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## Ethical consumerism: an oxymoron?

*How can we grow people's influence on the food system beyond the point of purchase?*

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### The current landscape

#### The rise of ethical consumers

The notion of the 'ethical consumer' in the UK arguably emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, symbolised by the Ethical Consumer magazine launching in 1989 – albeit values-driven consumption of food and drink has existed for much longer. The term 'ethical' means different things to different people – from 'doing no harm' to 'having a positive impact on others'. What constitutes harm is often contested, which is one reason why we need healthy discourse and explicit justification of courses of action.

Ethical food buying is assumed to still be niche, but that of course depends on the definition of 'ethical' used. The Ethical Consumer Markets Report 2017<sup>1</sup> charts the growth in 'ethical food and drinks' from just over £1 billion in 1999 to £9.8 billion in 2016 in the UK. This seemingly inexorable rise in ethical food consumption is very welcome, but surely a bit more conscious ethical food buying falls short of the depth of change needed?

The results of survey-based 'consumer segmentation' suggest that 5-10% of the UK population are 'ethical' in their buying habits, 20-30% at the other end never knowingly buy anything 'ethical' and the large proportion in the middle 'sometimes do', particularly if it is easy, available and affordable to do so. This segmentation is reported to be similar in lots of other countries around the world. However, interpreting these findings to mean that 'most people do not really care about ethical concerns in relation to food' both overstates the evidence and risks underestimating the trend towards greater ethical concern.

#### The age of transparency

With the rise of the ethical consumer's demands, the sector's response often becomes limited to 'providing information' (e.g. Conscious Consumer app). In a system where people are treated as simply consumers, the natural response is to create certification models and provide information via labels. Certification has been a response to managing risk and vetting for ethical products. Labels are not just there to inform the public – they can be a powerful way of driving positive action in the supply chain. Whilst independent certification can bring benefits, questions are

increasingly being asked about the pace of change, with many arguing for more radical, systemic change.

In a few sectors, a large proportion of products sold are now certified in the UK e.g. 'ethical' tea and organic baby food. However, even if *all* markets were certified and labelled as 'ethical' in the future, that might not equate to food systems being fair and sustainable. Too often with current certification, the 'process is becoming the purpose'.

#### Going beyond what the consumer wants

There are also limitations of food businesses only focusing on what consumers want.

For starters, there is no consensus as to what the top ethical priority is (or should be). Well-intentioned concerns voiced by the public do not often recognise unintended consequences of a single-issue focus. There are also many important issues which get little 'consumer response', e.g. factory farming.

When businesses allow thinking to be too heavily directed by 'ethical consumers', it can lead to them becoming more reactive than proactive, and at the mercy of the fickleness of public opinion. The current fixation with plastics is a good example of this, with some retailers – and indeed 'ethical consumers' – jumping on the 'Blue Planet plastics moment' and considering boycotting plastics. This is despite most experts agreeing that sometimes plastics are the most environmentally friendly materials and most "computable" alternatives can in reality neither be composted nor recycled. Food companies plus those involved in media and advertising have a responsibility to bridge past the 'top' layer of ethical issues.

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*Focusing only on the 'consumer' - who only has agency in consuming - neglects systemic aspects of injustice and unfairness in the food system.*

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Another issue of only listening to the (ethical) consumer, is that it limits the level of engagement. In the food context, there is a tendency to blame individuals for 'not being ethical enough'. But for lots of people, particularly on low incomes, their food choices are heavily constrained. Wouldn't it be more empowering to give people real *agency*, rather than merely talk about their *choice*?

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<sup>1</sup> [Ethical Consumer website](#)

## The power of language

The word ‘consumer’ carries with it a set of ideas of what a person’s role should be. It has become a mindset of what the right thing to do is, rather than just one of the many roles people can play<sup>2</sup>. By repeatedly thinking of one another as consumers, it becomes a system-wide mindset.

The mindset in which people operate affects the way they choose to engage with others. For example, the differences between the Brexit Referendum and the Irish referendum on abortion illustrate the positive

impact of viewing people as engaged citizens – citizens being trusted and respected, and having the agency to shape what the decision should be. The former could be thought of as a ‘consumer referendum’, where the terms were entirely defined for people and the choice was arguably between two ill-defined and undesirable ‘products’. By contrast, in the latter, the terms were defined by a citizens’ assembly, made up of a representative sample of the population, over a 16-month process. This led to a more nuanced debate and outcomes that fewer people contested.

