Marketing Neglected and Underutilised Species success factors of a market and consumer oriented approach

by Klaas Koolman
Koolman, K. (2014): Marketing neglected and Underutilized Species. Success factors of a market and consumer oriented approach, Berlin, Germany. This work mention of proprietary names, product or company names do not constitute endorsement of the product or company and are given only for information.

Koolman Consulting
www.koolmanconsulting.com
Berlin, Germany
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4
WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF THIS ARTICLE? 4
WHAT IS A NUS? 5
WHY ARE THEY NUS? 6
BENEFITS OF MARKETING NUS 7
Local producers 7
Private sector 8
Consumers 8
THREE STEPS OF DISCOVERING THE POTENTIAL OF UNDERUTILISED SPECIES 8
Benefits 8
Target group 9
Relevance 9
GETTING THE TIMING RIGHT 10
Different stages of market maturity 10
In which stage is my potential market? 11
At what stage can I enter the market? 11
How can I design my product to fit the market? 12
WAYS TO ENTER THE MARKET 13
Research & Design 13
Market testing 13
SUCCESS FACTORS 13
Benefits 14
Timing 14
Story 15
Audience 16
Brand 16
CONCLUSIONS 19
INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity, food security, nutrition, health, economic development – all these topics are high on the agenda of numerous organisations around the world and are the goals of global campaigns, initiatives, task forces and research projects. And they all have one thing in common: they are all concerned with the products we gain from agricultural cultivation, the business we create out of it, and the way we consume them.

Yet still today, food security is not yet a given, biodiversity is regressing, people in developing countries don’t have access to sufficient nutrition, and populations in industrialised countries suffer from diseases caused by excessive consumption of certain foods. And this is all interlinked.

It has all been mentioned before. It’s not new. But we need to think about it again.

There are an estimated 400,000 plant species on this planet. Over 20,000 species are edible, 150 species are commercialised. But only 3 crops are used to meet 50% of the daily worldwide calorie demand: maize, wheat and rice. 95% of our demand is met by only 30 species.

During the 20th century, according to FAO, “75 percent of plant genetic diversity has been lost as farmers worldwide have left their multiple local varieties and landraces for genetically uniform, high-yielding varieties”.

What about the remaining species? They are basically neglected, underutilised, not commercially used or forgotten. They are commonly called: ‘neglected and underutilised species’.

We should not be satisfied with the existence of the above mentioned issues.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Global Plan of Action for the Conservation and Sustainable Utilization of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (FAO), and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) are just some examples of global initiatives that focus on research and promotion of the utilisation of NUS.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF THIS ARTICLE?

We have a chance to delay or even stop the loss of biodiversity and at the same time increase food security, improve nutrition in developing countries, provide new health ingredients to populations in industrialised countries, and create sustainable livelihoods for producers in the countries of origin.

However, we need some help. Help from the above mentioned neglected and underutilised plant species.

We need to remember the knowledge of ancient cultures, we need to access the information about the huge variety of edible species, we need to get creative, and most of all we need to think about how to successfully market neglected and underutilised species to different consumer groups.

This article is about the marketing of neglected and underutilised species. It is about the success factors that need to be considered when formulating product strategies and when putting plans into action. This article will look at the different maturity stages of potential markets, the role the potential consumer plays in the commercialisation of NUS, the options in product design, the ways to enter a market, and finally the communication that needs to accompany it.

We will briefly touch on the definition of what NUS are but will not deeply investigate the scientific literature.

We will only scratch the surface of why species are neglected and underutilised and we will not review all the theoretical work that has been done on the structural side of the commercialisation of NUS.

Furthermore, this article does not deal with the EU novel food regulation and the barriers this regulation constitutes for the commercialisation of NUS.

WHAT IS A NUS?

What is a proper level of utilisation? Is it OK to speak about utilisation at all, when talking about nature’s species? Merely asking those questions shows how difficult it is to find the right definition of what an underutilised species is. In the context of the above mentioned global issues, international research has agreed upon a definition of NUS as “those species with under-exploited potential for contribution to food security, health (nutritional/medicinal), etc.”.


