ABSTRACT

CULTURES IN OPPOSITION:
THE BATTLE BETWEEN CORPORATE ORGANICS AND THE ORGANIC
MOVEMENT

By Kristin M. Oberlander

In the past ten years, organics have been re-framed as an industry that caters to the middle and upper class strata of society because the products cost more than agricultural farming products. Marketers build a dynamic wherein the mere purchase of organic food is akin to social activism. However, the term organic lacks a unified definition. This thesis examines how the mass marketing of organic products capitalizes on ideals of the organic movement to create a need that the purchase of organic foods “promises” to satisfy. It also examines popular tactics of persuasion used by marketing and advertising companies for organic foods, such as consumer activism generated from the origins of the Organic Movement in the United States. The organic industry must maintain the ability to produce enough food to meet the demand of consumers, while still following the tenets of the Organic Movement.
CULTURES IN OPPOSITION:
THE BATTLE BETWEEN CORPORATE ORGANICS AND THE ORGANIC
MOVEMENT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

Department of Communication

by

Kristin M. Oberlander

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2006

Advisor__________________________________________
Dr. David Sholle

Reader__________________________________________
Dr. Bruce Drushel

Reader__________________________________________
Dr. Ron Becker
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1 THE MARKETING OF ORGANIC FOODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEW OF THE ISSUES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking to the Past: Decades of Activism</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organics Enter the Spotlight</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Organics More Palatable: The Reframing of a Fringe Culture</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Food Companies Take Notice</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures in Opposition</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCOPE OF STUDY</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ORGANIZATION</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 2 THE MASS MARKETING AND DIFFUSION OF ORGANICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMPLEX MARKET STRUCTURES CULTIVATE CONSUMER NEED</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 3 TALKING ABOUT AND SEEING ORGANIC FOOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNICATION METHODS AND AUTHENTICITY</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARKETING WITH RISK</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companies Must Communicate Openly with the Public and Their Employees</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger Issues at Stake: Hazard and Outrage</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spokesperson</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HORIZON ORGANIC: A CASE STUDY</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing with Fear</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 4 THE FUTURE OF ORGANICS: WHO DEFINES IT AND HOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINAL THOUGHTS</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the care and support I have received in the past two years. Many thanks go to the faculty at Miami University including David Sholle, who was with me on this idea from the beginning and spent countless hours helping me to develop it; Bruce Drushel, for his invaluable editing advice (which undoubtedly has made me appear a much better writer than I actually am); and to Ron Becker, who was so often able to verbalize ideas and concepts in ways that I could not.

Special thanks to my colleagues and my family, especially my mother, father, Lisa, and Eric, who endured numerous discussions about organics.

And to all of those along the way that provided much needed feedback and insights…
CHAPTER 1

THE MARKETING OF ORGANIC FOODS

1.1 Introduction

The rise of the organic food industry has been called a true “underdog” story, in which the grassroots based movement persistently struggles with the agribusiness corporations, changing the way consumers look upon what goes into their food. Public relations wars between the organic and agribusiness sectors constantly argue about which side produces “healthier” and “more accessible” food. There appears to be no resolution on the horizon in a conflict that surfaced in the second half of the twentieth century. Each side is determined to present issues in a battle for the foreground. In the 1960s, when certain pesticides used in mass food production were deemed harmful for consumption and damaging to the environment, the practices and products of the organic community gained favor. Years later, in the 1990s, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) set strict guidelines for what could and could not be labeled as “organic” or “all natural.” This policy helped control the number of companies who could claim to grow organics at a time when more and more companies were looking to cash in on growing consumer interest in the products. This occurred even if only a small portion of the ingredients actually fit organic standards. Now, as the marketing for such products continues to grow, consumers are seeing a wider variety of organic foods available to them in more mainstream places: in separate sections of the supermarket, as smaller chains (Trader Joes), or even as full-blown organic superstores such as Whole Foods (based out of Texas) or Wild Oats (from Colorado). Regardless of the criticism that the organic food industry faces from the agribusiness sector, it is still a growing and profitable sector of production. Michael Sligh reports that, as of 2002, the organic industry was growing at a rate of more than 20% per year (277).

