting out here by yourself wondering if we're really on the right page or are we the only ones that think like this but when you get with people who are thinking the same way, it's really encouraging." – Dan and Fran Deruyck

This support network has empowered participants to become more effective agents of change.

"I don't know if we'd be talking and educating as much as if we weren't [a part of HMSLFI]. I've felt kind of like I had to keep what we are doing quiet... but I don't have to do that anymore. Now I'm a lot more open about what we are doing and that's where this group has been a big help." – Clint & Pam Cavers

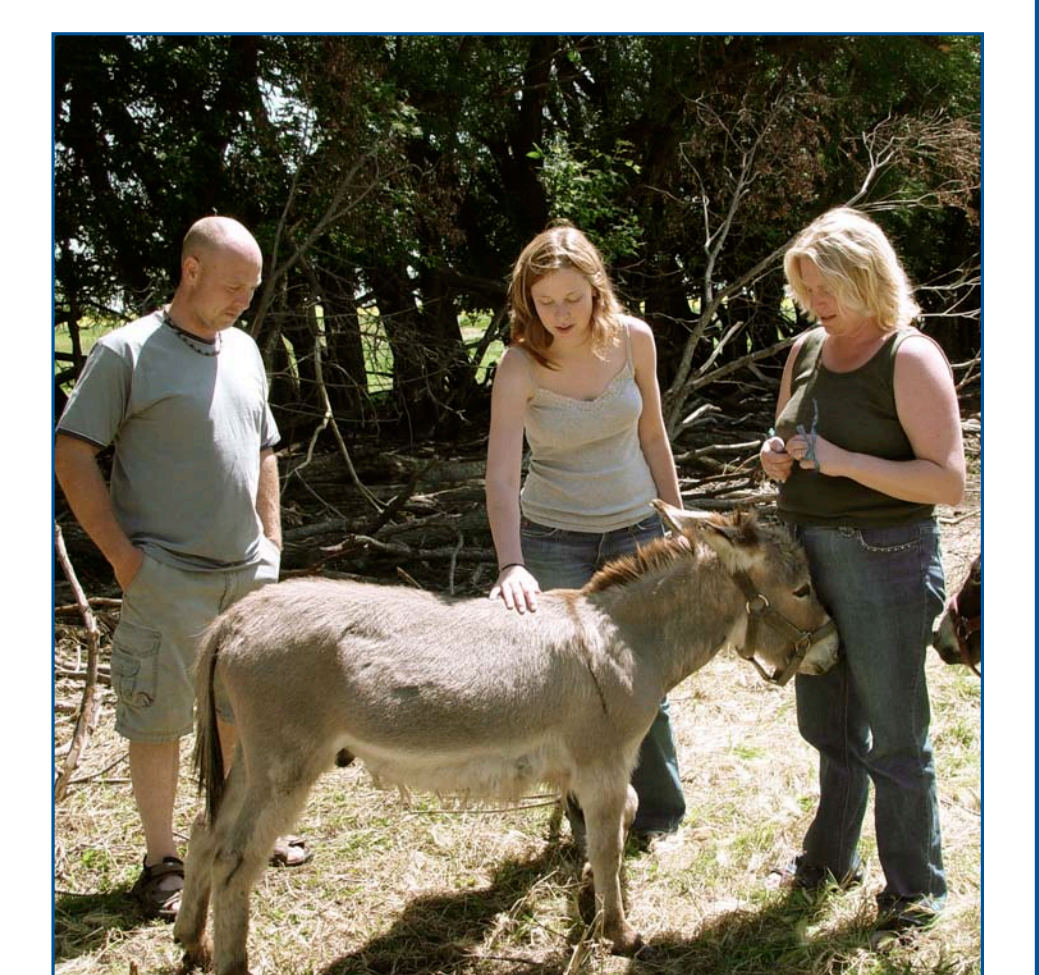


Figure 10 - Pam Cavers, Jacqui Kotyk, Clint Cavers

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