2. Ibid.
Synonyms to NUS are ‘orphan crops’, meaning they currently have no crop experts or research efforts going into them, or ‘minor crops’, which refers to their minor status relative to the so-called ‘global crops’ (such as wheat, maize, rice, etc.). NUS are sometimes referred to as ‘promising crops’, for example in emerging markets or because of previously unrecognised value traits, or as ‘niche crops’ due to their marginal importance in production systems and economies.

Certainly, there are different levels of detail which can be employed to define and classify NUS. This includes geographic characterisation (some NUS might be underutilised in one part of the world, but not in others), economic value characterisation (public value vs. private value), and characterisation regarding their potential (observed economic value vs. potential economic value), which again can vary depending on geographic location or other structural factors such as the existence of supply chains and knowledge.

NUS all have a couple of things in common: first and foremost they provide unrealised potential for contribution to human welfare, in particular to income generation for people in developing countries, food security and nutrition, and the reduction of ‘hidden hunger’.

They often play an important role in the cultural heritage of their places of origin (e.g. the Amaranth in Central America) and thus they often have a long history of local production. They have shown high adaptation capabilities to biological niches and hence play an important role in ecosystems around the world.

Generally, they are traditionally used in local diets. However their nutritional, culinary, and medicinal properties are little-known or under-appreciated, which results in them receiving little attention, especially from consumers.

And this is where their potential lies. In the end, it will be the consumer who is supposed to appreciate an edible plant species or a product derived from it. Already, a lot of research has gone into what needs to be done to foster the utilisation of certain species, a lot of work has been done on identifying the reasons that hinder utilisation of certain species, and a lot has been written about the necessary structures that need to be in place in order to facilitate utilisation of neglected species.

Let’s reverse this approach: let’s first ask what and to whom are the nutritional, medicinal, or culinary benefits of NUS and then start the process of utilisation from there.

**WHY ARE THEY NUS?**

Before looking at the benefits of marketing NUS, we are going to touch upon the reasons why some species made it to the top of the list, while thousands of others are playing a minor role, leading a neglected existence or aren’t utilised at all.

The most common theory alleges a combination of accidental and targeted manmade selection. Over the last couple of thousand years, serendipity and chance selection led to the fact that some crops got cultivated more often than others.

 Doubtless, geographical and climate factors have been influencing this selection process. Once certain crops got a head start over others, they received more scientific attention, selection and breeding focused on these crops, and they became traded more often than other crops. Finally, the mechanisation and later industrialisation of agriculture lead to the focus on only a dozen crops, mainly driven by agricultural corporations who provide seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides from a single source.

 But not only science, optimisation, and industrialisation influenced crop selection. Also, cultural beliefs influenced crop popularity, such as the prohibition of amaranth in

---

Central America by the Spanish conquerors or the promotion of potatoes by Prussian rulers in the 18th century.

On top of this, the marketing machinery of food corporations put the boot into crop variety by pushing industrial foods based on high-yield cash crops, thus changing consumer demand in both developed and developing countries.

**BENEFITS OF MARKETING NUS**

There is a lot of research on NUS which considers topics such as the impact of utilisation and commercialisation of NUS as well as the specification of the different types of benefits arising from the commercialisation of NUS. Here we will only briefly touch upon the different dimensions and characterisations resulting from that research.

Like the characterisation of NUS and the definitions of NUS, the benefits of marketing NUS can also be analysed from different viewpoints. We can classify them according to the general field of impact, such as the impact on food security, biodiversity, nutrition, health, or economic development. Further, characterisation can be applied along the value chain, classifying the benefits by their impact on a certain entity of the value chain (e.g. producers, resellers, manufacturers).

It is also quite important to look at the place of impact. Most of the neglected and underutilised species are found in developing countries. However, developed countries also offer opportunities for marketing certain forgotten crops. An example of this is the rise of Kale (Brassica oleracea) as a “superfood” in the US during the last couple of years.

