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Fruit Branding: Exploring Factors Affecting Adoption of the New Pear Cultivar ‘Angelys’ in Italian Large Retail

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ABSTRACT

‘Angelys’ is a new brand of pear cultivar, produced and marketed under the trademark license model called “Club variety.” The main aim of this article was to evaluate factors triggering a potential interest in Italian large-scale retail regarding the marketing of ‘Angelys’ and how large-scale retailers would exploit it to enhance their market potential. An explorative analysis approach was applied via in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with major Italian large-scale retail fruit purchase managers. The results show that although sensory properties, handling features, and Italian origin are highly appreciated by professional customers, the need to sell at a premium price might limit the interest of retailers for this new variety. Finally, implications and recommendations for academics and operators are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Fruit branding; pear; Italy; large retailer chains; factors influencing purchasing decision; in-depth interviews

Background

Italy is the second largest producer in the world of pear after China (WAPA, 2011). Over the past 10 years the per capita consumption has fallen by 13% (CSO, 2010) even though the level of consumption (around 11 kg/year/capita) is still among the highest in European countries. In particular, the decline of consumption occurred more strongly for pear cultivars offered in the market from April to September.

However, there have been many reasons that could account for this decline, such as the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of the current pear cultivars. With regards to the intrinsic factors, when comparing other fruits like apples, bananas, or oranges, pears could not be easily consumed as “snacks” because consumers feel the need to peel them as they are quite juicy when consumed in that manner. The implications are that pears are not very well suited to modern consumer lifestyles with particular reference to young and working consumers, for whom convenience is a decisive factor that

determines their choices. As a result, these consumers prefer to buy vegetable and fruit products that are flexible in terms of convenience, like ready-to-eat salads, minimally processed and packaged fruits, vegetables, and snacks (Ragaert et al., 2004). Furthermore, extrinsic factors (e.g., origin, price, etc.) are also relevant, playing an increasingly important role in consumer food choices (Asioli et al., 2014; Varela et al., 2010). Seemingly, the lack of innovation manifests also through weak marketing and promotion efforts of extrinsic attributes, such as branding, product origin, and methods of production like organic ones.

In addition, there has been a tremendous increase in competition in the last decade, which negatively affected the profitability of business in the pear market. Moreover, new fruit varieties have extended the period of sale (e.g., ‘Pinkcot’ apricot), improved intrinsic characteristics (e.g., ‘Candongra’ strawberries), and have received large investments in promotion activities (e.g., ‘Pink Lady’ apple).

In this context, it becomes clear that compared to others fruits (e.g., apple), the pear sector has been affected by a lack of innovation. This has been confirmed by the fact that the main cultivars available in the food market (e.g., Kaiser, William, Abate Fetel, etc.) have not changed in the last decades. This lack of innovation has certainly reduced the chances to meet new consumers’ needs and expectations. Thus, in this research we started from the assumption and the notion that pear consumption could be boosted by introducing new varieties on the food market that might better address consumers’ needs, wants, and expectations, which is the vitality of any marketing effort in any business venture.

In this context, a new pear cultivar developed by the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA), resulting from the cross Doyenné d’Hiver × Doyenné du Comice (Le Lézec et al., 2002), which was registered with the name ‘Angelys’, and which could represent the beginning of innovation in this arena. Its marketing has been developed under the “Club variety” trademark license model and it has been recently introduced in the Italian food market.

The main goal for this study was to explore the factors triggering a potential interest of Italian large-scale retail chains in marketing of ‘Angelys’, and how large-scale retailers would exploit these factors to enhance their marketing intentions. More details about the specific objectives would be reported in the “Issues Addressed in this Study” section.

The importance of fruit branding in the fresh produce market

Traditionally, fruit produce had been considered as a commodity (undifferentiated products), and thus subject to strong price competition. As a result, fresh fruit producers had focused more on producing a large volume of products,

paying attention to technical features, such as increasing production efficiency, improving food preservation, and standardizing product quality, rather than focusing on quality differentiation, marketing, and promotion efforts. As a consequence, the spot price market was the main determinant of the informal contracts between producers and retailers (Trienekens et al., 2012; Young and Hobbs, 2002).

