

Organic Paradox

Debra Van Camp

Saint Joseph's University, Haub School of Business

Abstract

In recent years sales of organic foods have grown rapidly, and even in the midst of a recession consumers have shown a steadfast commitment to the organic label (Mintel 2009 and 2010). Arguably, this is due to the fact that, as New York Times writer Mark Bittman observed, organic food has become “the magic-cure all, synonymous with eating well, healthfully, sanely, even ethically” (2009). Recent market research studies and consumer experiments support this observation and provide evidence that consumers have come to expect that organic foods deliver product-specific attributes beyond what organic standards guarantee. The goal of this paper is to analyze two common misconceptions about organic food; namely that organic food is 1) healthier and 2) safer than conventional food. These unsubstantiated claims are perpetuated and sometimes created by organic food companies and trade organizations. The opening section of the paper provides evidence of consumer deception and a discussion of responsible parties. This is followed by an analysis of moral arguments using utilitarian and rights theories. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of stakeholder responsibilities and recommended solutions to promote consumer autonomy.

Evidence of Consumer Deception

The aim of this paper is not to prove, or even imply, that organic foods are less healthy, less safe or more harmful to the environment than their conventional counterparts. Rather, the objective is to illustrate that by making and perpetuating unsubstantiated claims, organic food companies are engaging in deceptive practices and violating consumer autonomy. Explicit or implicit claims that organic foods are healthier or safer are inherently misleading for two reasons. First, comprehensive and peer-reviewed analyses of the scientific literature have consistently concluded there is insufficient empirical evidence to support any claim that

organic foods are more or less nutritious, beneficial to health, or safe than conventional foods (Williams, 2002; Bourn and Prescott, 2002; Siderer et al., 2005; Dangour et al., 2009; Dangour et al., 2010; Magkos et al., 2006). Secondly, current U.S. federal organic regulations do not specify or guarantee that organic foods meet a more rigorous nutrition or safety standard than conventional foods. “Organic” is a process-claim that guarantees that the food has been produced, processed, and handled in accordance with specific federal regulations. It is not a product-claim, and therefore, makes no reference or guarantee of the attributes of the final product (Magkos et al., 2006; 7 CFR, pt. 205, 2011).

Several market research studies and consumer behavior experiments have provided evidence that consumers wrongly believe that the organic label means food is healthier and safer. A 2005 study found that 81% of U.S. organic consumers choose organic food because of its nutritional content and stated, “Many consumers believe that organic and all-natural foods can serve as preventive medicine against health risks and help cure illnesses” (FMI, 2007). A peer-reviewed study by psychologists at the University of Michigan, titled “The ‘organic’ path to obesity”, reported that organic claims biased subjects’ perceptions of calorie content and healthfulness of indulgence foods (Schuldt and Schwarz, 2010). Subjects inferred that foods with an organic label had lower calorie content than those without an organic label. The study also showed that when evaluating the behavior of a person with a weight-loss goal, forgoing exercise after eating an organic dessert was deemed significantly more acceptable than after eating an identical conventional dessert. These examples illustrate the “health halo” that many consumers perceive with the organic label.

Similar, seemingly irrational, consumer behavior has been observed in relation to the perception that organic foods are safer than conventional foods. Surveys have shown that

avoidance of pesticide residues is among the leading reasons consumers choose to buy organic food (Winter and Davis, 2006). While organic regulations limit the types of pesticides which may be used on organic crops, this does not guarantee that organic foods are pesticide free. Surges in demand of organic food following national “food scares” provide further evidence of consumers’ belief in the relative safety of organic food (Pollan, 2006). However, these foods are equally susceptible to food-borne illnesses, as all food production operations, both organic and non-organic, are held to the same safety standards.

Collectively, this evidence suggests that consumers have been misled to believe there is a stronger relationship between “organic” and health and safety than science has proven or current regulations guarantee. Possible sources of this deception include organic food companies, advocacy organizations, news sources, and popular media. Deceptive marketing practices in the organic food industry are usually not blatant lies and can rarely be traced to an individual company. Rather, deception usually occurs as a result of ambiguity, implicit messages, and omission of critical facts in the advertising and promotion of organic food collectively. On food labels, organic manufacturers commonly use semantic and visual cues that can reasonably be assumed to evoke thoughts and feelings of health, safety, and trust. For example, organic taglines and brand names may include phrases such as “good for you”, “natural”, “pure”, “healthy”, “promise”, and “real” (Mintel-GNPD, 2010). These messages are often coupled with green or earth-toned colors and picturesque images of nature. These practices may not necessarily be deceptive in and of themselves, but the intended meaning of such visuals is reinforced by advertising content that makes explicit and implicit claims that organic food is healthier and safer. For example, websites of organic industry giants, such as Stoneyfield and Aurora Organic Dairy, selectively cite research studies which suggest that “organic food is safer”, imply organic