While Kale has been a traditional part of the central and northern European diet for centuries, this species has received a tremendous popularity push in the last couple of years. This provides evidence of the potential for local producers to benefit from both local and international markets – in both the southern and northern hemisphere.

**Private sector**

Apart from the above mentioned significance of NUS for local producers, NUS can also constitute a relevant source of business for the local private sector, such as resellers, the processing industry, or local companies marketing the products (internally as well as internationally). The commercialisation of NUS also creates opportunities for international business and international development aid, based on the creation of sustainable local businesses. Examples include the marketing of a Guayusa-based tea product (Runa LLC, USA) in the US, made from sustainably grown Guayusa leaves from the Ecuadorian rainforest, or Moringa products (Moringa oleifera) from Africa as “superfood bars” (KuliKuli Inc., USA) in the US or as a food supplement in Germany (africrops GmbH, Germany). These products successfully integrate local producers, manufacturers, exporters, importers and marketing companies in the target market, and benefit them all.

**Consumers**

Current research and discussion about NUS primarily looks at the benefits to different stakeholder groups, with a focus on the parties involved in the early stages of the value chain of NUS production as well as the overall environmental or economic benefits of the commercialisation of NUS.

Here we would like to turn the tables and primarily ask: “what’s in it for the consumer?” This is exactly the question that, in the end, will determine the success of the commercialisation of a neglected species: somebody’s got to buy it and somebody’s got to pay for it. If there

---

„It is widely recognized that embedding use of neglected and underutilised species (NUS) into traditional household systems of the resource-poor—be they small-scale farmers or collectors—holds significant potential for: improving food security and achieving more balanced nutrition for the rural and urban poor (social benefits); conserving biodiversity and stabilizing agro-ecosystems (environmental benefits); as well as generating income for the rural poor and creating employment along the value chain (VC).“

10
is no opportunity to turn the species into a sustainable business, then we should instead consider the commercialisation of the species as an act of development aid.

The above mentioned reasons for and benefits of marketing NUS are all important and of course are the main driver and justification for marketing NUS.

To successfully market NUS, the first question should always consider how the consumer benefits. And these benefits might be manifold. There can be benefits for local producers on the one side, such as easier cultivation, harvest, or processing than other crops, higher nutrition levels, healthier ingredients or higher income; or benefits for consumers in importing countries, such as exotic flavour and health claims. It is important to analyse the benefits of the species that is to be commercialised. And this should always be the first step of the process.

**THREE STEPS OF DISCOVERING THE POTENTIAL OF UNDERUTILISED SPECIES**

**Benefits**

As mentioned above, the name of the game in marketing underutilised species is to find out what the plant provides to the consumer. This holds regardless of who it is intending to commercialise NUS, be it local producers, local companies in the countries of origin, importing companies in target markets, or NGOs. Whoever it is who attempts to market NUS should investigate what the benefits of the plant or product might be.

They can be manifold: tangible benefits, such as nutritional benefits and health benefits, or intangible benefits related to human needs that are higher up in the hierarchy of needs, such as self-expression, distinction, or meeting altruistic motives.

Let’s take the example of Moringa oleifera, a bushy plant that grows in most parts of the tropics. Interestingly, the habitat of Moringa is almost congruent with the regions where malnutrition is most prevalent. Moringa provides more than one of the above mentioned benefits. Moringa is known as one of the most nutritious plants of the world, able to fight malnutrition in several ways. It also provides certain health benefits, as it contains a huge amount of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Furthermore, products made out of Moringa or containing Moringa can be distinctive, thus providing the benefit of distinction to the consumer and if marketed in the right way, altruistic motives might also be satisfied.

In a nutshell: one plant can provide different benefits for consumers, however, not all benefits will be equally important to all target groups, and hence not relevant, which brings us to step number two – the target groups.