The rise in popularity of these items, some argue, is a direct result of the marketing campaigns behind them. Not only are consumers told that the products satisfy their health needs—implying the food is more “pure” and “simple” than industrially produced items—but it is also implied that the mere purchase of an organic item is synonymous with the social activism of the Organic Movement that originated in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Wild Oats has a “Wooden Nickel” program in which customers are encouraged to recycle and donate to local
charities in one motion. The program gives shoppers the choice of a reimbursement of $0.05 per bag or a wooden token during checkout for each grocery bag they bring from home. For those choosing the latter, the customer drops the token into a “Wooden Nickel Bank” representing the local non-profit organization of his or her choice and the store will make a “real” donation to the group. In this way, the store (and the act of shopping at the store) becomes nearly indistinguishable from the act of donating to local causes. In turn, consumers begin to associate the mere act of going to these corporate establishments as a new form of consumer activism. To be sure, the organic superstores of the present are slickly packaged versions of the local farmers markets, co-ops, and natural food marts, and these larger stores cater to a demographic with deeper pockets who demand a trendier atmosphere. In addition, organic items are often described as “gourmet” and served in restaurant chains that tend to offer options that are lower in fat and have a lot of fresh ingredients. This means the organic trend in food also seems to cater to the more health-conscious consumer.

The battle between environmentalists and the agricultural business industry continues as each tries to define what it deems the most efficient, healthiest, and most environmentally sound food production method. Organics often accuse industrial agriculture of sacrificing the environment to make more food at the cost of fewer nutrients in the food because of pesticides, and that soil quality is often sacrificed for the higher yields. Organics also paint the industrial sect as motivated totally by profit. This is not to say the organics do not care about money. However, the discourse surrounding the industry downplays the profit motive in favor of pro-environmental and pro-health rhetoric, which not all consumers believe. Opponents (including agricultural business) note that organic items cost more than non-organic food, leading to class differences in who tends to buy the food. A third factor, government intervention, is also important to examine because it regulates the food industry as a whole. After promoting less nutritious grains for years, like white bread and rice to name a few, it seems that the government is trying to steer people towards less-processed foods. The new nutritional recommendations, called the “My Pyramid Plan,” suggest eating more whole grains and cutting down on sodium—the government website offers a method of tracking the amount of sodium one eats every day and advises a relatively low amount—which is typically found in commercially packaged foods. However, the next challenge of the government is to encourage more farmers to grow organic crops so that the future of the food pyramid’s recommendations can be met by more people. The new challenge facing the
organic industry will be to continue producing ecologically sound, certified crops to a growing market without crossing the line into traditional agricultural business practices. In addition, there are consequences in the global food market, since much of our produce is not grown locally, and in some cases, is imported.

I intend to show how the mass marketing of organic products capitalizes on ideals of the organic movement to create a need, through commodity fetishism, that the purchase of organic foods “promises” to satisfy. I will also examine popular tactics of persuasion used by marketing and advertising companies for organic foods, such as consumer activism generated from the origins of the Organic Movement in the United States. Of course, organics is not a new industry; it is a farming method cultivated by the earliest civilizations of this nation and the world. In the past decade or so, however, it has been re-framed as an industry that caters to the middle and upper class strata of society (because the products cost more than agricultural farming products) and as a path to activism for some consumers (marketers build a dynamic wherein the mere purchase of organic food is akin to social activism). As organic food becomes more popular with consumers, a conflict arises within the organic movement, i.e. the ability to produce enough food to meet the demand of consumers, while still following the tenets of the Organic Movement (including fair prices for producers and environmentally sound farming practices). This is particularly complicated as larger corporate labels buy organic labels in an effort to diversify their offerings.

The lack of a unified definition of the term organic makes conceptualizing it difficult—to farmers, it is an agricultural method; to the United States Department of Agriculture, it is based on a specific set of federal rules and guidelines; to activists involved in the Slow Food or Organic Movements, it is part of a larger measure to increase sustainability practices in agriculture and promote anti-globalization political and cultural agendas; to many food retailers, it is a marketing tool; to the suburban parent, it is a way to feel good about feeding pesticide- and growth hormone-free foods to his or her family. The terms organic sector, organic industry, and organic business will appear time and again throughout this thesis. The pairing of organic with words that are associated with commerce is admittedly contradictory, however it seems to best describe the current face of mass marketed organics as the products change from a small to a much larger niche market with the help of corporate takeovers and product introductions. Some organic activists may detest the idea of organics “selling out”, but the appropriation of the
subculture will not be reversed thanks, in part, to the enormous popularity of these products. The struggle between the organics and agribusinesses is not just about market share or the quality of the food; both believe they offer the best possible produce, provide the most nutritious milk, and supply the healthiest cuts of beef, poultry, and pork. At its base, the battle is about finding a clear and concise definition of organic, which is one reason this author has toiled with the best way to describe the advent of corporate organics.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are some of the main tactics used in the marketing and advertising of organic foods to entice consumers to buy the products and how is the purchase of these products likened with social activism?
2. How is the perception of organic food as a middle to upper class niche perpetuated by marketing?
3. How do the tenets of the Organic Movement conflict with the rise in the mass marketing of organic food?

