

Full Length Research paper

An Internal Perspective on the Horticultural Industry's Reputation

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An essential strategic asset is an industry's reputation, which has previously been emphasized for the horticulture sector. However, horticulture's diversity makes it challenging for society to view the sector. To determine the most crucial aspects of horticulture and the factors influencing its positive or negative reputation, an online poll was carried out. For this reason, 102 horticultural industry consultants and specialists were asked to describe horticulture and the industry's reputation. Horticulture is mostly linked to its varied activities and different product categories, according to an assessment of the survey based on a qualitative content analysis employing inductive category construction. Food products are the main emphasis of the product groups. On a 7-point Likert scale, the industry's reputation is assessed as "slightly positive," with an average score of 4.4.

Key words: Reputation, Horticulture, Qualitative content analysis, Experts, Characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

The area of agriculture that produces fruits, vegetables, and decorative plants is known as horticulture (Lal, 2008: 19). The range of goods and services provided by the horticulture business is one of its unique features; it includes fresh goods like fruits and vegetables, ornamental plants, nursery products, and other services (Bokelmann, 2001: 273). There is a contrast between horticultural services and trade and plant production in horticulture. Horticultural production is further separated into fruit, vegetables, decorative plants, and tree nursery products under the term "segment" based on the various production techniques used within the various product groupings. In addition to public green spaces like parks and garden displays, which are also regarded as horticultural products, horticultural services and trade include landscaping, gardens, cemetery horticulture, retail trade, and floristry. Germany's horticultural production is undergoing continuous structural transformation. The number of producing farms in the fruit and vegetable industry has decreased, while the area under cultivation has stayed constant and in some places has even increased (Isaak and Hübner, 2019).

Horticulture's diversity of goods and services remains a crucial feature despite the structural changes. Along with this diversity, other advancements have resulted in management needs that are getting more complicated. For instance, supermarkets are today the primary location where consumers buy fruits and vegetables. Because of this, multi-stage distribution systems are primarily used to supply items. Specifically, this skews how customers view the products (Bokelmann, 2009: 119; Yue and Behe, 2008: 764). Additionally, grocery companies import seasonal goods from other nations. Together, these factors lead to a lack of value chain transparency and, consequently, a decline in customer confidence. Furthermore, horticulture's management needs are expanding as a result of the increased interest in ecologically friendly production methods (Schimmenti et al., 2013: 162). Horticultural farms are a part of a complex environment that necessitates connection with the customer, as demonstrated by these instances of advances both inside and outside the business (cf. Section 2). However, effective communication with customers is only possible when one is aware of how they view horticulture.

A three-step study approach was selected in order to learn more about how horticulture is viewed and regarded in society. To identify the traits and quirks of reputation, differentiate it from related concepts (such image and identity), and find appropriate measuring techniques, a thorough literature review was conducted in the first phase. Using indicators from current reputation measurement systems, a construct for measuring reputation was created to build upon this and serve as the foundation for the subsequent research phase.

In the second phase, industry stakeholders assessed this early build through an expert survey. In order to do this,

stakeholders assessed each of the first step's separate metrics to determine how well they described horticulture's reputation. Furthermore, new metrics were discovered to characterize horticulture's reputation with the assistance of the stakeholders. A review of these new indicators and the structural model has already been released (Isaak et al., in press).

The findings in this research are based on the second stage as well, but they focus on the traits and product categories that affect horticulture's reputation. Furthermore, a preliminary evaluation of the industry's reputation was established, and the factors contributing to its alleged positive or negative image were examined. Section 3 contains all methodological notes pertaining to the findings reported in this research. The third stage, which measured the reputation of the entire horticultural business, was based on the knowledge gathered in the preceding steps. In order to achieve this, a consumer study about reputation in horticulture is being carried out (Section 6; yet to be published).

Finding the traits and product categories linked to horticulture was the goal of the research for this work.

The paper also examines how industry specialists evaluate horticulture's reputation and the explanations they offer for it, based on the exploratory study into how the industry is seen.

