

SYNOPSIS

Discussions of Branding and Marketing

Midwest Hazelnut Grower's Conference

La Crosse, Wisconsin

March 5, 2022

The discussions were lively and fruitful. The researchers and the rest of the team appreciate the enthusiastic response from the participants.

People were randomly assigned to small groups (less than 10 in each group), and each group circulated through three discussion stations – Knowledge, Branding, and Story – each with their own questions (shown in insets).

General Synopsis

The questions were designed to address similar things from different angles. This led to organic discussion with many overlapping responses which blurred lines enough that it is often difficult to link a specific comment to a specific question.

Above all others, one factor was prominent across all three discussion stations: the importance of highlighting the local aspect of midwest hazelnuts. Several topics brought up during the discussions warrant further research, such as marketing hazelnut oil for use in cosmetics, marketing husks and shells (still defining potential uses), and co-branding opportunities with other locally-grown products.

The group was largely energetic and united in its opinions. There was shared-thinking on many issues. Even folks without much exposure to branding and marketing actively participated.

Knowledge

Since hazelnuts are a new product for most Midwestern consumers, a lot of education will be needed for both home consumers and food industry consumers. The discussions highlighted the need for comparison-based knowledge – how hazels compare to other nuts in several ways – flavor profile, uses, and health benefits. This extends to processed products as well (flour, oil, byproducts). At least according to growers, consumer education will be important in branding and marketing efforts. For example, recipes and fact sheets may be useful tools to build hazelnut awareness and establish loyalty.

Knowledge Questions

- *What do home consumers need to know about hazelnuts?*
- *What do they need to know about Midwest-grown hazelnuts?*
- *What do chefs and food manufacturers need to know?*

Branding Questions

- What **EXCITES** you about successfully branding Midwest-grown hazelnuts?
- What **SCARES** you about successfully branding Midwest-grown hazelnuts?
- What **QUESTIONS** do you have about marketing and branding?

Branding

A lot of excitement was expressed regarding hazelnut branding – the excitement of getting in on the ground floor of a new market, of sharing the stories and benefits (ecological, health, etc.) of hazelnuts, and the potential of the new market. There are concerns among growers about several things: levels of supply not being able to meet demand, the unpredictability of bringing a new product to the market (especially without a large supply to start), fears about being overshadowed by large corporations with monocropping intentions, and concern that Oregon nuts will dominate the market.

There was much discussion about *ingredient branding*. Questions arose about who would manage an ingredient brand, what sort of controls will be put in place, and what requirements will need to be met to be able to label products as *Midwest* hazelnuts. Questions about geography, plant genetics, growing techniques, organics, quality controls, brand management, etc. will need to be addressed.

Story

There was a consensus among participants that highlighting the localness and the small-scale/family farm aspects of hazelnut growing is vital. Environmental benefits were also frequently mentioned – the perennial nature of the crop, and the idea of it being a legacy both for the environment and for family farms. Some growers felt it could be helpful to highlight the beauty and diversity of the farms, perhaps within hazelnut advertising, and/or by bringing consumers to the farms in-person. These growers said it could be important to show how small farms differ from big ag. Highlighting hazelnuts as a crop with native genetics came up several times, as well.

Story Questions

- What makes Midwest-grown hazelnuts special?
- Why are hazelnuts important to YOU?
- What do you hope CONSUMERS will feel is important about Midwest-grown hazelnuts?