1.3 Review of the Issues

Looking to the Past: Decades of Activism

In order to understand the marketing of consumer activism in organic food, it is necessary to examine organic culture as a grassroots effort that has corporate appeal. It also sheds light upon the reasons that I will refer to it as a subculture in the United States, claims which are built upon the Organic Movement. Though the widespread commodification of natural products is relatively recent, Andrew Kimbrell argues that interest in organic farming methods and techniques dates back to the early part of the twentieth century (273). However, it was not until the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s that the overall health benefits organicism promoted captivated a widespread audience. The “back to the land” mentality associated with counterculturists (like hippies) and with political movements (like the organic movement and anti-corporate movements of the mid to late twentieth century) was ripe for the launch of organic products into public consciousness. Communities established small co-op markets where farmers could sell
their produce and receive fair compensation for their goods. The organic lifestyle emphasized reliance on the environment and simplicity, as opposed to a heavy dependence upon corporate agriculture (Kimbrell 274) for sustenance (i.e., the organic lifestyle seeks to be a system involving the earth, wherein industrial agriculture ultimately becomes a system involving the corporatization of the earth as a unit of measure.) For many people with an increasing wariness of the food industry, organic food stepped in to provide them with a way to separate themselves from these industries through social activism.

The work of notable figures in the farming sect and environmental research during the mid to late twentieth century helped continue to raise national awareness about problems associated with corporate agriculture, specifically the harmful effect of pesticides. Rachel Carson’s research on pesticides in the late fifties and early sixties led consumers to think twice about what could be on or in their food, and Caser Chavez’s and farmers’ unions fought the use of harmful pesticides that were damaging the health of fieldworkers. Both concentrated on the effects that exposure to chemicals had upon the public’s well-being. In other areas of the country, farmers protested low corporate selling prices of food which were driving farmers into bankruptcy. The establishment of groups such as the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) and California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) drove interest for more research. In the 1970s, the USDA published its first account of the benefits of organic farming and the future of the industry (Kimbrell 275), thus institutionalizing the term “organic”. Cristin Marandino argues that decades later in the 1990s, the push for stricter government regulation established the Organic Foods Production Act (14). The Act launched the National Organic Standards Board, a group committed to organizing a complete set of rules and guidelines for organic products (Kimbrell 277). Meanwhile, the industry continued to receive widespread criticism of the true nature of the “organic” label after some companies falsely advertised products as “all natural” or “organic” when only a few of the many ingredients were certifiably so (Kimbrell 278). This caused the USDA to develop a concrete list of guidelines to which products wishing to be labeled as “certified organic” must adhere. Cheryl Long reports that, in order for a crop to be classified as certified organic, the farmer must use “only approved materials that will not harm humans, animals, or soil life,” provide an “organic farm management plan,” and be subject to annual inspections (44-45). Industrial agriculture businesses seeking the label are under scrutiny as well. They are not to use “toxic synthetic pesticides and fertilizers” (fields must be clean for three
years prior to being certified), genetically modified seeds, sewage sludge as fertilizers (organic farmers, seemingly backed up by the USDA’s organic standards, argue that the chemicals in treatment plants are unsafe and that fresh manure, in which pathogens have been naturally destroyed, is the safest method to fertilize crops) and that animals used for meat, eggs, or dairy products must be given totally organic feed, have outdoor access, and that no antibiotics or growth hormones are to be used on the animals (Long 44-45).

**Organics Enter the Spotlight**

Since the organic movement is rooted in “back to the land” beliefs and values, many of the practices of organic farming are evidence of overarching ideals within the organic community. I argue that this makes it a subculture, especially because many people equate those who prefer organic products with the “hippies” who made the term well-known in the 1960s and 70s. Organics are becoming less a symbol of the counterculture movements because of the increasing mass production of the items, though many people are enticed by the values that the products seem to represent. Hebdige’s work on subculture appropriation is certainly evident in the organic food industry. Michael Sligh identifies four facets of the integrity of organic products, and these terms are often seen on the packaging of organic food items. This includes references regarding responsibility to the environment, “accountability” to local communities and consumers, and fair pricing that allows farmers to maintain the more costly organic standards (280).