However, in recent years more attempts have been made to add value to fruit and vegetables, focusing on satisfying the specific needs and wants of consumers. This had been challenging; specifically, when developing a new food product and a brand, it is necessary to involve and coordinate all food supply chain actors in marketing activities (Brown and Maloney, 2009; Linnemann et al., 2006). The shift from the supply-driven activities to demand-based activities in the food sector is called “chain reversal” process (Linnemann et al., 2006).

In order to be successful in the market it is increasingly necessary to adopt a consumer-oriented approach, given the widespread situation of oversupply and fierce price competition for commodities (Gellynck et al., 2012; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Linnemann et al., 2006). Furthermore, changes in consumer demand, retail, and competitive environment have driven producers to take more market-oriented approaches in which brand management has been a key approach (Edwards and Shultz, 2005). When justifying this, the profound works of various authors (Banterle et al., 2014; Gellynck et al., 2012; Lichtenthal and Long, 1998; Miles et al., 1997) stated that future success of agribusinesses would require an increased focus away from the mere technical quality aspects of the product, towards and closer to consumer perception of quality, the development of marketing strategies promoting strong brands, unique selling propositions, and closer relationships along the supply chain. In other words, this meant some tremendous shifts, towards a more marketing and consumer-oriented approach.

Therefore, branding is one of the possible strategies for product innovation. Gardner and Levy (1955) defined a brand as “... a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumer many things, not only the way its sounds but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time.” Brand equity (the value of a brand as a company asset) depends on awareness, recognition, and, top-of-the mind awareness of these products in the market among other products or traders. This should generate positive associations with the product, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Beverland, 2001). According to Beverland (2007), Gehlhar et al. (2009), and Nijssen and van Trijp (1998), brand awareness could provide firms with strong economic returns and assets that are difficult to be imitated (Anderson and Narus, 2008; Webster and Keller, 2004).

There are many examples of successful branding in the fresh produce industry; among the different branding strategies in the fruit industry, the

“Club variety” model has recently become popular. Club varieties are patent-protected fruit cultivars that are commercialized through a trademark license for which fruit growers could join a “club” of licensed growers, but they might negotiate the rights to produce together with marketing these fruits with the patent holder (e.g., research institute, breeders, etc.) and might comply with the rules set in the licensing contract in terms of quality attributes as well as quantity. Moreover, club varieties have higher costs for growers where members would be required to pay royalty fees to the patent holders at planting, and periodic fees to support brand-marketing activities. These patent holders avoid overproduction by controlling the quantity supplied on the market, qualify and distinguish the offer from similar fruits in order to limit substitution, emphasize advertising and promotion activities to obtain price *premia*, which in turn should be able to guarantee higher economic return to both patent holders and growers. The typical examples of club varieties could be seen in the apple industry, where one could find cultivars, such as Pink Lady, Ambrosia, Jazz, Modì, Evelina, and Kanzi, while in the pear industry an example is the Sweet Sensation.

‘Angelys’: A new pear cultivar in the “Club Formula”

The ‘Angelys’ is a registered trademark and a “Club variety” brand associated with a special pear cultivar, which originated from the region of Angers in France. ‘Angelys’ was developed in the 1990s by INRA and the Centre Expérimentation Pépinières (CEP Innovations, France), which own the rights on the trademark in the European market.

Sensory and quality characteristics of ‘Angelys’

‘Angelys’ is a large pear of approximately 300 grams, with a short egg-shape and sometimes irregular in shape.

In order to evaluate the quality characteristics of ‘Angelys’ and their evolution during shelf life, a sensory analysis was performed during 2011 at Centro Italiano di Analisi Sensoriale (Matelica, Italy). Eight assessors (three males and five females) were selected and trained in sensory descriptive evaluation of pears, as recommended by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 5496–8586/1–/2 (ISO, 1993, 1994). The samples were tested in the sensory laboratory designed according to guidelines (ISO, 1988). Quantitative descriptive analysis (Stone et al., 1974) was used to evaluate attributes of ‘Angelys’. During the initial training session, the panelists generated descriptive attributes about appearance, flavor (combination of the olfactory, basic tastes, and trigeminal sensations perceived), texture, and after-taste (olfactory and taste sensations after the elimination of the product). The descriptive analysis was carried out using the sensory attributes listed in Table 1. 100-mm unstructured line scale, where the left side of the scale corresponded to the lowest intensity and the right-

Table 1. Sensory attributes definitions used to describe the pears.