Literature Review

Numerous authors define reputation differently, according to the literature review (Eckert, 2017: 147). "A perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared with other leading rivals" is the most well-known definition of (corporate) reputation, as given by Fombrun (1996: 72). The phrases "image" and "identity" are frequently used interchangeably with "reputation." According to Davies et al. (2001), "image" represents the opinion of external stakeholders, especially customers, whereas "identity" is the internal perception of the business held by its personnel. Accordingly, "reputation" is a general term that encompasses "identity" and "image" and is created by adding together the opinions of all parties involved (Davies et al., 2001: 113-114, MacMillan et al., 2005: 215). The strong relationship between the terms "identity," "image," and "reputation" has already been discussed by Whetten (1997: 27). These three terms can be connected to a wide range of additional characteristics that have been utilized in this scientific setting (Isaak et al., in press).

According to experts, horticulture began to implement image-improvement initiatives as early as the 1990s in an effort to strengthen its standing and reputation (Schenk, 1992). Meanwhile, NGOs' influence helped raise social pressure to alter horticulture output to meet ecological and social norms (Havardi-Burger et al., 2020: 21). Furthermore,

food scandals brought on by certain businesses harmed the industry's reputation and created a sense of doubt about consumption (Bitsch et al., 2014).

In their capacities as stakeholders and/or voters, consumers can also have an impact on the implementation of environmental laws by the government (Selfa et al., 2008). Analyzing their ideas and preferences is therefore essential, and not just from the standpoint of sales policy. Purchase decisions may be made against the interests of the company if there is an excessive disconnect between the expectations or concepts of consumers and those of businesses (Bokelmann, 2009). Understanding how society views specific horticulture enterprises or the sector as a whole can therefore open up new entrepreneurial opportunities for improved and, as a result, more long-term positioning. The development of communication techniques to guarantee long-term social acceptance is based on certain concepts related to an industry's reputation. Therefore, a positive reputation can help to validate business endeavors (Sageder et al., 2018: 343, 354).

Winfree and McCluskey (2005: 211) make the assumption that homogeneous product groups—like those frequently found in the production of fruits and vegetables—have an impact on the industry's or segment's reputation and that individual businesses are powerless to control the reputation of their products because there is a lack of product differentiation. However, the company's reputation can alleviate consumer confusion and help set it apart from rivals (Boyd et al., 2010; Waerass and Byrkjeflot, 2012: 191). Customer happiness and the reputation that follows are directly related to product quality in particular (Carmeli and Tishler, 2005). In light of this, Eckert (2017: 154) characterizes the consequences of poor product quality as a risk to one's reputation. However, because product quality is directly related to corporate performance, focusing just on it is not always enough for reputation management (Helm 2011: 11). Businesses must understand how consumers view items and the attributes that go along with them if they hope to influence how consumers perceive the quality of their purchases. To assess reputation, it is crucial to consider how people perceive and understand the product or, more broadly, the object (person, business, or sector) (Wærass and Byrkjeflot, 2012). This necessitates understanding how the most significant elements of the consumer-product (or industry) connection are currently perceived (MacMillan et al., 2005: 219). Since only measurable things can be controlled, this perception needs to be quantifiable (Luoma-aho, 2008). However, indicators—which have not yet been precisely identified for horticulture—are required because reputation is a latent variable and thus not immediately measurable (Quagrainie et al., 2003). The degree of knowledge a person possesses determines the information processing that comes after perception (Cowley and Mitchell, 2003: 444). Since opinions on the subject can differ greatly, people's

perceptions of it and, thus, its reputation, vary as well. All things considered, reputation is influenced by social cognitions, including knowledge, impressions, perceptions, and beliefs (Rindova et al., 2010: 614).

There are various levels of consideration for the intended control of reputation. Every individual, business, and industry has a reputation, which can develop both intentionally and inadvertently (Aula and Mantere, 2008: 33). However, by regulating perceptions through focused self-presentation, reputation management can affect a reputation (Waerass and Byrkjeflot, 2012: 191). Through multipliers or the media, this can be accomplished directly or indirectly (McDonnell and King, 2013: 411). Accordingly, a firm's reputation can be viewed as a variable that directly stems from perception, i.e., the opinions and attitudes of its stakeholders regarding the company (Kim, 2019: 1145). Furthermore, a company's and an industry's reputations have an impact on one another. It is unknown, therefore, if and to what degree a bad industry reputation can affect a favorable corporate reputation (Mahon, 2002: 425).

