

Fresh Fruit and vegetables in online trade Experiences in France

Malika El Krayass, DGCCRF

1. Online food shoppers

Before the pandemic, online food shoppers were mostly families with one or more children. A study published in 2022 from the “Fédération e-commerce et vente à distance” shows that 60% of French Internet users have purchased food products on Internet over the past 12 months.

2020 pandemic and lockdowns made online shopping a success. But the challenge is great for online traders since the new customers converted to e-commerce during the pandemic are quite different.

27% of online customers never bought food online before. For example, older customers (more than 60 and 70 years old) who were reluctant to buy food online before the pandemic (15%) changed their behavior. 22% of this target buy food online in 2020.

Reasons to use online stores:

If French shoppers chose to buy their groceries online, it was mainly to save time. Then with the Pandemic, it was to avoid crowded stores.

In the context of inflation, 60% of French consumers consider that their food budget has increased, they keep using online shopping. For 48% of them, these websites allow them to better control their budget, but also for 23% of the Internet users, they allow them to have their products delivered and therefore not to use their car.

About fresh fruit and vegetable, French consumers seek for local quality, agriculture from the neighborhood and the region. Thus, the offer is very localised but also highly personalized and transparent origin/farm/producer descriptions.

2. Existing models in France

French consumers have now many ways to do their shopping online. Pandemic had led to a rapid development of online trade but societal changes and expectations have also an impact on this fast growth.

2.1. Online shopping with delivery

In France, you can purchase food online and make them deliver at doorstep. It represents around 20% of online purchases.

2.2. A French ecommerce model called “drive”

Over the last decades, France has developed a click-and-collect model called “drive”. Orders are made online then customers pick them up at a collecting point.

First developed and used by supermarkets, many producers and retailers are now using this model. “Drive” is a real success in France. In 2019 we had 5138 drives and this number keeps growing.

3. Actors of the online trade of FFV in France

According to Freshfel and OECD study:

French fruit and vegetables online sales market is strongly dominated by producers who deliver either to doorstep or collecting points. Most of those producers present in the French online market decide for one delivery option. In total, agricultural delivery at doorstep and

agricultural delivery to a collecting point describe together 57% of the French online offer of fresh fruit and vegetables. Majority of the online offers is limited to regional delivery and with a highly localized offer. the emphasis on local, “French” production is dominant in France to answer to consumer needs.

The second biggest group - retailers delivering either to doorstep or to a collecting point describes roughly 27% of the market. The offer is designed by highly localised, small-sized, non-branded retailers, who would deliver to a locally limited market area. Big retail chains like Auchan or Carrefour are among the findings as well but the offer is highly fragmented and localised.

Online retailers with a market share of 15% comprise the last significant group. BtoB does not play a significant role in the overall online supply of fresh fruit and vegetables.

4. Online trade inspection

4.1. Services in charge of marketing standards for fresh fruit and vegetables

As a reminder, in France, the Directorate General for competition Policy, Consumers Affairs and Fraud Control, the “DGCCRF” which is part of the Ministry of Economy, is the dedicated inspection service that oversees fruit and vegetables at the export, wholesale and retail level.

At the regional level, 22 inspectors have special skills in quality control of fruit and vegetables. In addition, around 100 inspectors are involved with the control of food products, including fruits and vegetables.

4.2. Inspection procedure and enforceable regulation

Since 2018, we control online trade of fresh fruit and vegetables. The first goal is to check marketing standards according to regulation UE 543/2011. But our inspectors also check the respect of national regulation about online sale and absence of misleading claims.

Inspectors are not doing test purchases. They do screen checks then, the same day, they control the stocks where the order is prepared (store / warehouse/ producer).

Neither specific fruits nor vegetables nor market actors had been selected.

Controls carried out targeted mainly retailers and big retail chains using the drive model but few producers have also been controlled.

The provision of article 5 (3) of regulation n°543/2011 “Conformity with the marketing standards shall require that the information particulars shall be available before the purchase is concluded” supposes that all the required information has to be available to the consumer before adding something in the virtual “basket” (next to the product). Consumers don’t have to do additional click or any positive action to be informed.

4.3. Revealed non-compliances

A non-compliance rate between 30 to 40% had been reported.

About retailers

Since 2019, some retail chains using the drive model have complied with the regulation. The mandatory information is now immediately accessible next to the product without any additional click.

We used to have several origins, for example "France or Spain or Italy" or mentions like "according to arrival", "tropical countries" or even "Imported". This is not the case anymore.

But many online stores inspected still not comply with regulation. Thus, we still find online retailers' websites with incomplete mandatory information such as origin, class, variety, or size. Those retailers (big chains) mostly declare that information updates in real time is impossible. Websites are managed by their headquarters. This is also the reason they give when the information displayed and available for purchase (most of the time the origin) is different from the origin actually delivered.

About producers

Some new online producers selling fresh fruit and vegetables have been inspected. The regulations relating to distance selling or consumer information are often unknown from these new operators who have launched themselves in the context of the 2020 Pandemic. The controls revealed the absence of mandatory information regarding to 543/2011 regulation. Most of the time they replace the country of origin by the city. No class or variety is provided. Also, inspectors noticed that product ordered is finally not available. Those controls gave the inspectors the opportunity to remind operators that the regulations also apply online.

An important point to underline is that inspections also showed products presented as coming from the farm or local production were in reality it was imported products bought from wholesalers by the producer.

5. Conclusion

Despite improvements from some retailers, inspections of online stores still show a significant rate of non-conformity in particular regarding the information given to consumer.

Operators emphasize the fact the management of websites make law application difficult but since some companies manage to comply with regulations, this is not impossible.

During the pandemic, many producers have created their own website or created an account on specific marketplaces to sell their products but don't know the relevant regulations. However, investigations highlighted operators who intentionally commit fraud with false information provided to consumer to let them think imported products were from their own production. Those companies had been sued.