Sensory attribute	Definition
Color and external appearance	
Russet	Amount of brown coloration
Percentage of white pulp	Intensity of white color of pulp
Percentage of yellow pulp	Intensity of yellow color of pulp
Scars	Black marks or indentations on skin
Odor and aroma	
Pear	Smell and aroma of pear
Vanilla	Smell and aroma of vanilla
Texture	
Crispness/crunchiness	How crisp the pears seem during chewing—brittle, makes a characteristic crunchy noise when chewing
Juicy	Amount of juice produced during chewing
Granularity	Geometrical textural attribute relating to the perception of the size and shape of particles in a product
Fibrous	Perception refers to long particles oriented in the same direction
Hardness	Resistance to bite
Basic tastes	
Sweet	Taste of sugar
Sour	Complex sensation due to presence of organic acids
Bitter	Flavor of bitter substance, like quinine

Source: Authors' elaboration.

hand side corresponded to the highest intensity, was used for each attribute intensity analysis.

Data analysis was performed by using principal component analysis (PCA), which showed that 'Angelys' is characterized by slight external russet and white, highly aromatic, sweet flash, and juicy (Canavari et al., 2012). Sensory evaluations were performed four more times (after 3, 6, 9, and 14 weeks of storage) to evaluate the evolution of sensory characteristics during shelf life. After 3 weeks of cold storage, the pears were crunchy as in the first analysis, grainy, and slightly sour. At the 6th week, the fruits were less crunchy, sweeter, and juicy. At the 9th week, the flesh was slightly soft and bitter, while only at the 14th week 'Angelys' was softer, more bitter, and partially damaged.

Given its characteristics, 'Angelys' is ideal for fresh consumption when it is ripe, while when it is a little more unripened, it is ideal for the preparation of specific recipes that combine 'Angelys' with cheese and meat products. The long shelf life is one of the main reasons for its development: it is a pear that could be sold during spring and early summer in the Northern Hemisphere, a period in which local cultivars experience challenges in storage and suffer from competition with Southern Hemisphere cultivars (e.g., 'William').

The Italian market of 'Angelys'

The fruit company "F.lli Spreafico SPA" has the exclusive rights to produce and distribute 'Angelys' in the Italian food market. During the study,

“F.lli Spreafico SPA” had started to produce and distribute ‘Angelys’ in the Italian food markets through large retail chain-stores in the North of Italy. However, information about market performance, experiences and expectations from customers/consumers about ‘Angelys’ in the Italian food market is still lacking (Canavari et al., 2012). In addition, since research related to the investigation of fruit branding is still rare in spite of the growing importance of fruit brands, more research in this area is required (Beverland, 2001; Nijssen and van Trijp, 1998). Therefore, an analysis on the potential of the ‘Angelys’ branded pear in distribution channels of Italy might provide fundamental support to decision makers about the viability of refocusing Italian distribution as a strategic marketing option, as well as to identify the key drivers affecting consumer purchasing decision that would be investigated in the next steps of the project through a quantitative survey.

Issues addressed in this study

Considering ‘Angelys’ has just been introduced into the Italian market, its selection for distribution and sale is via industry gatekeepers (Huliyeti et al., 2008; Insch et al., 2011; Sternquist, 1994; Wongprawmas et al., 2012). In this supply chain, gatekeepers are purchasing managers who have the power to select products placed in the points of sale in large retail chains (Sternquist, 1994; Wongprawmas et al., 2012).

This research focuses on gatekeepers’ perceptions of ‘Angelys’. In particular, the research objectives are:

- To explore the drivers that might guide gatekeepers to include ‘Angelys’ in their distribution channels.
- To explore the opinion of gatekeepers about possible main reactions of consumers towards ‘Angelys’, with particular reference to the main sensory aspects.
- To highlight the factors that might limit or impede the introduction of ‘Angelys’ within the large retail distribution chains.
- To track the key marketing elements that are most important for introducing ‘Angelys’ in the Italian food market.

Methods and data

Exploratory research based on qualitative data collection techniques was adopted in this study. It was the most suitable approach due to the absence of previous studies investigating the factors that affected the adoption of new fruit cultivars in the “Club” form. The exploratory approach enables the

evaluation of the complexity and rich diversity of the gatekeeper's perceptions, relying upon the collection of a large amount of information from few subjects, rather than only little pieces of information from a large sample. Although its findings cannot be generalized to all food chain members and channels, it is useful to provide guidance and generate hypotheses for further research (Myers, 2009).