All things considered, a company's reputation is a crucial strategic asset that greatly affects its financial performance (Boyd et al., 2010). The reputation of a business, an industry, or a product determines whether or not customers are prepared to pay for the good or service (Keh and Xie, 2009). Just two instances of how reputation affects business success are the validity of entrepreneurial activity and its appeal to experts and managers (Meyerding, 2016; Sageder et al., 2018).

Methods

The findings of the second research step's stakeholder survey are presented in this document. This paper presents the findings that concentrate on horticultural features and products. It was discovered which product groups and attributes have a particular impact on horticulture.

In their capacity as specialists, the stakeholder group of consultants was interviewed. They are presumed to be intimately associated with the sector due to their professional activities. A thorough understanding of the unique characteristics of the industry that consultants have acquired throughout their work experience is part of an internal vision of the sector. Unlike consumers, consultants possess a comprehensive understanding of the industry's variability, including product diversification and segmentation, which consumers frequently do not link with horticulture.

Unlike entrepreneurs or plant managers, they are not directly impacted financially by the horticultural business's success because they work as consultants or are self-employed. As a result, they are able to evaluate industry-specific traits on their own. The official extension services in Germany, which are funded by the federal states, employ a significant number of horticulture experts. In certain instances, the horticultural businesses are required to provide a small amount of money to

the extension services. However, the consultants themselves are not directly reliant on the company' commercial performance.

1.1 Questionnaire

To interview the experts, an online survey was used. In order to determine the horticultural traits and products that are pertinent to the industry's reputation, the questionnaire integrated qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Open-ended questions were used in the qualitative method to pinpoint and explain particular horticultural traits. Furthermore, this approach was used to develop an understanding of the connection between horticultural traits and a favorable or unfavorable reputation. According to the quantitative approach, a 7-point Likert scale was used to assess the experts' reputations through the use of specific closed-ended questions. One online survey, created with LimeSurvey (Version 2.6.6), integrated the two approaches.

1.2 Expert sample

To be categorized as advisors for stakeholder groups, specialists from associations, institutes, chambers of agriculture, and consulting firms were chosen. Contact information was gathered via an internet search and organized by federal states. An email containing a link to the poll and a request to share the study with peers was sent to the 132 experts. Using the snowball effect, distribution was made possible by this process. A follow-up email was sent as a reminder after 14 days. The poll was conducted in 2018 between early May and mid-July.

1.3 Statistical evaluation: qualitative content analysis

According to Mayring (2014), qualitative content analysis was used to process the free text questions, and inductive category creation was used for evaluation. The expert statements were methodically compiled into groups and, if feasible, into smaller groups (Mayring, 2014: 106). The research question, which was established at the start of the study, was taken into consideration while developing the selection criteria for identifying the categories and the levels of differentiation into more specific categories. In the course of more study, these definitions were used as a guide to create new categories. The selection criteria and the degree of abstraction were used to define the categories in an iterative process. Additionally, text passages or statements were arranged in a hierarchical manner inside the pre-existing categories that corresponded to the content. In the Supplementary Material, each category is defined and described. The previously arranged content was then re-edited, and new categories were made for comments that could not

be placed into an already-existing category.

The procedure guidelines for each stage of the inductive category development were adhered to for quality control. Two individuals conducted the material analysis. In order to establish a shared understanding of the dimensions, samples of the material were first discussed (Schilling, 2006: 32). The results were evaluated and the categories were updated (inter-coder agreement) after roughly half of the content had been examined. The entire document was reviewed and edited, repeating the process (Mayring, 2014: 80).

IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) was used to evaluate the closed questions and MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 (VERBI Software, Berlin, Germany) was used to evaluate the open questions.

Results

Seventy-seven percent of the 102 specialists who were interviewed were employed by associations, research institutes, public bodies, laboratories, and education. Upstream and downstream in the value chain, the remaining 23% of respondents were advisors for industrial enterprises.