**Target group**

As seen above, benefits are not benefits to everybody. People in developing countries might appreciate the nutritious values of a plant, whereas the same group of people living abroad - thus having access to foods that are perceived as better - might not be interested in the nutritional benefits of the same plant. Alternatively, native inhabitants of an industrialised country might appreciate the health benefits of a plant that is considered as ‘animal fodder’ (e.g. Moringa oleifera) in other parts of the world in a way that local consumers cannot.

So, potential product benefits must always be analysed in connection with the potential target group.

**Benefit plus target group leads to relevance.** Example? Why are you still reading this article? Well, because you’ve got the feeling, that it is relevant to you!

**Relevance**

Relevance acts as the strongest influencer in buying decisions, indeed relevance is the reason. And ultimately, the buying decision is the most important element in the process of marketing NUS.

For decades now, marketing theory and practice have studied markets in an attempt to cluster and to count consumers and apply socio-demographic traits. They have tried assigning attributes and characteristics to potential consumers, attempting to conclude their needs based on demographic attributes.

We now know that there is a shortcut: relevance. **Relevance is a subjective feeling that originates from the personal circumstances of the potential consumer.** Relevance is independent of age, gender, profession, education or other classic demographic factors. Relevance originates from personal interest, individual problems, challenges, peer groups, trends, word-of-mouth, and other factors, such as stage of life, which again has nothing to do with age.

For example, Acai (Euterpe oleracea) the not-so-neglected-anymore superfruit from the Amazonas, has had a very high relevance for indigenous inhabitants of the Amazonas region for centuries for its nutritious properties. It then became popular amongst surfers at Brazilian beaches, when they were looking for a healthy and nutritious food to provide them with energy to keep surfing. Already we can see that the one and the same fruit, which is valued for the same benefit (nutritional benefit), has a different relevance to different target groups. Eventually, Acai got marketed as a “superfood” to industrialised countries such as the US and the EU, again to a completely different target group than the one who first used it as a part of their traditional diet. In industrialised countries consumers appreciate Acai for its healthy ingredients, which they believe will help against aging or with weight-loss. Again, a completely different set of benefits, a different target group, and thus relevant for completely different reasons.
Consequently, everybody involved in marketing neglected and underutilised species at whatever stage of the process should be able to name the reason why the product is relevant, and to whom.

To sum it up: we need to discover the potential benefit, check it with a potential target group, and, most importantly, make sure that this particular benefit is relevant.

GETTING THE TIMING RIGHT

Different stages of market maturity

What does that mean? Let’s try to describe this without going into the detail of the theory of diffusion of innovations within markets. First, we will take a look at market maturity. From a seller’s point of view, the level of market maturity is determined by the potential to achieve additional revenue/sales over time.

Market maturity is low in so called introduction markets or innovators markets. The audience are mostly innovators, the market is small, prices are usually comparably high, and sales are low as is the competition. However, the potential to achieve additional sales is still very high. Less so in the next stage, the growth markets, where the audience, mostly early adopters, already is bigger, prices are still high, sales are expanding and competition is rising.

Close before reaching saturation (the point where 100% of potential customer base are customers) the markets experience the stage of maturity, with a so called “early majority” of consumers buying the product, where sales are at their peak and competition is still moderate. From this point onwards the chance of achieving additional sales declines and the market shows first signs of saturation.

The next stage is the saturation phase, where the “late majority” of consumers finally adopt a product, the market size is now at its peak, prices begin to decline, thus decreasing sales volume, and the competition is high. This is also usually the phase, where a lot of B- and C-brands and me-too-products enter the market.

The last stage is the market decline, when even laggards are starting to buy a product, prices and sales are dropping and competition starts dying off.

Why is this theory of market saturation and innovation diffusion important to marketing neglected and underutilised species? As mentioned earlier, relevance is the crucial success factor for marketing NUS, however, marketing NUS can become quite difficult if there is not yet an existing market, or if the market is saturated or even in decline. Hence, it is vital to know at which stage a potential market is at and when a company can enter the market.

In which stage is my potential market?

