Habits, concerns and preferences of vegetables consumers in Hanoi

Findings from the "Safe & Organic Food Finder" baseline study

Solving Hanoi's food safety paradox

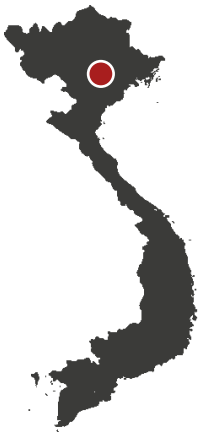
In early 2016, VECO Vietnam launched the Safe & Organic Food Finder (SOFF) platform (http://soff.asia) in Hanoi. The platform, composed of both a mobile app and a website, aims to help consumers in Hanoi find safe and organic vegetables (S/OV) stores in their neighbourhood. One of the project's objectives is to help solve what VECO Vietnam calls the "food safety paradox" in Hanoi. On the one hand, about 93% of Hanoi's urban population claims to be concerned about food safety. On the other hand, only 3.2% of all vegetables sold in urban Hanoi are safe (Wertheim-Heck et. al., 2014). In Vietnam, the number of farmer groups that grow S/OV is growing steadily, hand in hand with the Vietnamese consumer's increasing appetite for these kinds of vegetables. However, it seems like both sides have a hard time finding each other, and one of the reasons often quoted by consumers is that 'I don't really know where to buy safe or organic vegetables'.

SOFF precisely aims to address this lack of knowledge. After putting their address in SOFF's search bar, the users of the platform can visualise on a map all stores located near the location they put in. They can then access information about the store's address, opening hours, the types of vegetables sold and the certifications attached to these vegetables at the time that the store was surveyed. Shortly after SOFF's launch, VECO Vietnam hired a consultant to carry out a baseline study in order to better understand the situation of S/OV consumption and sales in Hanoi.

The study focused on assessing consumers' knowledge, concern and awareness about safe food, and aimed to grasp their level of trust and familiarity with safe food stores and certifications, with a view to refining the project's interventions and to determining a baseline value for a series of key monitoring indicators. The study used a mixed data collection methodology combining both quantitative and qualitative methods such as a questionnaire survey and direct follow-up interviews with consumers and store owners. Data collection took place in July 2016 in all urban districts of Hanoi. 280 valid questionnaires meeting the formulated criteria were used for data analysis. The study's target group is comprised of 95% of Vietnamese and 5% of foreigners, mostly female, living in urban Hanoi, belonging to middle to high income households, between 17 and 45 years old, and regular internet users. As such, the target group reflects the profile of potential SOFF users and safe vegetables shoppers in Hanoi.

Main findings

1. Approximately 28.6% of respondents grow safe or organic vegetables at home. Their first motivation is their concern for food safety, particularly farmers' overuse of agrochemicals and their lack of trust in the government's food safety control system. Other reasons include growing safe vegetables out of habit and for their own enjoyment.



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2. Open markets are consumers' preferred shopping place for vegetables. The survey revealed that, although consumers shop for vegetables in many places, approximately 64% of them most commonly shop at open markets. 16.5% of respondents claim to usually go to supermarkets, followed by 11.5% stating to shop from vegetables stores. About 5% of respondents grow most of their vegetables themselves, consume vegetables grown by relatives in their hometowns or buy them from trusted acquaintances.

3. One third of respondents never or rarely buy safe or organic vegetables while less than one fifth claims to buy S/OV on a daily basis. One quarter of respondents buy S/OV a few times per week, and 22.5% buy them a few times per month. In contrast with the findings above about vegetables purchase in general, 44% of consumers buy their safe and organic vegetables in supermarkets, and 22.5% at vegetables stores. Surprisingly, 17% of respondents report buying S/OV from open markets and street vendors where S/OV are rarely found. This would indicate limited knowledge and understanding about food and vegetables safety amongst consumers in Hanoi.

4. Internet is the main source of information about safe food. Almost three quarters of consumers access information about safe and organic food via the internet. 61% find information from neighbours and 45% from television. Newspapers are another significant source of information with 38% of respondents claiming to get information through that channel.

5. 97.5% of all respondents are either worried (30%) or extremely worried (67.5%) about food safety. This supports previous findings by Wertheim-Heck et. Al. (2014) who found that 93% of consumers in Hanoi are concerned about food safety. In addition, three quarters of consumers report to be very interested in the issue of safe and organic vegetables, against 1.8% claiming not to be interested at all.

6. Health is the key driver of S/OV consumption. The main reason driving consumers to buy S/OV is to protect their health (91% of respondents), followed by environment protection (38%), and better taste (20.5%).