foods contain more nutrients, and propose that eating organic foods may reduce the risk of disease (Stoneyfield, 2010; Aurora Organic Dairy, 2010). The most overtly misleading claims come not from organic companies directly, but from non-profit advocacy groups and “educational” organizations with close ties to the industry. The Organic Center, which is funded largely by organic corporations, is one example of this type of organization (The Organic Center, 2010). The “research” the center generates grossly favors organic food and agriculture and sharply contradicts the peer-reviewed scientific literature (Benbrook et al., 2008). Undoubtedly, organic food companies benefit significantly from this positive publicity, yet these companies are not held directly accountable for the inherent deceptiveness of these claims.

While organic food companies play a central role in deceiving consumers about the meaning of organic, the news media also significantly contributes to consumers’ misperceptions. Two independent, peer-reviewed articles which reviewed the content of relevant news stories found evidence that mainstream news media shows an inherent positive bias toward organic food and agriculture, especially in relation to health benefits (Cahill et al., 2010; Lockie, 2006). One study concluded that, “unsubstantiated comments have become endemic in media coverage of all things organic” (Cahill et al., 2010).

Analysis of Moral Arguments

A common utilitarian argument made by proponents of organic food is that it is not only good for individuals, but for the planet (or society) as a whole. However, a strong argument could be made that the *potential* tangible benefits of increased organic food consumption under misleading pretenses are surpassed by evidence of actual costs. Benefits of increased organic food consumption may include marginally reduced environmental impact as well as potentially reduced pesticide exposure and increased consumption of minor nutrients. However, these

benefits seem pale in comparison to the magnitude of likely costs including, possible amplification of obesity and diet-related chronic disease (already a national crisis), increased food costs (in the midst of a recession), and reduced trust in the food industry as a whole (by implying conventional foods are less healthy and safe). Hypothetically, even if it could be “proven” that the net benefit of organic food to the environment and human health surpasses any associated costs, using this argument as justification for deceiving consumers would be immoral, because it is a direct violation of a fundamental belief in consumer autonomy.

As a society founded on rights theory, it is generally accepted that individuals are not a means to an ends, but an ends in and of themselves (DesJardins et al., 2005). This fundamental belief in the dignity of persons means that we recognize individuals as autonomous beings who possess the capacity to make reasoned, deliberative choices. Deception in organic food advertising is a direct violation of human autonomy, because it attempts to “short-circuit” an individual’s ability to engage in free, reasoned choice (McCall, 2005). Additionally, integral to the idea of rights theory is the concept of correlativity of rights and duties, meaning that protecting the rights of one party imposes obligations on other parties. These obligations can be in the form of negative duty, which oblige inaction, as well as positive rights, which oblige action.

It is important to recognize that, like consumers, organic food companies, advocacy groups, and news organizations also have rights. For example, organic producers, manufacturers and retailers have a right to offer an alternative to conventionally produced foods, to advertise the attributes or processes that differentiate their products, and to make a profit. However, all of these groups also have a negative duty to conduct business without deceiving consumers. Additionally, regulatory agencies, consumer advocacy groups, and news reporters have a

positive right to monitor the organic food industry and hold parties engaging in deceptive marketing practices accountable.

While deceptive advertising practices alone are an egregious violation of consumer autonomy, the concept of positive rights makes deception in organic food marketing even more ethically complex. The nature of unsubstantiated or unqualified claims regarding the health and safety of organic foods may create negative duty to purchase organic food in some consumers' minds. This is because such benefits are intrinsic to what can be reasonably assumed to constitute "adequate human life" (DesJardins et al., 2005). An illustrative example of this sense of duty was shared in a speech on organic food marketing delivered by Sir John Krebs, former head of the UK's Food Standards Agency. He quoted a mother who confessed, "I feel really guilty because I cannot afford organic food to feed my children a healthy diet," (Newsweek, 2010). Krebs stated that this comment made him "cross", because the mother did not have to buy organic to provide her children a balanced and nutritious diet. This example demonstrates how consumers may be led to believe that the purchase of organic food is moral obligation as an extension of fundamental belief in the right to life.

Stakeholder Responsibilities and Recommended Solutions

There are several ways that the stakeholders in organic food marketing can fulfill their moral obligations to consumers, without compromising their own rights to make a profit or exercise freedom of speech. One possible solution is for organic food companies to use an organization such as The Organic Center to disseminate corrective marketing messages. This may be an efficient way for the industry to address issues such as organic "health halos" while sharing associated costs.