The respondents were asked to categorize themselves into a horticulture segment or closely similar region as part of an additional specification. In this instance, the free text option was selected by 41.2% of the respondents. The remaining free text responses could be categorized under the heading "all segments" (10.8%), while 30.4% of the responses could be categorized under the heading "service for horticulture," such as research and guidance.

34.3% of the respondents were assigned to other horticultural activities (fruit growing, decorative horticulture, gardening and landscaping, tree nursery, floristry, and retail), whereas 14.7% of the respondents were focused on vegetable production. The remaining 9.8% of respondents assigned their tasks to the closely related fields of soil and substrate and agriculture rather than horticulture.

Attributes of horticulture

Horticulture was mostly linked to "horticultural fields of action" (43 citations) for the experts (Figure 1). Horticultural services like "creating and designing gardens," "grave planting and cemetery maintenance," and "the targeted design of open spaces" are included in this. Along with distribution-related attributes, "allotment activities" were also categorized under "horticultural fields of action." Supplementary Tables S1, S2, and S3 provide a thorough explanation of this category as well as every other category.

The category "horticultural crops" contained additional traits that were often discussed (39). The subcategories of "food products" (31) and "non-food products" (22) were separated out of this category. The

"production and cultivation of plants/industry-specific goods" (36), an examination of the three product criteria combined. After this, a which contained information on production procedures, was percentage of 64.5% for "non-edible plants" came in third. 29.0% another significant category. References to the production of food of the respondents put "food products" in this category. This or plants were discovered here. Conversely, there were less than indicates that eight experts only connected horticulture with "food 30 references for the group "perceptions of horticulture as a products."

professional field and the working environment." The many career options in horticulture, working in rural areas, and motivations for working in this field were among the statements in this category.

According to the experts' descriptions of horticulture, "horticultural crops" was the second most frequently stated category (Figure 1). Three product classes that the experts linked to horticulture were used to determine this information (Figure 2). "Food products," "non-edible plants," and "building/working materials and services" are the three categories into which the submissions could be divided.

Edible plants (biotics) are typically categorized under the "food products" category. The term "non-edible plants" (biotic) refers to all other plants. If these categories overlapped, for example, an apple would be categorized as a foodstuff under the "food products" category, while an apple tree would be categorized as a tree nursery product under the "non-edible plants" category. Materials or items with an abiotic (inanimate) origin and an indirect connection to horticulture were included in the category of "building/working materials and services." Work tools like shovels and concrete were also included in this category. The following percentages show the results, which are a composite of the three groups (Figure 2). Additional findings, which pertain to the quantity of mentions within the categories and may be computed from Figure 2, are provided by absolute frequencies.

With 149 references overall, "food products" was the most commonly cited category name, regardless of rank. Vegetables (103) were mentioned twice as frequently as fruit (46), within the category of "food products." The primary goods indicated were salad (12), tomato (9) and herbs (6) if a single product was included within the vegetable group. In the fruit group, it was uncommon to find additional product specifications, and eight experts noted apples. There were 128 mentions in all for the category "non-edible plants." Ornamental plants (82) outnumbered nursery products (31) in this category. Individual goods were specified for decorative plants, with flowers (20) and bedding and balcony plants (18) receiving a few entries. Products from tree nurseries were further separated into roses (4) and trees/woody plants (22). Only 29 times was the category "building/working materials and services" mentioned, and only three of those mentions indicated services.

Fifty-five percent of the experts in Figure 2 originally named "food products." Of these, the "vegetables" portion received three-quarters of all responses, while the "fruit" segment received one-quarter. 52 experts ranked "food products" as the second most popular category, with vegetables accounting for 35 of the total. Vegetables dominated the third category, "food products," which was mentioned by less than half (43) of the respondents.