7. Consumers' low trust in S/OV certifications is a major hurdle to more S/OV consumption. The study revealed that about 10% of respondents are unsure about whether the vegetables they consume daily are safe or not. Together with a large number of citizens growing S/OV at home, this indicates shortcomings in the transparency of the safe S/OV value chain. Only 2% of consumers claim to have high trust in safe food certifications. About half of questioned consumers fairly trust the certifications, 40% have little trust

in them, while 8% pretend not to trust them at all. Consumers don't trust safe food certifications because of the threat of false brands (43%), their lack of trust in the certification process (55%), the unknown origin of produce (40%), and their lack of trust in the sellers (32%). As such, the study clearly identifies the lack of trust in S/OV certifications and sellers as a main issue preventing people from buying more S/OV. Consumers are particularly concerned about sellers not properly understanding the concept of "safe" and "organic" products. Furthermore, they regret that vegetables stores are not certified by reputable certifiers. In particular, consumers are afraid that vegetables labelled as safe or organic do not live up to the quality standard.

8. Consumers have low knowledge of and trust in S/OV stores. The findings of the study indicate that only 10% of respondents are very familiar with stores selling S/OV. 25% are quite familiar, while 41% are a little bit familiar and 25% are not familiar at all. On average, consumers have very low levels of trust in S/OV stores. Only 3.6% trust them very much, 38% generally trust them, 45.7% trust them a little bit while 12.5% of consumers do not trust them at all.

9. Consumers have a low level of understanding of S/OV certifications. A significant number of participants claim to be familiar with food safety certifications but their understanding of what they mean and encompass is low, even for the most common government certifications. This low level of understanding could partially explain why consumers' willingness to pay more for S/OV is relatively low. This situation seems to reflect the weak information dissemination by the government about food safety certifications.

10. Approximately 71 % of respondents are willing to pay higher prices for S/OV. 5.7% are not willing to pay higher prices at all, and 23.2% are unsure. When asked about how many more percent they would be willing to pay for certified S/OV, 238 respondents (85.0%) answered with an average amount of 27.1%, which is much lower than the actual selling price of S/OV. Most consumers said that they are willing to pay higher prices for S/OV in order to protect and improve their health. During in-depth interviews, 82% of the 31 respondents claimed to be willing to pay more for vegetables because they are safer for their family. Some respondents also mentioned that their motivation to pay more came from a feeling of security. A few respondents emphasised their willingness to support farmers whose production costs are higher for organic and safe produce, and a few others mentioned being willing to pay more to protect the environment.

11. Low trust in S/OV hampers consumer's willingness to pay more. People who were not willing to pay more for S/OV said that this is due to their low level of trust in S/OV (59%) and their humble income compared to the actual selling price of S/OV (45.5%). Other respondents complained about the current limited S/OV retail network and choice of vegetables varieties. The study showed that female consumers are on average more willing to pay higher prices for certified S/OV while it showed no evidence that willingness to pay is influenced by income levels, age group and district.

12.Trust, price and information are the main obstacles to S/OV purchase. Overall, the study showed that the low level of trust in both the quality of S/OV and in vegetables sellers is the main issue preventing

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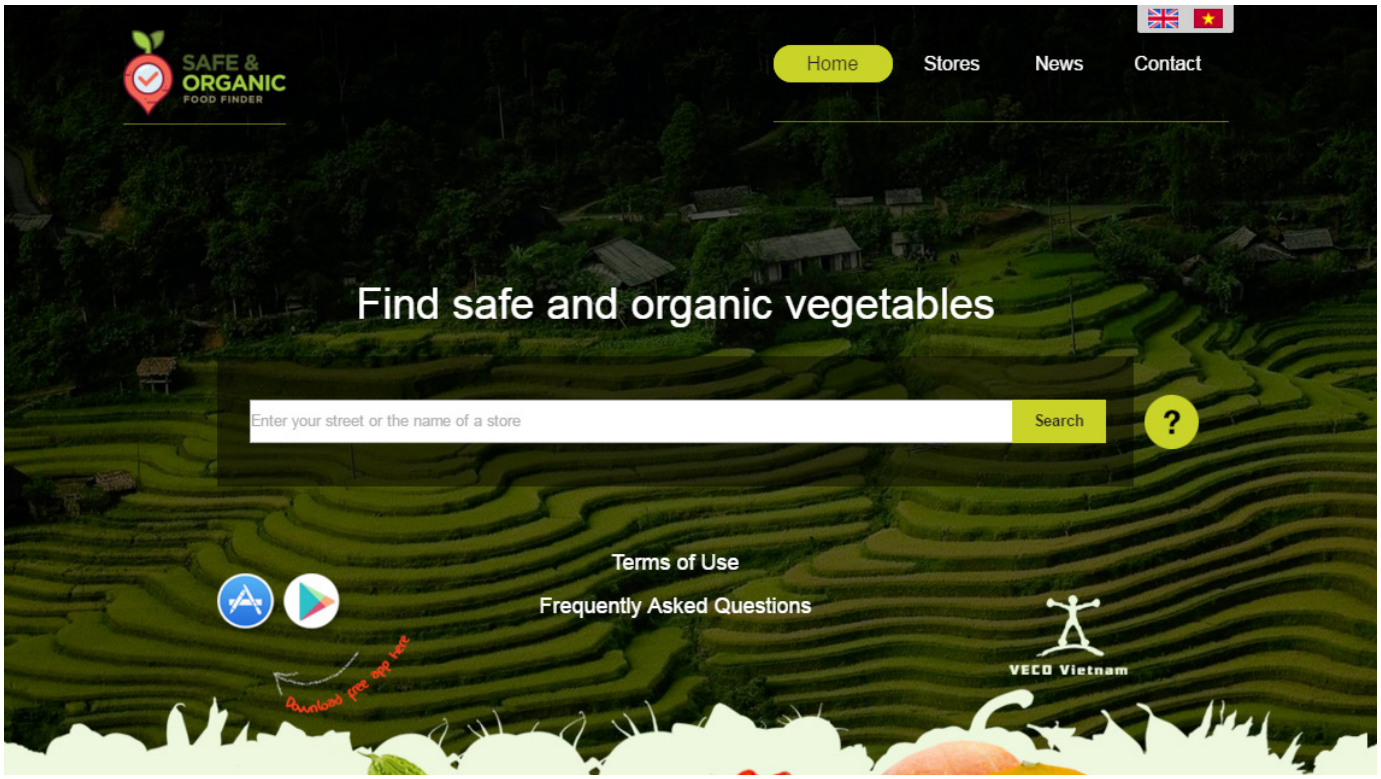