Another possible solution is that regulatory agencies could require marketers to qualify statements regarding the relative healthfulness and safety of organic foods with a disclaimer to convey the strength of scientific evidence to support such claims. This would allow organic companies to communicate emerging scientific findings, while not misleading consumers. However, a potential drawback is that additional clutter on food labels and in advertisements may actually increase consumer confusion.

A more promising solution would be a reform of the way government agencies monitor and regulate organic food marketing. This regulatory responsibility is currently divided between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). These regulatory bodies could issue a joint guidance document on organic marketing practices for the benefit of both the industry and consumers. Additionally, the USDA could establish a “memorandum of understanding” with the FDA and FTC to more clearly delineate which organization has responsibility to pursue misleading organic marketing claims and under what circumstances. Such a memorandum would be similar to the one already in place between the FDA and FTC regarding food claims regulated by the FDA. Collectively, these actions would signal to the organic industry that deceptive marketing practices will not be tolerated and would strengthen consumer confidence in the organic label.

References

Aurora Organic Dairy. (2010). Organic FAQs.

http://www.stonyfield.com/organic_living/organic_and_you/organic_faqs/index.jsp

Bittman, Mark. (2009). Eating Food That's Better for You, Organic or Not. *New York Times*, Online. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/weekinreview/22bittman.html>

Benbrook C, Zhao X, Yáñez J, Davies N, and Andrews P. (2008). State of Science Review:

Nutritional Superiority of Organic Foods. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: http://www.organic-center.org/science.nutri.php?action=view&report_id=126

Bourn, D., & Prescott, J. (2002). A comparison of the nutritional value, sensory qualities, and food safety of organically and conventionally produced foods. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 42(1), 1–34.

Cahill S, Morley K, and Powell DA. (2010). Coverage of organic agriculture in North American newspapers Media: linking food safety, the environment, human health and organic agriculture. *British Food Journal*. 112(7):710-722.

[CFR] Agriculture, National Organic Program, 7 CFR, pt. 205 (2011). Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: <http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/>

Dangour A, Dodhia SK, Hayter A, Allen E, Lock K, and Uauy R. (2009). Nutritional quality of organic foods: a systematic review. *Am. J. Clin. Nutr.* 90(3): 680-685.

Dangour A, Lock K, Hayter A, Aikenhead A, Allen E, and Uauy R. (2010). Nutrition-related health effects of organic foods: a systematic review. *Am. J. Clin. Nutr.* 92(1): 203-210.

DesJardins, Joseph R. and McCall John J. *Contemporary Issues in Business Ethics, fifth ed.* Belmont: Wadsworth. (2005). 44-55. Print.

[FMI] Food Marketing Institute. (2007). FMI Backgrounder: National and Organic Foods. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: http://www.fmi.org/media/bg/natural_organic_foods.pdf

Lockie S. (2006). Capturing the sustainability agenda: Organic foods and media discourses on food scares, environment, genetic engineering, and health. *Agriculture and Human Values*. 23:313-323.

Magkos, F; Arvaniti, F; Zampelas, A. (2006). Organic food: Buying more safety or just peace of mind? A critical review of the literature. *Critical Reviews in Food Sci and Nutr.* 46(1): 23-56.

McCall, John J. "Deceptive Advertising". *Contemporary Issues in Business Ethics, fifth ed.* Belmont: Wadsworth. (2005). 332-337. Print.

Mintel. (2009). Organic Food and Drink Retailing - US - November 2009.

Mintel. (2010). Consumer Attitudes Toward Natural and Organic Food and Beverage - US - March 2010.

[Mintel-GNPD] (2010). List based on images of packaging of organic product launches captured by Mintel- Global New Products Database.

Newsweek. (April 19, 2010). Is Organic Food Marketing Hype. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/04/18/is-organic-food-marketing-hype.html>

Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Penguin Press, New York. (2006).

Schuldt JP and Schwarz N. (2010). The “organic” path to obesity? Organic claims influence calorie judgments and exercise recommendations. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 5(3): 144–150.

Siderer Y, Maquet A, and Anklam E. (2005). Need for research to support consumer confidence in the growing organic food market. *Trend Food Sci. Tech.* 16:332–343.

Stonyfield. (2010). Organic for babies and kids. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: http://www.stonyfield.com/yobaby/all_about_yobaby/organic_for_babies_and_kids/index.jsp

The Organic Center. (2010). Cornerstone Donors. Retrieved January 21, 2011 from: <https://organic-center.org/donors.corner.html>

Williams CM. (2002). Nutritional quality of organic food: shades of grey or shades of green? *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. 61:19–24.

Winter CK and Davis SF. (2006). Organic Foods. *J Food Sci.* 71(9): R117-R124.