To find out in which stage a market is, we need to look for the following information. Has the NUS been marketed before, and if so, in what kind of way? Was it commercialised as an ingredient or as a stand-alone product? Who is already marketing the specific NUS and where? How many players are involved, how developed are the value chains, and how many possible consumers exist? Some of these questions might be easy to answer while others may require intensive research or market analysis.

A good indicator for the maturity of a market is the number of players already in the business (on the marketing side of it). Generally, very early markets for NUS show 1-3 highly specialised players trying to build a market by seeing early products meeting very specific needs of innovators, who are either brave enough to try a new product.
or are highly convinced of its benefits. These few players share the market amongst themselves.

Markets at “innovator” or “introduction” stage often show a highly fragmented market share structure with lots of different players, most often with only small market shares of around 5%. In these markets, the top 3 players might only account for 30% of the market share, with the remaining 70% distributed between many small players.

More mature markets at the “growth” or “saturation” phase present a different picture. At this stage 3-5 big players account for 80% of the market share, with the remaining players only holding 20%.

In declining markets, C-brands finally get washed away, with only the top brands remaining. You don’t usually want to enter declining markets with a product based on NUS. In any case, given that the definition of “underutilised” products requires that there hasn’t yet been significant commercialisation, it’s quite unlikely to encounter markets for NUS that are in this declining stage.

**At what stage can I enter the market?**

Commercialisation of neglected and underutilised species means groundbreaking work. This certainly applies to the value chain and sourcing side of it, but potentially even more so to the commercialisation side. In most cases, the markets for NUS are either currently non-existent (hence the underutilisation) or they are at a very early stage, such as the “innovation” or “introduction” phase.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that a certain plant might be very popular in one region, but not used at all in other regions, meaning that there might be a market in the region of origin but not elsewhere, or the other way around. Moringa oleifera is again a good example for an underutilised plant that is very popular in south and south-east Asia as a vegetable, but not so in the northern hemisphere. Consequently, while we could regard the “home” market as a mature market, the possible new target markets of the northern hemisphere would be at the “innovation” stage.

To find out in which stage a market is, we need to look for the following information. Has the NUS been marketed before, and if so, in what kind of way? Was it commercialised as an ingredient or as a stand-alone product? Who is already marketing the specific NUS and where? How many players are involved, how developed are the value chains, and how many possible consumers exist? Some of these questions might be easy to answer while others may require intensive research or market analysis.

**How can I design my product to fit the market?**

Product design, to most marketers, is about the look and feel of a product. But actually it is more. When talking about product design, we are actually talking more broadly about the inherent features that make a product relevant to a certain target group. Basically, it is about what the product can do for the consumer and how. Keeping that in mind, we can now link things together by connecting the “relevance” and “market stage” approaches.

The same applies to açai. Undoubtedly, the market in Brazil is at a mature stage, whereas in Europe it is at innovation stage. Other differences are also apparent. Most of the time we are talking about a product that is consumed differently in different target markets. Native markets often use NUS as a basic ingredient in their diet, whereas in foreign target markets, NUS constitute a component of a certain product. This brings us to another dimension of the marketing for underutilised species: the product design.

Whenever we want to market NUS we should know what makes the product relevant for the consumer but also at what stage the potential market is. Let’s look at some examples.

Quinoa (Chenopodium quinoa), once an ancient grain, has received a popularity boost over the past couple of years and is now very popular in northern America and Europe. The market in the US and EU certainly is at a growth stage (still with some potential, as not all potential consumers know about and use Quinoa). The product itself is the actual grain. In most cases it is not processed or incorporated into another product. The product design is simple. It is basically the nutritional value of Quinoa that makes it relevant to the consumer. Further, there are some target groups that appreciate the fact that it is a gluten-free grain*. We are now slowly starting to see Quinoa based products such as Quinoa pasta or snack bars that incorporate Quinoa.