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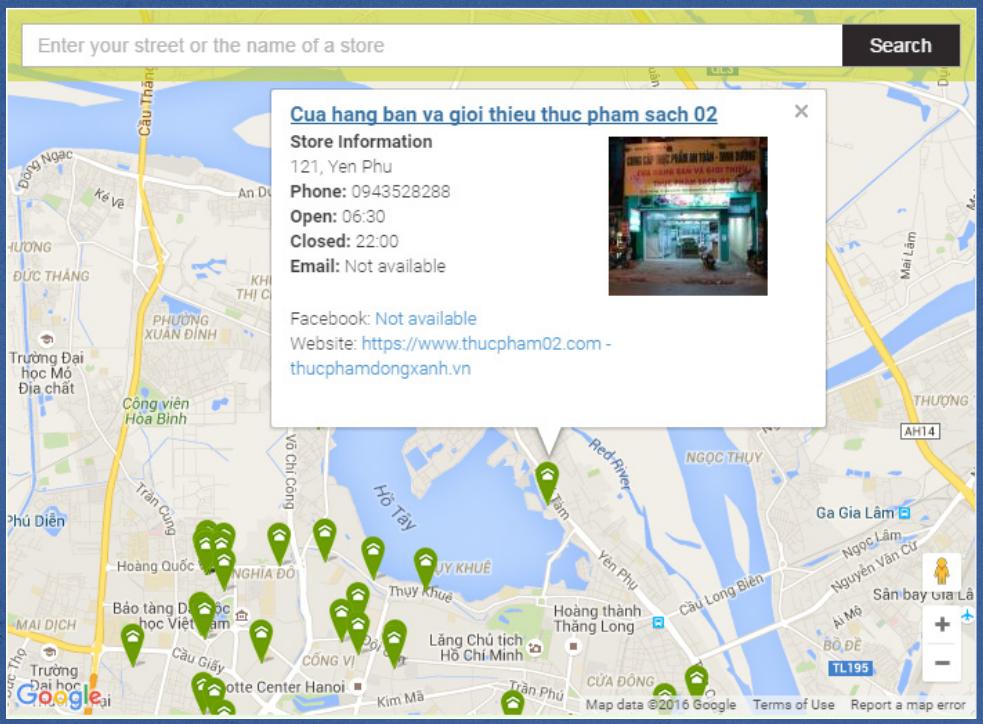
people from buying more S/OV (77% of the 31 in-depth interviewees). High prices for S/OV (58%) and limited information on where to buy trustable S/OV (55%) – which is addressed by SOFF – were two other major obstacles mentioned by consumers. Interviews with S/OV store owners highlighted some of the key challenges that they are facing such as irregular supply and limited number of vegetable varieties which make the stores unable to consistently meet consumers' demand.

Conclusion and recommendations

In order to solve Vietnam's food safety paradox, future actions should be oriented towards building consumers' trust in safe and organic food, particularly vegetables. In order to increase that trust and to support higher sales of S/OV, a series of other issues must be addressed such as farmers' compliance with S/OV production standards, strict and transparent certification processes, product traceability, better branding and labelling of S/OV, and strengthened inspection and penalty for sellers found cheating.

The study also highlighted that consumers' understanding of what constitutes safe and organic food is not optimal, and that they have limited understanding of certification processes.

Future communication activities by safe food actors should thus focus on demystifying certification processes and educate consumers about what safe food really means. Involving consumers in the quality assurance process as is done in Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) is one way of increasing their trust in the quality of safe and organic food. Organising media and awareness campaigns that involve store owners was also suggested to improve trust and transparency. When asked about how to increase the sales of S/OV, about one third of respondents suggested improving S/OV stores' delivery services. Improving quality assurance was the most common answer, followed by awareness raising activities and producers' support. Finally, more efforts should be directed at connecting S/OV stores with a larger pool of producers in order to ensure a regular and diverse supply that would better serve consumers who would in turn be more incentivised to keep shopping at S/OV stores.



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