Qualitative methods are increasingly used in food and food consumption issues (Asioli et al., 2012; Lindgreen, 2003; Wongprawmas et al., 2012) and their reliability and validity in this domain are well established and recognized (Maxwell, 1992; Riege, 2003; Whitemore et al., 2001), especially when a relatively new and unexplored phenomenon is analyzed (Harris et al., 2009). Explorative studies based on qualitative techniques are the best starting points for the development of further research, since they provide in-depth and context-rich information, although in most cases their findings cannot be considered conclusive.

Among the available qualitative research methods, in-depth interview was chosen because it is optimal for collecting data on individuals' histories, perspectives, expectations, and experiences (Molteni and Troilo, 2007). In addition, among the different types of interview techniques, we applied the semi-structured qualitative interview because of its flexibility (Molteni and Troilo, 2007) and also because its validity is proven by the fact that it is the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). In the semi-structured interview, interviewer and interviewee are engaged in a formal interview by using "Interview guidelines," which is a set of pre-determined open-ended questions/topics (not necessarily asked in a particular order), that might be complemented with other questions/topics that might emerge or change during the interview (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The interviewer is allowed to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that might stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate.

A semi-structured ad hoc interview schedule was designed for this study, to serve as a non-binding outline of the discussion with respondents, following the research aims mentioned above.

Selection of respondents

The researchers selected a non-probabilistic convenience sample of large retail chains as relevant "key informants," according to the research objectives of the research project commissioned by "F.lli Spreafico SPA."

"F.lli Spreafico SPA" provided a list of large Italian retailers. The criterion for the selection was based on large retailer chains with stores (supermarkets and/or hypermarkets) located in the North of Italy. This criterion was selected based on the company objective to launch 'Angelys' in these localities, as there is a strong tradition of pear production and consumption of

Autumn and Winter pear cultivars (e.g., Decana). Thus, the company provided researchers with a list of contacts with whom good business relationships has already been established. Five large retail chains were selected from the contact list for this study, whereby three of them were Italian while two were of international scale. Individuals interviewed were responsible for the purchasing decisions (buyers) for the large retail chains, and thus act as gatekeepers with a large amount of experience in the pear market in Italy.

Large retailers represent the most important marketing channel of fruit products in the country. Indeed, the retail chains interviewed in this study are the top three in Italy in terms of market share, while the overall five selected retailers cover around 50% of the market share of large retailers in the Italian market (Nielsen, 2013). However, since the research focused (1) only in the North of Italy and (2) a larger proportion of retailers are concentrated in that area, the largest possible quota of the target market captured could be approximated to around 70% of the pear market in the North of Italy.

Interview procedure

Five interviews were administered during March–May 2011. The interview schedule was sent to respondents in advance and personal interviews ranged between 30–90 min in duration. The interviews were structured according to a semi-structured interview guideline but did not adhere strictly to them because a “conversation-like dialogue rather than asking questions that imposes categorical frameworks on informants’ understanding and experiences” was preferable (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p. 492). All of the interviews were carried out face-to-face by an experienced researcher, while an assistant took notes. Interviews were recorded if permitted by the respondent, and the interviewer took note of important information and observed context-specific elements.

Data analysis

Immediately after the interview was administered, the interviewer prepared a summary report based on notes and on the recorded conversation. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed, comments were coded on the transcripts, and keywords were identified in order to identify important themes and patterns. Information from the summary reports, together with available transcription and comments, were analyzed through a qualitative content summarizing procedure with the aim of describing the phenomenon and presenting the most interesting elements arising from each interview, to gain an extensive overview of informants’ attitudes toward the topic (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992).

Results

General issues affecting fruit consumption

Respondents stated that they considered the Italian market for fresh fruits to be in crisis. The drivers of this decline come from both demand and supply sides. On the demand side, the increasing cost of living not balanced by increasing incomes has modified consumers' choices for all the goods including food purchases. In addition, consumer lifestyles are changing their food habits that have placed increasing emphasis on fruit characteristics that were previously not considered important (e.g., fresh-cut, etc.). For example, young people and women do not have much time to prepare and consume their meal. Consequently, some fruits are considered unsuitable for these new consumption patterns if new product features are not added (e.g., fresh-cut fruit salad). On the supply side, retailers often offer fruit products that are not attractive to consumers. More specifically, retailers offer unripe fruits, which have unsatisfactory sensory characteristics. The effect is that the consumer is not willing to spend money to purchase these products.