Açai, Acerola (Malpighia glabra), Noni (Morinda citrifolia L.) Maca (Lepidium meyenii) and any other “superfoods”. Most of them are incorporated into other products, thus enhancing these products and providing additional value through additional benefits. The pure product itself, in most cases is not relevant to consumers. Often, this is because it is impractical or inconvenient for them to use. In the case of the above mentioned superfoods, it’s the supposed health benefit of the plant that makes it attractive as an ingredient. In the case of

---

*“gluten-free grain”
Quinoa for example, it’s the nutritional value and filling quality that makes it attractive as a side dish.

To find the right product/market fit we need to look at the consumer needs together with the stage of market maturity. The newer and more exotic a product to a certain consumer group is, the more basic the actual product might be. In an innovator market, people might be willing to adopt a product even if it is not yet very elaborate or sophisticated. Early adopters grapple with innovative products and convinced users are likely to spread the word about an interesting product. The more that a new and innovative product or ingredient from a NUS spreads in a market, the more interesting it becomes for other consumer groups. However, the early majority of consumers willing to adopt a new idea need to be convinced by good product design. At this stage of market maturity, in most cases it is not sufficient anymore to just provide the basic ingredient. The neglected and underutilised species need to be incorporated into more convenient or handy products. But again, this depends on the inherent features of the basic ingredient, as seen with the Quinoa example. If the product itself is the reason why consumers are adopting it, then there is no need to create a fancy product out of it.

The key is to figure out whether NUS would best serve as an ingredient or as a stand-alone product. In the following paragraphs, we’ll be touching upon how to enter a market with a new product.

WAYS TO ENTER THE MARKET

Research & Design

In an ideal situation, a company should not enter a market with a new product without thorough research. Product design should be based on quantitative and qualitative market research. Product development should follow the findings of the market research. However, in most of the cases, when commercialising NUS, neither time nor money will be sufficient to realise proper market research. Hence, there must be other ways to find out what is likely to actually work for a market.

Market testing

Market testing is a common method to find a suitable solution for a certain target market. Market testing can be realised on a small scale by testing a new ingredient or a new product concept with a certain group of consumers. If they respond positively then production can be scaled up. Market testing might also be a good way to attract new partners or investors. Once a product concept is out on the market and visible, it is much easier for potential business partners to evaluate their involvement. Market testing also includes using the means of communications and public relations to test how the public would respond to a certain product concept. Producers should not be afraid that by doing this they will reveal private information to potential competitors or encourage them to appear on the scene. In most of the cases, the pioneer will have a strategic advantage in terms of knowledge and time.

SUCCESS FACTORS

As discussed above, there are different factors that contribute to the potential of NUS being marketed successfully. Furthermore, we have seen that it is vital to identify if there is even a market for a certain NUS or NUS-based product at all. This target market usually can be described with regards to its maturity level. However, there are five important factors that will determine if a market-oriented development of NUS will be successful or not.

Benefits

As previously mentioned, the cultivation, processing and marketing of NUS must be beneficial to at least one group within the process to make it work as a market-based approach. The more people and groups that can benefit from NUS and the market-oriented development of NUS, the better.

Above all, there is the economic benefit of a market-oriented approach. The economic benefits encourage farmers, traders, and industries to get involved and invest into the production and marketing of NUS and NUS-based products. If there is no economic benefit for anybody within the whole value chain, then we should really talk about an act of conservation of NUS than market-based facilitation.

What would those benefits be? NUS possess a couple of characteristics that make them interesting. They often play a vital role in the livelihood strategies and diets of rural or urban households. Some NUS have low input needs, enabling resource-poor farmers to venture into production. The perception of some NUS have also changed amongst target groups, other than the farmers growing them, from “food for the poor” into interesting, nutritious, and novel food ingredients for consumers around the world. Let’s take the Maca root (Lepidium meyenii) as an example. Maca has been cultivated for centuries in the Andes for its nutritious values by indigenous groups. However, just recently, Maca became one of the most interesting and high demand ingredients, especially for nutraceuticals and supplements, as Maca has been found to have positive effects on the whole body, the psyche, and may help with sexual dysfunctions. Thus Maca production has increased drastically in the specific region of origin (around Lake Junin, Peru) and led to increased income for local producers.