## A new vision

### Shifting assumptions

FROM (current prevailing assumption)	TO (a different way of thinking)
People are consumers, who (sometimes) vote	People are citizens, who consume food
The food system is ‘broken’	The food system works very well at doing what we no longer want it to do
Ethical food is a niche	All things being equal, everybody would prefer ethical food and farming systems, but their current agency to shape the system is limited
Big business is always unethical	Every business has an opportunity to change the system
‘Good’ business is about creating profit	Good business is about creating value
Consumers need more information	Citizens have agency
Neo-liberal economic discourse is the only way	The current economic narrative can be reframed <sup>3</sup>
The only way to increase power and make change in the system is by scaling up a business	Power in systems (knowledge, capital, etc.) flows through nurtured networks that share a common set of beliefs. Change happens as more players join that network.

## What can business do to grow people’s influence in the UK food system?

### Create meaningful connections with suppliers

With the increasing complexity of the food system, there is more disconnection with the individuals shaping it. An example from outside the food sector was given of a company selling ethical cotton pyjamas, where the Board of the retail company met the (in this case) women making the garments. Creating a direct human connection with supply chain workers can change the perspectives of, and dynamics, between different stakeholders.

*“Once you meet these [supplier] communities in person, you become accountable to them.”*

### Engage with others to drive system change

Food and farming businesses could focus on harnessing the agency and expertise that is latent, rather than simply making products more saleable. If people are thought of differently – as active participants who want to contribute and shape things – this opens up lots of creative opportunities. What might a shift look like from describing people as consumers who occasionally vote, to citizens who consume?

It is important to engage with government too, to share what ethical businesses need most. One small example given was pushing for business rates relief for sustainable restaurants.

<sup>2</sup> New Citizenship Project – Food Citizenship (2017) [\[link\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> Framing the Economy (2018) [\[link\]](#)

## Offer people a financial stake in the business

People can become more directly involved through having a financial stake in a food or drink business. Brewdog pioneered equity crowdfunding, creating a community of ‘equity punks’ that now applies pressure and held the company to account by being part of the conversation. It has, for example, become one of the first living wage employers.

When seeking to involve *people*, business leaders should critically involve employees, which they might not do if they were just labelling people as consumers. There is a growing number of examples where employees have been offered a stake in the business. Most recently, Riverford moved to 74% employee ownership, following in the footsteps of brands like Waitrose that have long pioneered that model.

## Start small

Change, however small, can have a lasting positive impact on the business and the wider UK food and farming sector. So start small, experiment, learn, review, adapt and move forward. This approach allows for the strategy to adapt as the context inevitably evolves, makes it easier for change to be encouraged, and accepted, throughout the business, reduces risks to the business, and gives rise to unforeseeable opportunities.

## Understand our own unique agency in the system

Each business is unique, so each step to transform the UK food and farming system will be unique. Every food business can be engaged to contribute to system change – for example by contributing a new ethical business model or by engaging suppliers to shift towards more ethical practices. Core to success is understanding the power and reach of each player in the system.

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*“Business is part of society. We all employ people. We all have families. We all have a future to look forward in some way.”*

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## Conclusions

There is a growing understanding that we are operating within a *system*, which requires us to change our strategies in our efforts to transform it. Currently, a lot of the context within which we operate undermines our efforts (see ‘assumptions table’), but business have the power to transform this context.

What constitutes ‘good for business’ does not necessarily equate to ‘generates more customers now’. Taking a consumer-led approach, buying our way to a ‘better’ food system, is not enough and is arguably getting in the way of an urgently-needed long-term approach to food system challenges.

Rather than just reacting to what is put on the agenda by the latest consumer boycott, food businesses can take a lead and create more meaningful levels of engagement with *people*, be it customers, employees, shareholders, or suppliers.

### What next?

- Who can I brainstorm with for new ideas in my business?
- What is my power in my current position in the food system (e.g. my business, my office, my industry)?
- How can I start a conversation with all stakeholders now, rather than just react to public opinion?
- How can our business tap into both macro (famous people) and micro influencers (so-called ‘normal’ people)?
- Which organisations are already seeking to grow people’s influence beyond point of purchase?
- What is the tone of the conversation food brands should be having with their customers?
- How can we ‘do with’, rather than ‘do to’?

The Food Ethics Council is working to build a Food Citizenship movement and in so doing will be gathering inspiration from food organisations exhibiting aspects of the food citizenship mindset. For more information, go to [foodcitizenship.info](http://foodcitizenship.info).

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting from 10<sup>th</sup> July 2018. We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Rob Harrison**, editor of Ethical Consumer magazine and **Julian Baggini**, author, philosopher and member of the Food Ethics Council. There was a short ‘response’ from our current Chair, **Jon Alexander**, co-founder of the New Citizenship Project. The meeting was chaired by **Dan Crossley**, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley [dan@foodethicscouncil.org](mailto:dan@foodethicscouncil.org) +44 (0) 333 012 4147.