When "food products" were mentioned first, 58.5% of the experts ranked a "food product" in second place, according to

Also from Figure 2, it can be seen that 'non-edible plants' were mentioned in first place by 46.7% of the respondents, with ornamental plants dominating (31). Just as vegetables dominated the category for 'food products', ornamental plants dominated the category of 'non-edible plants'. Where the category of 'non-edible plants' was chosen as the first entry, the second entry was either a 'food product' (42.9%) or a product from the category 'non-edible plants' (44.9%). In both cases, 'food products' were the third most frequent response. In addition, 12.2% of the respondents cited 'building/working materials and services' in second place, followed by 'building/working materials and services', which was also the third highest ranked product (66.7%).

Just three respondents (2.9%) selected the category "building/working materials and services" as the first choice. "Building/working materials and services" was ranked second by these experts as well. This category's aspects were mostly listed in second (11) or third (18) place. A bias in the sample may possibly be the cause of the category "building/working materials and services" having little significance; just ten experts in this survey identified as gardening and landscaping experts.

All three categories—"food products," "non-edible plants," and "building/working materials and services"—are equally covered in the introduction's definition of horticulture. As a result, professional answers that addressed all three areas aligned with the horticultural knowledge presented here. Ten of the experts' responses identified these categories, regardless of their order.

Reputation evaluation and justification

■ Evaluation

Regardless of the indicators, the opinion of experts regarding the industry's reputation was surveyed. On a 7-point Likert scale, the experts (n=102) gave the industry's reputation a "slightly positive" rating ($\mu=4.4$). Nevertheless, the distribution also revealed that eight of the experts polled thought the industry's reputation was either extremely bad (1) or bad (2). According to the assessment of six experts, however, the industry's reputation was also regarded as excellent (7).

The experts were requested to provide an explanation of their reputation evaluation in a free text area in addition to this closed question. The 102 experts who

were interviewed explained the rationale behind their assessments. The categories were cited more frequently than the number of polled experts since the responses frequently addressed different issues (Figure 3). Overall, 111 reasons were cited by 55 experts who gave their reputation a higher rating, 43 by 19 experts who gave their reputation a neutral review, and 52 by 27 experts who gave their reputation a lower rating (Figure 4). As a result, on average, each expert gave two justifications for their reputation evaluation.

■ *Justification*

The most often mentioned aspects and explanations were under the heading of "attributes of horticultural products, services, and distribution." This category contained characteristics that describe or assess horticultural goods, services, and distribution networks. Beautiful flowers and gardens, excellent customer service, or regional product marketing were examples in this category. Experts who assessed the reputation as "rather good" (>4) cited 71% of the attributes in this category (see Figure 4). "If you ask the consumer directly about the reputation of horticulture, the reputation is good and generally refers to the products that are assessed as predominantly positive," explained one expert. Conversely, a "rather bad" reputation was attributed to customer pricing awareness (<4).

The phrase "consumer preferences, perception, and appreciation" can be used to describe a wide range of statements. This encompassed not only personal preferences but also the way in which work, products, and the horticultural industry as a whole were perceived and valued. Experts who assessed the reputation as "rather good" provided somewhat more than half of the explanations in this category. But the causes of a poor reputation, such "little valued and anyone can become a gardener" or "very often the negative headlines [...]" stick in people's thoughts.

of many, but they are brought about, if at all, by a small number of businesses [...]', show, above all, the issues facing the sector in society.

The prevalent horticulture job description as viewed by society served as a partial explanation of the category "horticultural professional field." These included more negative sentiments like "[...] poor pay; physical work in all weathers [...]" as well as more positive ones like "taking care of nature and the green in town and country." Furthermore, a favorable reputation assessment was provided by half of the experts who mentioned traits in this category (the "horticultural professional field"). The reputation was judged as neutral (8) or poor (7) by 25% of the respondents who included the category in their response.

One might also classify "general use of pesticides" under "impact on environment and society" or

"production systems." The significance of pesticide use and the multiple references to it in different contexts were emphasized by this category's distinctive location. A separate classification for this area would seem to make sense because statements about the use of pesticides are frequently not immediately related to consequences on the environment or society. The experts emphasized "residues, [and] pesticide use." Furthermore, according to one expert, "horticulture is seen negatively or reduced to this, especially from the point of view of the use of pesticides." It is possible to infer from this category that only remarks that harm one's reputation fall under this heading. However, experts who had previously provided a good reputation rating described half of this category's features. This demonstrates that professionals who assessed reputation favorably also identified problems that would harm reputation. But according to these experts, traits other than reputation appeared to have a greater impact on the category than "general use of pesticides."