To successfully market NUS at least one benefit must be identified. Apart from the fact that there has to be at least one economic benefit, as mentioned above, there needs to be at least one crucial product benefit. Those can be nutritious values, “exotic” image, fair trade features, special quality propositions, or exclusivity. The greater the number of crucial benefits that come together in one product, the greater the chance of the NUS becoming a commercial success.

Timing

Getting the timing right is an important factor for successfully marketing NUS. As discussed earlier, markets have different stages of maturity. Per definition, NUS are “neglected” and “underutilised” and we can therefore assume that at the moment we start a market-oriented approach of utilisation of NUS no market exists. However, that’s not always the case. As we have seen, in most of the cases NUS are being cultivated and used in at least some parts of the world already.

Let’s again take Moringa as an example. Moringa has been used in certain parts of the world for centuries if not even thousands of years. Very mature markets for Moringa and Moringa-based products already exist, for example in the Philippines. However, when looking at the European market, it is still in its beginnings. In Europe, consumers still buy Moringa as pure leaf powder, mostly in bags or encapsulated as a dietary supplement. Moringa in Europe is still considered a very niche and exotic food supplement. The market for Moringa is in its very early stage. However, in the Philippines, people already

The key is to figure out whether NUS would best serve as an ingredient or as a stand-alone product.
To successfully market NUS at least one benefit must be identified. Apart from the fact that there has to be at least one economic benefit, as mentioned above, there needs to be at least one crucial product benefit. Those can be nutritious values, “exotic” image, fair trade features, special quality propositions, or exclusivity. The greater the number of crucial benefits that come together in one product, the greater the chance of the NUS becoming a commercial success.

Enjoy a vast assortment of interesting Moringa-based products. Hence, the market is much more mature. Accordingly, introducing a simple leaf-powder based product in the Philippine market wouldn’t cause much of a stir, indeed it might not even be successful, as competition is already very dense. The vice versa also applies: introducing a very advanced Moringa-based product into the European market might not be successful at this point in time, as it might simply get overlooked and ignored. The market just wouldn’t be ready for it.

Consequently, successfully marketing NUS always requires that you first analyse the target market and develop products that fit the actual state of the market and the consumer demands.

Story

Apart from marketing NUS in the countries of origin, which are often developing countries, good opportunities for commercialisation also exist in other target markets such as developed countries, where the spending power for new products from NUS exists and revenues for producers might be higher. However, markets in developed countries are saturated. For almost every product-type there is an A-brand and at least a couple of competitors. Basic products are available in an abundance of types and brands and specialty products or niche products are at least provided by two to three competitors.

How does that affect the successful marketing of neglected and underutilised species? You simply have to stick out. Consumers not only want to know the tangible benefits of a product (e.g. healthy, energising) but they also want to hear a story. A story that they can relate to, that touches them or that makes the product remarkable. It is very important to elaborate this part of the marketing positioning.

Let’s take the production of an energy drink based on the Guayusa (Ilex Guayusa) leaves from Ecuador. Partly funded by the German GIZ (German Agency for International Co-operation) the US-based company Runa LLC developed a clean and healthy energy drink to be marketed in the US-market. The US-market is, like other markets, full of energy drinks and you would expect that it would be difficult to enter a market like this with a new product from a neglected and underutilised species. However, alongside getting the basic marketing factors right, Runa LLC also offers consumers a story based on the positive image of the two young founders, the positive effects the business has on the environment (rainforest), and the benefits that it provides for local producers in Ecuador (sustainable income generation).

In the end, product features, pricing, packaging, point of sale etc. are all very important. However, people like to talk about something with their peer group. The likelihood that something gets shared with other people increases with the quality of the story. Nobody wants to share a boring story, and the same applies to products from NUS.

Audience

When thinking about the story behind a product or brand, we necessarily need to think about who we want to hear that story. That’s the audience. As mentioned above, a target group for a product is mandatory. But the target group is only the group of people that might possibly buy a product. The audience is the group of people that actually wants to hear what the brand has to say. To successfully market a neglected and underutilised species, we need to understand what our audience relates to.