The focus on sustainability, social responsibility, and an almost utopian goal to change corporate influence on consumption are common goals within organicism. The ability to “live simply” or “live off the land” are oft-used phrases among proponents of the lifestyle. The organic community also has celebrity supporters who tout its benefits. Actor and activist Woody Harrelson is an outspoken vegan who lives in a sustainable “solar powered community in Hawaii” (Freydkin) and has protested logging methods by ascending the Golden Gate Bridge in California. His social activism led him to star in a 2003 documentary, “Go Further”, which follows Harrelson’s Simple Organic Living Tour wherein he visited colleges in a “hemp oil-fueled bus…preaching the benefits of raw food, yoga, and hemp” (Deziel). For those who believe that Harrelson’s promotion of marijuana associates the organic movement with illicit drug use, Alicia Silverstone offers a “cleaner” drug-free image. The actress is a strict vegan, operates an organic garden, and reportedly uses and praises an all-natural hair product line,
called PureOlogy (Cojocaru 120). The activism of Harrelson, Silverstone and other celebrities illustrates that part of the push behind the movement is especially focused on fighting corporate control of the nation. The idea of creating food production methods like farming and livestock in the organic image places a strong emphasis upon the polarization of the ideological struggle between proponents of organic methods of farming and corporate methods. Dave Henson believes that it is an issue of standing ground and keeping up with the latest developments in the area of agribusiness:

Our conservation and environmental movements have been focused on “fighting fires.” We have built ten thousand local or national groups to fight ten thousand corporate assaults on nature and people…. We cannot confuse reaction to a problem with proactive strategy (234-235).

Then he directly links the organic community’s discourse on responsible use of the Earth’s resources (“sustainability”) and the ongoing fight to change and redefine the dominant views on food production (corporate “mechanisms”):

While we must build sustainable alternatives, we will create a safe and open space for sustainable practices to become the norm only if we dismantle the mechanisms of corporate rule that stand in our way (235, italics added).

The aforementioned food production ideals of Sligh create a subtext about the “organic” lifestyle and the association of those who regularly consume organic food with these ideals. Opponents of organic farming techniques argue that publications of social activists within the Organic Movement paint a distorted picture of the issues surrounding industrial agriculture.

Both sides are polarizing the issue of the future of farming practices in the country, spinning the arguments with “Us” versus “Them” rhetoric. Since the agribusiness companies are larger, they have more means to control a lot of what the public knows about the debate. One of the topics they seem to concentrate upon is the inability of organic methods to produce enough food to “feed the masses.” John Miller argues that organic farming is “wasteful” because it produces “about half of what conventional farmers expect at harvest time” and, because of this, the organic community supports “population control” (37). Kimbrell confronts another variation of the argument--citing that people who prefer the more expensive organic products and the methods that create the products are allegedly creating a system in which the economically disadvantaged will not be able to afford to buy the food (15).
Arguments such as these, allow industrial farming supporters to paint the organic food community as deviant. In the 1990s, when organic food products were starting to gain popularity with mass market audiences, advertisers hoping to market neo-organic foods faced the challenge of broadening the fan base of items normally associated with and representing values of the organic community. In effect, advertising firms needed to “present” the values and beliefs of organicism to the public in a way that would appeal to potential consumers who might ordinarily be turned off by the associations with counterculture movements. Once only found at locally owned natural foods stores or farmers markets, organic food products have exploded, appearing in grocery chains such as Kroger, Wegmans, as well as self proclaimed “mega stores” such as Meijer, Wal-Mart, Price Chopper, and 7-Eleven (Ruiz-Marrero). Additionally, this niche market is expanding at such rates that chain stores designed to sell all-natural and organic products are succeeding. Stores such as Trader Joe’s, Jungle Jim’s, Wild Oats, and Whole Foods are catering to a rapidly growing group.

Making Organics More Palatable: The Reframing of a Fringe Culture

The commercialization of the organic foods industry is still in relative infancy. Therefore, consumers will generally pay a markup of around $0.80 per item compared to non-organic products. With higher prices, the buyers of natural food are generally located higher on the pay scale, which has social class implications based upon who has the means to buy organic items. More expensive products packaged in exotic ways and sold in upscale markets become associated with middle and upper class tastes. Advertisers are covertly promoting a lifestyle in these products--not just that the food is more pure or more healthy then processed foods--and purchasing these items affirms one’s position in an elite class. Two processes—reconstructing the organic image and the promotion of its use value—are responsible for transforming the organic food industry from a niche market to an exceedingly profitable business venture. It underwent an “incorporation” stage (Hebdige 208-209) in which the products, through commercialization, started to become accepted into mainstream society. Advertising campaigns achieve this by reconstructing the image surrounding anything labeled “organic” or “all-natural,” i.e. the association with radical left-wing hippies, and with such perceivably unsavory ingredients as alfalfa sprouts and tofu. Hebdige discusses incorporation as part of the method in which a society accepts, and welcomes, a group that they previously viewed as deviant. With
incorporation, society absorbs a subculture—in this case the organic food industry—and seeks to construct a version of it deemed acceptable by the public. In order for this to occur, the deviant group must be defined as “Other,” i.e. different from popular culture (211). The values of the organic subculture take an anti-consumerism and anti-industrial agriculture stance, which is definitely seen as counter to what most of capitalist America is taught to believe and practice.