■ *Justification for the evaluation*

The various significance of the categories for each specific reputation was demonstrated by an examination of the categories in relation to the previously assessed reputation (Figure 4). A total of 52 qualities were used to justify a pretty negative reputation (<4), with "consumer preferences, perception and appreciation" (19%) being the most common argument. Notably, when experts were asked to determine what constitutes a bad reputation, the categories of "horticultural professional field" (14%), "presence and level of awareness" (12%), "attributes of horticultural products, services, and distribution" (12%), and "general use of pesticides" (12%) were selected with roughly the same frequency.

The category "presence and level of awareness" stood out in both instances with a very negative and neutral reputation. But it didn't matter if you had a very solid reputation. The most commonly mentioned source for the explanation of a neutral reputation was the category "horticultural professional field," which also contributed significantly to the justification of a relatively negative reputation (19%). Furthermore, the category's "characteristics of the industry or the segments" (16%) traits also provided a neutral reputation. The experts' impartial reputation assessment was more closely associated with the broad aspects of how the public views the industry than it was with the specific items. This effect and its evolution are typically unpredictable, not solely within the industry's control, contingent on time and trends, and impacted by numerous other social cohabitation elements. As a result, the experts who viewed the sector's reputation as neutral most likely believed that the industry itself had no power over it. Rather, they most likely saw the industry as a web of societal dependencies that neither the industry nor its participants can directly control. To advertise and improve the attractiveness of its product's attributes, the industry could employ image marketing. However, influencing the traits that impact the entire sector or occupational group is more challenging. A quarter of the experts cited the category "attributes of horticultural products, services, and distribution" to support their

rather positive reputation. In the case of a relatively poor implies that food goods should be the main source of focused reputation, this category was mentioned far less frequently. self-presentation, as required by Waerass and Byrkjeflot (2012: 191), for reputation management at the industry level. Consequently, it can be said that a positive reputation is greatly influenced by the features of goods, services, and distribution. Perceptions are influenced by both the products and the cultivation of the items as well as the reputation that is built upon appreciation" included attributes to support a positive them (Figure 3). Public green spaces, a byproduct of horticulture, reputation, just as it did for a very negative and neutral one. have been highlighted and mentioned in the literature as playing a significant role in society's leisure activities (Priego et al., 2008).

For all three types of reputation, the categories of "media coverage and lobbies," "production systems," and "impact on environment and society" were comparatively inconsequential.

In conclusion, it can be said that a variety of complex factors can contribute to both a positive and a negative reputation.

There is no one major factor that determines whether reputation is evaluated favorably or unfavorably. Regardless of whether the reputation was "good," "neutral," or "bad," the category "consumer preferences, perception, and appreciation" was significant.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that horticulture's reputation and perception are impacted by a variety of horticultural factors. Overall, it is evident that horticulture is linked to "specific product groups" (39), "certain activities and fields of activity," and the "production and cultivation of plants or industry-specific goods" (36) (Figure 1). MacMillan et al. (2015: 291) further distinguish these components of perception by asking, "Reputation for what, to whom [?]." From the perspective of horticultural professionals, these questions can be addressed. The categories that are most commonly cited indicate that horticulture items and their cultivation are particularly significant. This implies that the products must be considered in both reputation management and the latent variable description of reputation (cf. Quagrainie et al., 2003).

The sample's bias towards producing horticulture was once more apparent when questions about goods that were inherently associated with horticulture were asked (Figure 2). "Building/working materials and services" had little bearing on the subject of typical items, but "food products" and "non-edible plants" were very important. Vegetables were the most significant product category, regardless of where the term "food products" was referenced. This implies that landscaping and gardening are more likely to take a backseat in this situation. By mentioning a collection of items that encompass the whole definition of horticulture, only a small number of professionals were able to cover the industry's diversity. Nonetheless, the wide range of other potential divisions offered by respondents showed the industry's variability. Social cognitions, including knowledge, impressions, perceptions, and beliefs, are significant aspects of reputation, according to the literature study (Rindova et al., 2010: 614). Active reputation management at the corporate level can begin with product quality as corporate performance. But first, we need to understand how people view the products and the traits that go along with them (Section 2). Based on the findings in this research, it can be concluded that horticultural qualities are primarily associated with food, especially vegetables. This

Not only is the product a crucial component in building a reputation, but the reputation also affects the product selection. Specifically, the reputation might lessen the consumer's confusion because the quality of horticulture food items is primarily a matter of trust (Rindova et al., 2005).