The right ripeness, so the best quality [pause], does not always coincide with those aspects, which are then manipulation of the product itself [...]. If we could offer the fruit at the proper level of ripening, we would give a product of superior quality to the consumer and maybe we would sell more products (Large retailer 2).

General issues affecting pear consumption

According to market information, pear is one the fruit products that has suffered most from this current market situation. The decrease in consumption is particularly sharp during the spring and summer months because of the increasing competition with other fruits during those months.

Pear is a fruit that bruises and dents easily in packaging, storage, and transport, and therefore it is often harvested and sold unripe. Furthermore, pear is very juicy and it needs to be peeled and so it is not convenient for people who do not have a long mealtime or eat outside the home.

Do the kids eat pears? [...] We see that old people sometimes eat pears, but especially for the young ... pear is something that you necessarily have to peel all in all, because who has never seen someone who brought to school a pear ... I always saw that they bring to school a banana [...] an apple maybe, maybe an orange, but a pear ... never (Large retailer 3).

Another problem for the pear is that it does not have that varietal renewal that has occurred in other fruits, such as apple.

The varietal change in the apples had opened up new horizons (Large retailer 5).

Factors influence large retailer chains’ purchasing decision ‘Angelys’

Table 2 summarizes the most relevant factors affecting the inclusion of ‘Angelys’ in the supermarket chains.

According to all of the interviewees, sensory attributes are very important features when consumers buy fruits with special emphasis to fresh produce. This is particularly true for two main sensory attributes: appearance and taste. Appearance is one of the key drivers for the first purchase. Reserving a space in the supermarket next to the entrance with attractive and appealing fruits is recognized as a widespread strategy implemented in supermarkets to attract consumers. Subsequently, taste is most important for re-purchase.

On this respect, the new pear offers relevant advantages. Respondents like ‘Angelys’ because of its white juicy flesh, size, and taste, even though they think it could be sweeter. The latter findings are corroborated on what was found by Canavari et al. (2012) who stated that ‘Angelys’ is not defined by the attributes “sweetness.” Indeed, the soluble solids content has been found to be lower for ‘Angelys’ (12.93%) if compared with ‘Kaiser’ (14.67%). The

Table 2. Overview of the most relevant factors that influence large retailer chains’ purchasing decision for ‘Angelys’ and illustrative quotations.

Factors	Illustrative quotations
Sensory attributes	<i>... the first parameter for a purchase is the eye, because the consumer, from surveys conducted, stops for a relatively brief time in the fruit and vegetable department, or he/she just buys the product which is written in the shopping list; but if he/she sees an attractive product with his/her eye, for the packaging or when the promoter allows him to taste the product, then he stops and thinks about this....</i> (Large retailer 1) <i>... from an organoleptic point of view it is not bad, it comes very close to Decana....</i> (Large retailer 4)
Price	<i>... price is the most important determinant in economic crisis. It is very important to sell products that consumers can afford, however current prices seem to be too high as compared to the quality....</i> (Large retailer 2)
Origin	<i>... the Italian origin is an important factor that consumers consider when buying a pear, however the quality/price ratio is still more relevant....</i> (Large retailer 2)
Services	<i>... we need to study something that will enable consumers to buy pears that they can eat as a snack, even when away from home....</i> (Large retailer 1)
Constant supply during the spring	<i>... to sell Angelys we have to make sure that there will be a sufficient supply of product all spring ... we cannot tell the consumer "Sorry, we do not have Angelys anymore."</i> (Large retailer 5)
Packaging and labeling	<i>... the color of packaging and labeling look very nice as well as attractive for consumers. However, we find the cardboard box difficult to recycle....</i> (Large retailer 3)
Period of commercialization and competitors	<i>... the spring season is the best time to sell it.... Due of the lack of strong competitors at that time and we could continue to supply the consumers that usually buy Decana....</i> (Large retailer 1)
Promotion	<i>... we do not have any problems with adopting a Club variety: if consumers like and buy it, we can adopt it, however the promotion costs should be sustained by Club producers....</i> (Large retailer 2)

Source: Authors’ elaboration of survey data.

bronze color is a positive feature because it might mask small dents arising from transport and handling, which is an important characteristic for all of the large retailers interviewed.