Once the dominant group (agribusiness) realizes that there is a profit to be made from society’s fascination with the allure of the “Other,” the dominant group begins to commodify the subculture. This occurs as the dominant group picks and chooses parts of the subculture to market, creating an ‘alter-subculture.’ Organic food advertisers focused on the “simplicity” of the Organic Movement and sought to promote the products as “pure” and “from the Earth.” In the process, they created a demand for the food that only a sector of the country could afford. Middle to upper class Americans, for the most part, accepted the new “watered down” representation of the organic subculture to the public presented by advertising and marketing firms (209-210). Stuart Hall characterizes this process as one in which mainstream society examines and “situate[s] [the subculture] within the dominant framework of meanings” (Hebdige 209). In effect, society is expanding its boundaries to incorporate the new version of the “Other” (organic food) and, in the process, strips away the danger and mystique that was formerly associated with the deviant culture (the connection to the politicized, anti-establishment hippies). Roland Barthes takes a Marxist view on control of information when he argues that the bourgeois class continues to redefine, shape, and call into question all that the society has come to understand (Hebdige 200). This can be equated with the approach that agribusiness (the “bourgeois”) applies to the organic subculture. Industrial food production companies, realizing the growing favor that the organic food sector was gaining with certain consumers, started buying organic product lines or launching their own versions. With numerous examples of buyouts and product launches which will be discussed more in-depth later, the food industry recognized that the best way to control the power of a perceptibly deviant group is to make them part of the dominant culture. In essence, the mass marketers of commercial food products adopted the strategy of (a somewhat altered phrase), “if you can’t beat them, buy them out.”

Incorporation, as a socio-political construct, differs from issues dealing with commerce and marketing, however there are still valid comparisons to be made. Through incorporation, advertising firms create a “use value” (Willis 337) whereby the consumer feels a strong desire to
make the initial purchase of natural foods and has the motivation to keep buying them. Naomi Klein refers to this practice as “emotional branding,” which reduces a product to a group of identifiable feelings that the consumer recalls when seeing or hearing about the item (No Logo). One could argue that the emotional branding of organic food products would use the concepts of “sustainability” and “social responsibility” from the aforementioned list of ideals Sligh recognized as part of organic culture. In the process of its image reconstruction, natural foods begin to be mass marketed, and the sales figures are augmented by the advertising industry’s reliance upon the individual’s desire to acquire more goods. Douglas Atkin, of Merkley + Partners Advertising, studied cult devotion to discover what concepts made people susceptible to feeling an intense connection with a product, and found that making an almost spiritual connection between brand and consumer resulted in the ability to control the consumer dollar (The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers). The advertisers of organic foods have been able to do this by linking the concept of simplicity as purity to organic products. The annual increase in sales, leads one to believe that Atkin and Klein are on to something: that by introducing a product as filling a certain emotional void, the consumer will turn to that product every time he or she feels an inner “pull” or desire to experience that emotion. In organics’ case, the “pull” is to experience and identify with the ideals of the organic subculture. Advertisers use this to their advantage by marketing products to perpetuate a cycle of wanting/buying, or “commodity fetishism.” Marx coined the term and, since then, many critics have touched upon its meaning. In his studies on the advertising industry, Wolfgang Haug argues that individuals are presented with a “double reality” (as qtd. in Willis 338) that is the use value of an item and the “appearance” (338) of use value. For example, in an advertisement for organic juice, consumers are presented with the actual use value of the juice (to quench thirst). Through the carefully constructed imagery within the ad they come to discover other values that are attached to its use. Among these meanings could be consuming fruit for health reasons, the socio-cultural values of the fruit drink as a symbol for a given lifestyle choice, and more. Susan Willis argues that the consumer’s “anticipation of use” creates excitement and a need to buy the product again at a later time (337), which substantiates the data behind products providing an emotional base for consumers. For instance, in reference to the purchase of apparel, Willis looks upon the excitement of how “the high-class piece of merchandise…that in itself lives up to all our expectations…activates anticipation for the next purchase when we take our designer fashion
home and hang it next to our now worn and boring collection of clothes” (337). The same thrill in attainment explains the reason that organic products carry such value to the individuals looking to, literally, ‘buy into’ that lifestyle. The consumer eye has been trained to be attracted to the upscale packaging of organic products compared to commercially packaged items.

