

Organic Industry Challenges in the Face of Negative Media Reports

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Abstract

As the organic industry continues to grow in volume and profile, so too does the resistance to the industry by vested interests, aided by the sensationalist media. Information and misinformation concerning the quality and safety of organic foods is being conveyed to consumers via the mass media and the Internet. Although the organic industry is defined by process standards, detractors of the industry are focusing on product quality and safety issues. Reactive responses by the organic industry may be justified and may or may not include critiquing the disparaging research and the negative media reporting. Proactive responses involving disseminating favourable research are more desirable but must be based on well designed research. Reducing opportunities for critics can be accomplished through rigorous organic product quality control and ensuring that the touted product benefits match the actual product attributes.

Introduction

The old adage that success breeds contempt holds true for the organic industry. Friction between conventional and organic agriculture was inevitable given that the organic industry has leveraged sales by differentiating organic products based on food safety, quality, sustainability, and animal welfare. Market research indicates that 57% of respondents in Europe and 68% globally were motivated to buy organics because they are perceived to be healthier for consumers and their children (AC Nielsen 2005). To protect the financial interests of conventional agriculture, some players in the industry including suppliers and industry funded institutions have resorted to issuing reports and press releases discrediting organic product quality and safety. The media have been all too happy to promote this agenda either out of ignorance or to exploit negative and controversial news. Since the merits of organic foods are being judged in the court of consumer perceptions, the industry must respond carefully to avoid damaging credibility and stunting market growth. Misinformation and propaganda require an appropriate response in order to avoid consumer confusion and disillusionment. While it is unlikely that hard core purchasers of organic products could be swayed by the media, light and non-users can be affected. The continued growth of the industry will likely depend on expanding this consumer segment.

Reactive Response

When the media reports on research denigrating organic food quality and safety, the onus is on the organic industry to decide whether to respond. Deciding on how and whether to respond to negative media allegations is partly dependant on the complexity and gravity of the reported findings. For example, if the government or media reports that a food born illness was traced to organic product, this is easily

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understood by consumers and is likely to elicit a prompt negative consumer response. A similar response could be expected for a research report that determines that there are toxic substances in organic foods. Less likely to have a swift and detrimental impact on consumer buying habits would be the reporting of unhealthy substances that impact consumer health on a dose basis and over time, such as increased cholesterol levels in food products. Revealing that organic foods contain equal or lower amounts of healthful substances than conventional foods is not an immediate life threatening issue, but it does attack one of the core beliefs of organic consumers. A more nebulous and subjective critique of organic products involves issues of taste. This is a very subjective parameter and one that current organic consumers are not likely to be swayed by someone else's opinion. However, non-users of organics could be negatively persuaded.

Motivation to ignore attacks on the industry could be triggered by not wanting to wedge the consumer in a public relations war. Consumers can grow weary when bombarded with contradictory information about a food or food category. This can have the effect of desensitizing the consumer to additional positive or negative messages. If the consumer has turned away from organics or decided not to try them, this can present a barrier to market expansion.

Should the industry decide that a response is necessary, one option would be to avoid engaging the research study and findings in question and rebut the negative research with other positive research findings. This presents the consumer with the difficult task of deciding which research to believe and which source of information is more credible. The longer the battle between opposing views, the more likely the consumer is to tune out the issues.

Another option for the organic industry is to expose the flaws in the negative research and media presentation of the research. One of the difficulties in dissecting a research report is in determining the origin, fate, and testing protocol of the sampled food products. "Organic" can refer to product that was certified by any number of agencies or governments based on process standards. The complex dynamics of farm inputs, management, environmental factors, and global sourcing leave some latitude in the attributes of the organic products. The effects of time of harvest, post harvest storage, processing methods, distribution and merchandizing conditions, and possible fraudulent organic production or labelling can also result in quality variations. For a given research study, the product could have been sampled at farm gate, or sampled at retail and subjected to handling and cross contamination issues, or biased by the researchers in the method of preparation (e.g. cooking of meat products). Each of these factors may or may not be identified in the research methodology.

Another complicating factor is in scrutinizing the validity of the testing protocols, methods, and results. Compounding the problem in a comparative (organic versus non-organic) study are the product attributes to be measured and the determination of what is an acceptable value and/or significant difference between organic and non-organic products. Even if a difference is identified there is the problem of interpreting the impact of such a difference. And finally, there is the difficulty of extrapolating data for limited product samples (due to research budgetary constraints) to characterize an entire industry or production system.

Having dissected the research study and findings and determined their shortcomings, the task of relaying this information in a useful and understandable manner to consumers can be challenging. Most consumers are not scientists or engineers and have little interest in understanding statistics or testing protocols.

In all cases, the response from the organic industry must be done in a manner that does not undermine consumer beliefs. An industry group in the UK responded to allegations that organic chickens were less healthful than conventionally raised chickens. Their message was that organics is not predominantly about healthier food, but about animal welfare and environmental sustainability. This strategy could have negative consequences considering that health concerns are the primary consumer motivator for purchasing organics.

The burden of who should respond to negative media depends on the specifics of the research. If a retailer, product brand or company is targeted or named in the negative research, then a direct response from these companies would be in order. In the case of generic accusations against the industry or a product category (e.g. organic chicken) then trade associations would be the logical choice to respond. Industry experts could also be called upon to provide support, including members of academia or the organic industry.

Proactive Response

Pre-emptively providing the consumer with well documented and researched benefits of organic foods and farming is one method of buffering consumers from the negative media. Unfortunately getting the message to the consumer can be a costly endeavour. Press releases to stimulate free news stories are more likely to be successful when announcing contrarian or sensationalistic information. Likewise, consumers are more apt to take notice of food stories that are based on adverse rather than positive health impacts. Funding proactive research can be an expensive proposition depending on the level of government and industry support. Posting information on websites is useful although a more passive means of educating the consumer. In any case the available information should be based on research to date as well as responses to up-to-the-minute issues.

Individual farms, processors, or retailers can insulate themselves from potential real, fabricated, or perceived problems in the industry at large by implementing rigorous process and product standards. Routine product testing to detect deleterious substances or deficiencies should be included in QA/QC or HACCP plans. Unfortunately there are no tests at present to detect fraudulent organic product. Indirectly, testing for banned substances could be used an indicator. More holistic tests such as biocrystallization could be of use although the test methodologies are complex and more research is needed in order to standardize the test results.

The organic industry must be careful to only support and promote product claims that can be substantiated, even though government standards are only process based. Creating a gap between consumer expectations and product performance can only open the door to more scrutiny and criticism.

Conclusions

Attacks on the organic industry are not likely to disappear as long as market share is cannibalized at the expense of other market segments. Maintaining the credibility and growth of the industry will depend on carefully orchestrated responses. More importantly, implementing rigorous quality assurance through product testing and standards will diminish the opportunities for organic critics.

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