

Organic industry misses mark with 'fear factor' messaging

May 7/04 *Meatingplace.com* ... The following editorial by Dan Murphy has been abridged for this update.

Few behaviors are entirely predictable in the volatile realm of tracking consumer trends. But marketers (and their pollsters) can take one fact to the bank: **What consumers "say" they'll buy and what actually passes the checkout scanners are often the proverbial night and day.**

Yet that is exactly what a new national survey out this week on consumer receptivity towards organic foods attempts to outline — namely, that Americans just can't wait to jack up their grocery bills. We've seen similar surveys over the last 12 months reach identical conclusions on country-of-origin labeling and on BSE-tested beef, and those were equally suspect.

The problem with this latest public opinion poll from Roper Public Affairs isn't its credibility. Roper is well-respected, and its methodology is beyond reproach. Even the questions asked of the sample of 1,000 adults in a phone survey last month were suitably non-biased.

Unfortunately, no matter how demographically balanced the respondents or how neutral the questioning, merely asking consumers about their willingness to spend money yields awfully soft data. "I intend to spend" is not to be trusted unless people are actually reaching into their wallets and forking it over.

However, a far greater problem with the subsequent publicity surrounding the survey is the positioning of organic foods. It's obvious that because organically grown products are generally so much costlier, **the manufacturers feel compelled to demonize their competitors in an effort to justify the price point.**

For example, the poll, which was sponsored by Wisconsin-based Organic Valley co-op, claimed that two-thirds of Americans say they would "pay more for foods produced without chemicals," such as pesticides, antibiotics or hormones.

Fact is, on a safety and quality basis, organically grown foods offer little in the way of substantive benefits. Conventional meat, produce and dairy products aren't "laced" with chemicals, hormones or drug residues. Those contaminants are easy to control and even easier to detect. Virtually

every name-brand food processor has policies in place to prevent even accidental problems.

Thankfully, such tactics have a shorter and shorter shelf life, and organic growers would help themselves by backing away from continually trying to instill fear in their potential target market

The other red flag the pollsters waved in front of respondents was animal welfare, and in fact the survey reported that 51% said they'd be willing to pay a premium for foods from animals raised humanely.

Although the marketers of organic meat and poultry want their customers to think otherwise, **raising food animals according to the rules of organic engagement does not necessarily guarantee their welfare. Whether some beef cattle or broiler chickens are eating organic grains (or grass) has nothing to do with how they're handled, how they're transported and how they're harvested.**

"Organic" has a strict definition, but the label is neither a solution to the non-problem of food contamination nor a certification that the farmer treats his livestock the way the rest of us take care of Fluffy and Rover.

The organic industry needs to stop with the surveys claiming Americans love paying more for foods of dubious added value and start distancing themselves from the fear factor approach that seems to be driving their marketing.

It isn't necessary.

In fact, there are several serious challenges surrounding our food production system that need to be addressed, and organic growers could play a positive role in accelerating a debate on how best to meet them.

For example, the number of people willing to devote themselves to a lifetime of producing food products has been in a free fall for the last 50 years. That is the result of improvements in technology and agricultural inputs that have dramatically increased per-person productivity.

Organic farming offers a way for small-scale producers and growers to fill a market niche and sidestep the head-to-head competition with the big boys, where they inevitably get squeezed right out of the business.

Maintaining opportunities for people to choose farming as an occupation is important, although from a small-business standpoint, not a public health perspective. Smaller operations are necessarily more entrepreneurial, and that has a positive impact on maintaining a diversity of choices in protein foods, fresh produce and other perishables. Going organic won't remove the barriers to entry that make it tough for anyone to start up a viable farm operation, but it could help some existing farmers stay on the land.

Indeed, there is **legitimate traction to be gained in communicating a message that smaller specialized farms could serve as a buffer to slow the rate at which the ex-urban farmland surrounding our big cities is being swallowed up by development.**

Even in what are classified as rural areas, a backlash is brewing against local livestock and farm operations, without any thought on the part of the protesters about the **importance of food production to national security**, among many other benefits. The organic movement ought to be working to educate the public on agricultural land-use issues, not firing up the phony food phobias on which they seem to be hanging their future.

Sell the products on the basis of their quality and an environmental "feel good" factor, not by positioning conventional foods as dangerous or mainstream livestock producers as inhumane.

Every election cycle, we grow tired of the seemingly endless tide of negative campaign ads designed to deflect debate on the issues, while plastering the opponent in a mountain of mud. That strategy works short-term, but eventually, such tactics are a turn-off for most voters.

In politics, we shrug off negative campaigning as business as usual.

But for the organic industry, which loves to tout its long-term commitment to the health of its customers and the environment, adopting a similar marketing model is the height of hypocrisy.

- Dan Murphy