**Large Food Companies Take Notice**

With an understanding of the underlying social factors of incorporation and commodity fetishism, it is easier to interpret the reasons why and how the industry is growing, and who is driving this development. The process began as organic food products started appearing in major grocery store chains, which made them more accessible to consumers. In addition, since relatively recent commercialization of the industry means that larger groups of people are being exposed to organic food for the first time, it may appear to be a “new phenomenon.” While this is not to say that all consumers buy into the rhetoric of the organic food industry, it does make one wonder if the enormous growth of the organic sector is part of a desire for consumers to jump on the bandwagon (join the fad) or an earnest desire to promote the activist causes behind it. The process results in higher prices that tend to draw members of the middle and upper class, and it puts the emphasis upon the purchase of organic materials as part of a lifestyle—i.e. signifying that one is a member of class that brings a certain status—rather than a decision based solely upon health or environmental reasons. These occurrences are driven by the general tendency of Americans to engage in commodity fetishism once a subculture is no longer labeled deviant. Simultaneously, it marginalizes the oppositional politics of real consumers, and ignores concerns for the environment, health, and the anti-corporate movement.

The organic industry showed significant gains starting in the 1990s, but it was not until around 2001 that mass producers began to take note of the awesome growth potential that organics could provide. The incorporation of the industry into something tangible and readily accessible to the public helped feed their interest and, consequently, the interest of corporations looking to take part in the lucrative sales. Organic food was no longer sold exclusively in organic or natural specialty stores. National chains like Wegmans and Kroger started selling organic food products in designated sections throughout the retail outlets, complete with special banners and signs to create a “store within a store” (Turcsik 64) feel. Along with greater accessibility and consumer friendliness, advertisers also directly referenced a “standard of living” in their ads,
therefore trying to get the consumer to connect organic food—and on a larger scale the organic industry—with prestige. An example of this is the Whole Foods store. It opened in early 2004 in the new Time Warner Center mall in Manhattan, New York City amidst other upscale tenants, such as Williams-Sonoma, a pricy cookware and accessories store. Whole Foods is a 59,000 square foot megalopolis of organic and other fashionable food items which refers to itself as the “Ultimate Shopping and Lifestyle Experience” (Ruiz-Marrero). As Whole Foods was garnering attention for opening the Manhattan store and others in 2004, Trader Joe’s also was trying to expand its largely suburban locations to downtown New York sites (Holusha 1). This is further proof that a market for these large stores exists.

Before the building frenzy, however, corporate food entities sought to introduce their own organic product lines or to acquire already established organic food companies. The process of incorporation was responsible for the increased desire of major food companies to be connected to natural products, and there were many takers. In a 2003 article inside In Business, a wave of organic product introductions demonstrated the race between companies to attach their name to the “organic” trend: Frito-Lay (owned by PepsiCo, Inc.) unveiled Tostitos Organic Tortilla Chips; Tyson Foods, Inc., owner of Nature’s Farm, began marketing organic chicken available in select areas; and Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream (whose parent company is Unilever) introduced four flavors of organic ice cream. At this time, there was also talk of General Mills putting its name on then recently acquired Cascadian Farms natural cereals (“Major Food Companies Buy Organic Companies and Launch Organic Products” 8). In a June 2004 article (“A Natural Connection”), Frozen Food Age highlighted the organic dessert sector. Natural ice cream and ice cream novelties started appearing more frequently in freezer cases. Dairy alternatives, like soy, make up a growing sector of the industry. Turtle Mountain, a company based out of Oregon, is providing products to compete with regular ice cream companies by “piling trend (soy) upon trend (all natural) upon trend (low-carb)” (Wellman) in its latest offerings. Other organic dairy products caught consumers’ eyes as well, based on practicality. Certain organic companies garnered attention by also offering a longer shelf life on their products. A 2003 Dean Foods’ purchase, Horizon Organic, reportedly tripled sales from $49 million to about $160 million in 2001, and offered consumers milk that lasts for up to fifty-five days (Pulfrey et al.).