Obviously, interviewees considered price to be one of the main factors driving consumer purchase. When considering the inclusion of 'Angelys' in the range of products sold, the current selling price appears too high compared to the quality characteristics of 'Angelys', and the interviewees were not confident that consumers would find the difference in taste a sufficient trade-off.

Respondents agreed that the fact that 'Angelys' is produced in Italy is an important factor that affects the purchase decision of Italian consumers. This is particularly true for Italy-based retailers, for which the "Italian origin" holds a particular value, while the international retail chains interviewed seem to pay less importance to origin.

In addition, the Italian origin has a further advantage for large retailers that eliminate handling and complex logistical aspects associated with fresh produce supplied by international markets.

According to respondents, the current offer of pear cultivars available in the Italian market does not meet at all the needs of consumers and distributors. Indeed, there are only a few pear cultivars on the market, and there has been no turnover in the cultivars on offer. Many cultivars have disappeared because the consumers were not interested in buying them at a certain price, or because they were too sensitive to handling. A possible strategy to encourage a pear purchase decision could be to include more services that facilitate the consumption of ripe pears. For example, to supply pears already peeled and cut, such as fresh-cut fruit salad, or labeling that indicates the best consumption date.

A key driver for the introduction of 'Angelys' in large retail chains is the spring-round supply of products required by global retailers. Other important factors are packaging and labeling, which are important both for consumers and large retailers. For consumers, packaging and labeling should be attractive, and the attractive box and color palette of black and bronze pleased respondents. However, the material chosen (cardboard box) would likely create problems of increasing waste volumes due to recycling difficulties.

The respondents consider the period of commercialization as one of the most important drivers for adopting 'Angelys'. During that time, possible competitors could be pears coming from the Southern Hemisphere (e.g., William), as well as cultivars produced in Italy like Abate Fetel, even though the latter is in its final period of sales. In addition, since 'Angelys' is similar to Decana and in that period Decana is not on the market, 'Angelys' could easily serve as a substitute and prolongation of consumption for this cultivar.

Finally, respondents stated that the adoption of a "Club variety," such as 'Angelys' by large retailers greatly depends on the promotion activities that the Club is able to perform. Tasting experiences, gadgets, and advertising

nowadays are gaining more and more relevance in food marketing, but they require substantial investments that, in the opinion of respondents, have to be carried out by the “Club” producers.

Anticipated and actual consumer reactions to ‘Angelys’

Not all of the respondents had experience in commercialization of ‘Angelys’. The respondents that have already sold ‘Angelys’ stated that initially consumers, who purchased the new product, reacted positively.

However, it was posited that due to high price that was not mitigated by extraordinary sensory features, a second purchase of ‘Angelys’ was not common. For example, respondents declared that ‘Angelys’ is not sweet enough, as might be consumers would expect, which might limit its commercialization. The lack of sweetness is also supported by the sensory panel test (Canavari et al., 2012). The respondents who were not yet selling ‘Angelys’ had difficulties in expressing an opinion. However, they stated that since consumer perception varies across different geographical areas, understanding in which area ‘Angelys’ is more appreciated would be very important.

Finally, respondents that did not have experience with ‘Angelys’ suggested that there are two groups of consumers. In the first group, there are consumers who are informed and know the differences between cultivars: these consumers are usually attracted by novelties like ‘Angelys’. The consumers in the second group are not informed and would not recognize the different pear cultivars, and therefore would not be likely to be attracted by ‘Angelys’, given its higher price.

Marketing features of the pear ‘Angelys’: Suggestions and recommendations

Several different points regarding the packaging came forward from the analysis.

The current packaging, such as the cardboard box, has both positive and negative features. It allows for self-service sales, which is very important in fruit sales. However, it causes a huge amount of waste, which is a problem for supermarket chains. A possible packaging solution is to adopt either plastic bins or to use a packaging with a small number of fruits (e.g., four) because fruits are expensive and hard to manage. A smaller package might increase consumption due to lowest price for the package and also to prevent consumer handling of the product on the supermarket shelf.

Respondents suggested that ‘Angelys’ should be promoted in points of sale to increase consumers’ awareness and knowledge of the product, and that these costs should be carried by the owners/licenses of ‘Angelys’ brand. Price discounts, tasting experiences linked with cheese, and promotion materials

like gadgets might increase purchases. The optimal commercialization period for ‘Angelys’ is considered the springtime, because there is less competition from other pear cultivars and other fruits.