Let’s take for example the Moringa (Moringa oleifera) case. The German based company africrops! GmbH imports Moringa leaf products and Moringa seed oil from eastern Africa, mainly Tanzania and Malawi, where they help the local smallholders to successfully plant, grow,
harvest, process, and sell the Moringa products. So africrops! GmbH does inclusive business development in the country of origin. Parts of the production are exported to Europe and marketed to consumers under a consumer brand. And that’s where the audience comes in. The story of africrops! GmbH in combination with the health benefits of Moringa is something that the consumers want to hear. The fact that they can do something good for their own body plus help people in other parts of the world seems to be a story worth telling.

Brand

Story, target group, audience: whatever marketers are trying to do to market neglected and underutilised species, it all comes down to the brand. Why? No matter how small a venture might be, how niche the target group is, or how specific the cause is, a brand protects the business. Supply chains, production facilities, technology, advertisements: anything can be copied. However, a real brand can’t be copied, because it’s an intangible asset in peoples’ minds. Companies trying to market NUS should not risk being copied. There is always somebody who has got more money to invest or more staff to put on a project. By creating a distinguishable brand marketers of NUS can protect their cause.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have discussed several aspects of marketing neglected and underutilised species. We looked at the definition of NUS, the reasons why they are NUS, and the benefits that come with the commercialization of NUS. We agreed that promoting NUS can contribute to food security and biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, we have seen that the successful utilisation of NUS can also represent a vital source of food and income, especially for the ‘base of the pyramid’. Accordingly, international efforts are increasingly pointed to the utilisation of NUS as a source of food, income, and biodiversity conservation.

We have further discussed two different approaches towards the utilisation of NUS. One is to understand the utilisation as an act of conservation. In most of these cases international development aid organisations and NGOs conduct their respective projects to foster the cultivation, processing, and utilisation of neglected and underutilised species. They set up the necessary structures and frameworks, apply knowledge sharing, and build capacity. However, they lack the successful commercialisation and as a result the projects are not economically sustainable in the long run.

The other approach towards the utilisation of NUS is to embrace them as a source of business, especially for those at the beginning of the process. A lot of NUS have a huge potential to not only serve as food and nutritional supplements for the producers, but also as a high margin product in other markets. Successfully commercialising neglected and underutilised species can offer a vital source of income for all parts of the value chain in producing countries.

There should be no doubt that the latter approach is the more economically and socially sustainable way of utilising NUS. Accordingly, everybody involved in the utilisation and conservation of NUS should strive to achieve a sustainable market oriented approach towards NUS. The means to successfully market NUS are the same as marketing any other goods, and the most important aspects have been described in this article. However, there is on big difference in applying professional marketing techniques to NUS: it will not only be for a good reason but also for a good cause!

Consumers not only want to know the tangible benefits of a product (e.g. healthy, energising) but they also want to hear a story. A story that they can relate to, that touches them or that makes the product remarkable. It is very important to elaborate this part of the marketing positioning.
A lot of NUS have a huge potential to not only serve as food and nutritional supplements for the producers, but also as a high margin product in other markets. Successfully commercialising neglected and underutilised species can offer a vital source of income for all parts of the value chain in producing countries.

Sources and further reading:

http://www.pfaf.org/user/default.aspx
http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5609e/y5609e02.htm
http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/
http://www.runa.org
http://www.kulkulbar.com
http://www.africrops.de


About the author:

Klaas Koolman is a business and marketing consultant, dedicated to marketing for sustainable business models. With Koolman Consulting, he focuses on inclusive business, direct fair trade, marketing for neglected and underutilized species, novel foods and innovative niche products from biodiversity.

He has been working in various industries since 2001 with international companies such as Sony and until recently held management positions in sales and marketing. His international experience brought him to Singapore, Buenos Aires and London; he currently lives in Berlin.

Klaas holds an MBA in Business Administration and Marketing from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany.

Contact: mail@koolmanconsulting.com