One cannot help noticing the parent companies of these brands: General Mills, Dean Foods, PepsiCo, Inc. Large-scale corporations controlling and operating organic food companies seems
counter to the ideals of the organic community. However, since these organic food and food products have become so attractive to the consumer, it is necessary to bring in large corporations to help handle the volume, and these large corporations have even larger stakeholders. Ruiz-Marrero reports that there are several cases in which this is true: Health Valley (a cereal producer), Bearitos (a tortilla chip manufacturer), Bread Shop (a granola brand), and Celestial Seasonings (a tea company) are all owned by the Hain Celestial Group, whose stockholders include Phillip Morris, Citigroup, Exxon-Mobil, Wal-Mart, Lockheed-Martin, and H. J. Heinz foods; Cascadian Farms, itself owned by Small Planet foods, belongs to a larger company, General Mills, whose main stockholders are Phillip Morris, Exxon-Mobil, General Electric, Chevron, Nike, McDonald’s, Dupont, Dow Chemical, and PepsiCo, Inc. It seems that, the popularity of such products has grown so considerably that organics had to call a truce with agribusiness, for now, and that is where the paradox lies. Some members of the organic community are wondering how it is possible to keep the integrity of the techniques on such a large scale, arguing that these grand operations cannot be ecologically sound because of the amount of product they must produce. In addition, there are questions about the extent to which these organic companies turned agribusinesses will consider soil conservation techniques, corrosion of the goals of the organic community to sell local produce to local consumers, and the increasing amount of fuel that must be used to transport the growing number of harvests to sales venues that are further away (Ruiz-Marrero). These concerns also call into question a larger issue: i.e. how the organic food industry is being altered to meet greater consumer demand. Sligh’s comment on the nature of the organic movement seems ironic in the face of the recent boom: “[It] did not start out to establish niche-market foods for rich people, but to model an alternative system for all of agriculture” (128). While the agribusiness community and organic supporters will need to come to some sort of understanding on the future of the techniques used to produce the food, the advertising sector is still looking for ways to attract upper class tastes in order to keep the market growing.

Businesses vie for consumer attentions, and the success of the increased commercialization of organic foods continues to keep demand high and prices similarly high. The price of natural foods means that certain groups are more likely to have the means to buy the products, which highlights income-based boundaries. The dynamics of commodity fetishism are easily applied to a wealthier population with more expensive tastes and more money to spend on them. Joanne
Finkelstein argues that food consumption is an indicator of class: i.e. “what a person eats represents status and group membership” (Finkelstein abstract). Organic foods are purported to be especially popular on college campuses. This falls in line with Finkelstein’s argument, since college attendance generally is reserved for those who have the means to attend. Kelly, as well as Delaney and Brown, note that the typical customer of organic food is an educated female baby-boomer (“Health Food Chains Spar for Baby-Boomers” and “Health Food Stores Flex Their Muscles,” respectively), arguing that the prices alone suggest that shoppers are “buying into a lifestyle” (Kelly). In addition to these class implications, advertisers are relying upon the fact that organicism represents a slower paced lifestyle as well. The grassroots groups that sought to “return to the land” also preached a reliance on nature and resistance to consumerist attitudes; thus, “simplicity” becomes a deep-rooted emotional tie that consumers make with organic products.Advertisers know this, and often design packaging to look rustic or well-worn. This may be the reason that the increasingly overworked baby booming sector seeks the products: as a way to disconnect from the pressures of their careers and family responsibilities while putting an emphasis on a type of lifestyle that seems attractive, since it runs counter to a typically fast-paced society. According to sales, it appears that consumers who support the industry are most likely to identify with organic products as a way to get “back to the land” without having to really change their lifestyle. Advertisers make the connection for them by projecting that the consumer can buy simplicity (or status) by picking up the item and putting it in his or her cart.

Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, patented the “Lovemark” concept which evokes a brand loyalty that is hard to match (“The Persuaders”). The marketers or the organic food industry are relying on this type of advertising to continue to build loyalty and draw in new customers, hence the emphasis upon simplicity and status. The emotions that these concepts project also make altering the family’s diet increasingly attractive. Organic and natural products appeal to parents who are carefully watching what they put into their children’s bodies, and commodity fetishism teaches them to believe that only the most expensive and trendy products will do. The commercialization of such products show that consumers are likely to be manipulated, and will readily buy into advertising campaigns. In accordance with Roger Scruton’s scathing attack on the commercialization of bottled water, individuals are compelled to treat organic products as luxury items while systematically viewing the purchase of these items
as part of the price of status and group membership (“Bottled Water Is the Greatest Fraud in the Whole History of Food Fetishism” 58).