Discussion and conclusions

Since this was an exploratory research project, many issues were raised that would need to be addressed in future studies. The main aim of this article was to gain an in-depth understanding of attitudes of large Italian retail chains towards the inclusion of ‘Angelys’ in their points of sale. In this context, respondents confirmed that the pear sector seeks and needs new cultivars, which should address the innovation both in terms of food product characteristics (e.g., sensory like more attractive appearance, longer shelf life able to make available the product during the spring and early summer months, etc.) and marketing aspects (e.g., promotion, advertising, etc.). Respondents often referred to ‘Pink Lady’ as a good example of innovation in the fruit sector.

Second, with regards to the drivers that influence the adoption of ‘Angelys’ in the large Italian retailers, sensory properties, price, Italian origin, consumer awareness and preferences, constant product supply, and the appropriate commercialization period (during spring–early summer) are the most important aspects. The same drivers were also identified as key factors for fruit products originating from Thailand in the Italian food market (Wongprawmas et al., 2012).

Third, concerning the possible reactions of consumers towards ‘Angelys’, the respondents noted that prices are currently too high if compared to the quality features of ‘Angelys’. In order to provide more in-depth knowledge, more information is necessary in order to better set up the prices at the supermarket, because if prices are perceived to be too high in comparison with quality perceived, consumers would not buy or buy less quantity of ‘Angelys’.

The factors that may limit the adoption of ‘Angelys’ could be identified as high current prices, unsuitable packaging, and nonuniform appearance.

Finally, respondents suggested that if producers want to develop in-store strong brand positioning and make consumers aware of ‘Angelys’, they have to place more effort and financial resources in marketing activities, such as promotion, advertising, and tasting experiences. This suggestion is congruent with recommendations by Beverland (2001) for ZESPRI in New Zealand and Nijssen and van Trijp (1998) for fresh produce in general. Having good marketing programs (Kotler, 2007), targeting and positioning brand in a careful way are actually considered the prerequisite for brand success (Park et al., 1986). The membership to the “Club” cultivar, if well supported by producers both in terms of product quality characteristics and promotion activities, would favor ‘Angelys’ adoption by Italian large retail chains. In

addition, ‘Angelys’ could be positioned in the market as a “luxury” product suitable for special occasions (e.g., making cakes or combining tasting experience with cheese for special events).

As a concluding remark, the Club variety could be a new business model, which could certainly offer advantages to fruit producers, such as a premium price, higher returns, and improved company image. However, managing a Club variety requires large investments, strict product quality control (e.g., maintain standardized and high-level quality attributes) and marketing control (e.g., quality monitoring for fruits sold under the “Club variety” brand) essential for creating brand awareness and recognition positively affecting brand equity.

Limitations of the study are due to the fact that this research is based only on a qualitative approach and therefore the results could not be generalized to all Italian fruit distributors, although the ones who were interviewed represent the majority of pear distributors in Northern Italy. In addition, due to the lack of in-depth knowledge of ‘Angelys’ of the respondents, it was difficult to extract more in-depth information.

Keeping these limitations in mind, some suggestions and recommendations for practitioners and academia could be provided. On the producers’ perspective, the attempts of ‘Angelys’ producers have to be encouraged and supported. This research suggests that it is very important to establish a closed and fruitful collaboration among all of the stakeholders involved in ‘Angelys’ like researchers, breeders, producers, and marketers. Specifically, more investments in market research are necessary to inform both distributors and consumers on the demand side. This could allow better product development with special emphasis on packaging and promotion activities. In addition, developing different products with ‘Angelys’ like fresh-cut, cakes, or combinations of taste activities with cheese products could increase the chance of better marketing ‘Angelys’. Finally, the small amount of produce currently available could limit the success of the brand in case demand grows, so more plantations are recommended.

More research is especially needed on the consumer side, with the objective of getting feedback on consumer perception of taste and value. For this purpose, choice experiments and experimental auctions paired with sensory consumer tests are recommended to evaluate the consumer’s willingness to pay for this specific Club cultivar/brand. This information would be useful for practitioners for product development and for segmenting consumers and developing a more refined and targeted marketing strategy (i.e., suggesting prices to retailers).

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