

Wood products from sustainably managed woodlands: Review of consumer awareness and best marketing practice

Following the publication of the England Forestry Strategy in 1998, and as part of its policy to improve the management of neglected broadleaved woodland, Forestry Commission England sought to assess the market for woodland products as the basis for measures to improve marketing. Market research concerning wood products derived from sustainably managed woodlands was commissioned in 2003, which included a literature review and market analysis. It was concluded that marketing efforts should concentrate on training and development for small-scale producers, together with creating an identifiable brand and suitable co-ordination to allow such producers to compete and expand sales in the mass markets.



“Key to the success of this enterprise has been maintaining a level of quality and reliability of supply that meets the retailer’s expectations. The product attracts a premium in terms of retail selling price. Imported charcoal sells at £500 per tonne, whereas home-grown charcoal attracts £750.”

BioRegional Charcoal Company

Background

Many of England’s broadleaved woodlands are neglected and most of the support available to them is in the form of management grants and other incentives. Undermanaged woodlands contribute little to rural development, biodiversity and social value. One of the major hurdles preventing more sustainable management of these woodlands is the poor state of the market for woodland products. New markets and new uses for woodland products need to be stimulated to reinvigorate the woodland economy.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- review current knowledge of consumers’ awareness and attitudes towards sustainable wood products
- provide an insight into current marketing activities carried out within the sector, with the aim of identifying successful approaches
- provide strategic guidance on the marketing priorities for the industry in order to develop both a greater volume and higher value of sales

Methods

- The study involved desk research, postal and telephone consultation with a wide range of trade organisations and timber using industries, and a peer review of strategic guidance.
- The desk review examined what was already known about consumer attitudes towards sustainable wood products and highlighted examples of best marketing practice that have proved effective in promoting the sale of sustainable wood goods.
- Organisations and businesses were identified by the steering group (Forest Research, Countryside Agency, Small Woods Association), using contact lists from the Small Woods Association and members of trade associations.
- Approximately 150 predominantly small producers were sent a questionnaire asking for information on their product range, volume of sales, branding, labelling and marketing activities.
- A range of organisations representing large producers, as well as trade and commercial buyers and supporting organisations, was consulted.

Findings

Consumer awareness research found that the Forest Stewardship Council and Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification logos are only recognised by a minority of UK consumers. There is no current link between sustainable accreditation and British origin in the wood product sector. In the public's mind, the focus of such accreditation schemes is largely to combat the exploitation of tropical hardwood. There is also a wider issue that many members of the public consider any harvesting of woodland as environmentally damaging.

While there are some retail customers prepared to support a 'local' or 'green' premium because the product carries sustainable credentials, most will not. This view is reinforced by a European Consumer survey, which identifies environmental compatibility as ranking only seventh in the priority list for the retail consumer when they are purchasing furniture products.

As small-scale producers tend to lack the time and resources to promote market expansion, and depend heavily on word of mouth and reputation, training and development funding for small businesses (less than 50 employees) was recommended. Such smaller scale producers also have difficulty in delivering consistent

volumes of product. Entry into the national retail market is only possible by co-ordinating the efforts of these producers and marketing their combined output as a single product range.

A basis for a strategy to expand mass markets was suggested, which included creating an identifiable brand and designing a variety of marketing initiatives. Such an expansion would require a co-ordinated and systematic approach to production, as it demands a supply of products of reliable quality and volume. For there to be any significant penetration into commercial construction and trade markets, UK sustainable wood products must compete in terms of price, quality and service. The BioRegional Charcoal Company offers one model of how the industry can be organised to deliver a product at the scale required by mass-market buyers. There is scope for other national markets, for example firewood, fencing and garden furniture.

In Wales and Scotland suitable raw product is less fragmented than in England and is therefore better able to be produced at a scale that can compete with imports. There is a question mark over the ability of English timber to meet increased demand for all but the specialist niche end of the market.

Recommendations

- 'British origin' should be developed as a valued and unique selling point, otherwise British production will continue to find it difficult to compete with high volume, cheap imports.
- A single British brand will probably be of greater benefit rather than separate national (e.g. English) brands, and should focus on quality and value for money.
- British producers should lend their support to recognised sustainable accreditation.
- Training and development funding for small-sized woodland product businesses (less than 50 employees) should be made available. For example, training to develop a good local customer base or to diversify to take advantage of other sources of income.

Partners

Research carried out by Arkenford Ltd in collaboration with Paul Tabbush formerly of Forest Research.

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Funding / Support

Funded by Forestry Commission England and the Countryside Agency, in partnership with the Small Woodlands Association.

Reports and publications

Christie, C. and Cooper, A. (2004). *Wood Products from Sustainably Managed Woodlands: Review of Consumer Awareness and Best Marketing Practice*. Unpublished report.