As previously noted in the literature, reputation can develop unintentionally as well as consciously (Aula and Mantere, 2008). The study's findings corroborate this assertion because horticulture's standing is impacted by both its interactions with society and customers as well as the industry's performance (e.g., products). The authors were able to draw the conclusion that horticulture can only have a limited direct impact on its reputation by using the categories of "consumer preferences, perception and appreciation," "lack of knowledge and consumer distrust," "media coverage and lobbies," and "presence and level of awareness." As a result, horticulture's reputation can be shaped deliberately by its goods and services, unintentionally by its emotional appeal to interest groups, or by outside forces (like the media).

The public's primary source of information on agriculture is the media (Albersmeier and Spiller, 2010: 258). The public is informed about the usage of pesticides and fertilizers in plant agriculture by the media. Nonetheless, research indicates that some segments of the population lack trust in the use of fertilizers and pesticides (Basha et al., 2015; Oroian et al., 2017). The experts did not find that pesticides had a more significant detrimental impact on horticulture's reputation than they did on the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, it may be said that this study's social critique focused on the usage of pesticides. However, the overall environmental impact had a negligible effect on horticulture's reputation.

Product differentiation is made more difficult by homogeneous product categories (Winfrey and McCluskey, 2005: 11). In this situation, focused reputation management is more challenging due to the lack of product uniqueness. Free-riding by individual businesses may have an impact on the industry as a whole because it is difficult to distinguish and evaluate the reputation of individual businesses in a given sector. As one of the experts said, "many [remember] negative headlines [...], which are, however, only caused by individual companies [...]," this issue was also acknowledged. Being open and eager to foster collaboration within the company can make it harder for freeloaders to do this while also making it easier for them to be held responsible. However, in order to keep consumers from associating them with the wrongdoing of other companies, it appears that businesses must clearly set themselves apart from other companies in the industry.

Conclusions

It can be inferred that professionals now view the industry's reputation as being somewhat favorable. Furthermore, the associations around horticulture and the products that are naturally linked to the business reflect the industry's varied nature. This amply illustrates the study's key finding, which is that experts believe that customer perception is especially significant when evaluating the standing of the German horticultural sector. This leads to the conclusion that the industry should engage with customers, especially through its products that have pleasant associations. In order to convey its public identity in a self-determined manner and to avoid bad reporting, the industry should also particularly improve its public presence and customer impression of the industry. This calls for the appropriate business plan for each company as well as for the industry as a whole. Every business must have a plan for communicating with its clientele through its merchandise.

For the horticultural sector, where interacting with society—and particularly with consumers—is the primary task, this leads to a number of difficulties. Despite the fact that the use of pesticides did not dominate the reputation in this study, this enables the sector to have a direct conversation about issues that are negatively perceived. Increased engagement can also foster media presence and avoid suspicion.

Because of this, the findings of this study were utilized to create a customer survey that is as accurate as feasible. In this third step, the industry's overall reputation was assessed as part of additional study that has not yet been released. Two horticultural categories were used as an example to develop the indicators from the expert survey that were found to be especially significant for the entire industry. Following this, consumers were asked to rate the indicators in an online survey.

Additionally, suggestions for industry-wide action should be developed with the aid of the indicators. Customer-oriented communication is made possible by timely awareness of how society views one's own industry. Effective public relations efforts and a modification of marketing initiatives may be made possible by this. Understanding how reputation can have an impact is crucial, and in certain situations, it can also be useful to understand how reputation affects stakeholder behavior that could be harmful to the sector. Planning the scope and budget for reputation-boosting initiatives can be aided by this.

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