Cultures in Opposition

The war between agribusiness the organic industry is not likely to cease anytime soon, with government agencies, producers, and activists each wanting a say in how organic is defined. The popularity of organic products continues to expand--with nearly 20% annual growth from 1997-2003—thanks to the exploitation of ideals and values associated with the Organic Movement. Organicism has humble roots, dating back to the early part of the twentieth century, but it grew to become an opponent of industrial agriculture through grassroots efforts and the rise of counterculture movement in the 1960s and 70s. After about a fifteen-year evolution, organic food is still tied to the environment, touting purity and simplicity of the movement’s roots, but now is associated more with what is “fashionable” to buy. Specialty stores that focus on providing organic items are expanding and building in metropolitan areas around the country, and they are being associated with the upscale surroundings in which they reside. With the emergence of such trend-setting and quirky natural foods retailers as Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, and Jungle Jim’s, the organic industry began to be associated with higher income levels, especially since the price of food was generally more expensive than non-organic. The incorporation and commodification of the organic industry is still relatively recent. The process persists, but I would argue that, while it is a relatively new trend, the ideological meanings of the products could shift as they become more popular. As the demand for organic food items continues to increase, the prices will drop. In 1996, consumers could expect to pay an average of $1.16 more per item (Bailey 407); as of 2004 that price was about $0.80 more. This will change the class and status identifications, as the greater public is better able to afford the products. However, Andy Berliner, president of [natural frozen food company] Amy’s Kitchen, noted that the company’s products did well in urban areas, if the price of the item was adjusted to the market (Turcsik 66). So where does the future of organics lie? First, it all resides upon the image of locally grown, organic farming operations. However, the demand that consumers place on suppliers has also grown, to the point that smaller operations no longer are able to keep up with the demand. Established parent companies have seen the income that organics provide and, with new product lines or acquisitions, are able to compete in the organic field as well. However,
this involvement brings agribusiness into an area that, for years, the organic subculture fought against. The companies are able to provide the land and production space needed for the newly expanded organic operations, but the very thought has the organic community outraged. Activists argue that most people still believe that the organic products are made on smaller farms and that, as Ronnie Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association says that there is “no way in hell can you be organic if you have over a hundred cows. After a certain size the operation cannot be ecologically sound anymore, among other things because of the amount of manure produced” (Ruiz-Marreo).

But the advertising industry is counting on the fact that consumers will still flock to upscale organic markets like Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods to buy items whose “use value” is greatly determined by the “emotional branding” that the firms are marketing. They are banking on the fact that consumers have identified with the Organic Movement’s emphasis on simplicity. Advertisers believe that people are looking to bring more order to their life, and if organicism helps convey that idea to the consumer, then some people must already be wired to desire that order. If consumers believe that organics serve as a way for them to appear more in touch with the environment, then it will sell. So far, the hunch of advertisers is correct. All that they needed to do was tap into the average consumer’s fears and propose that organic food was a solution. Until the process stops working on consumers or prices of the items fall, organic food will still be associated with upper class tastes, status, prestige, and a way to purchase part of a simpler life.

1.4 Scope of Study

This study will be a complex examination of the marketing of the organic food industry, concentrating specifically on the tactics used to persuade consumers to continue buying the products. I will be examining overall marketing trends and public relations efforts of organic and non-organic companies. This approach will look at the larger implications of the industry, as well as scrutinize how companies help to create an ideological shift in the way consumers view these food products. This manipulation of consumers is a major way the organics industry is battling to have control over a larger share of the population, that is, to create a larger market share. I will examine Horizon Organic Dairy—a company that started as a small operation but was acquired by a large food company (Dean Foods)—as an example of how political and cultural factors
have contributed to the acceptance of organic food and, on a larger scale, a larger awareness of ‘green’ causes in the United States.

1.5 Methodology

This paper will be a qualitative study of the marketing of organic food products and the rhetoric and policy-making decisions that surround the industry. The focus will be on the organic movement and its antagonistic relationship with industrial agriculture, the psychological constructs of organic marketing campaigns, the implications of a national organic standard, and the media and public relations rhetoric generated within the discourse.

1.6 Chapter Organization

Chapter One outlines the history of the Organic Movement and the perception of the subculture created by the movement by mainstream society. Chapter 2 will focus on the marketing tactics used to liken the purchase of organic food to social activism. Chapter Three examines the use of environmental communication tactics by the organic food industry to legitimize the need for organic food. Chapter Four analyzes the future of the organic food industry and how it will stay true to its ideals while serving a rapidly growing market. This proposal summarizes an undertaking of studying the past, present, and future of the organic food industry based upon consumer preferences, government policy, and global demand. Ideally, it will help the reader to clarify his or her own views about the current climate of food and health in the United States and to think more carefully about the politics of consumption of the foods and ideologies upon which our society relies.
CHAPTER 2

THE MASS-MARKETING AND DIFFUSION OF ORGANICS

Two further theories that can help us to look at the mass marketing of organics are commodity aesthetics and diffusion theory. The study of commodity aesthetics involves wading through a sea of diverse ideas on the importance of commodities, and the exchange that takes place between merchants and consumers. Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Susan Willis present a few of many interpretations of Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism in a modern capitalist market. Their ideas differ from incorporation in that they are based largely on economics versus a socio-political construct. Marx concentrates on the conflict of the commodity form and its representation of human labor in its abstract. As follows, the representation is where the exchange value is determined. Haug and Willis advance this concept in their application of these concepts to a complex economy; they both delve into the area of advertising and marketing. Haug concentrates on the exchange between the buyer and seller as the main component of use value, whereas Willis’ work focuses on the aesthetics of the packaging itself, and what it conveys to the consumer. Stuart Hall points out that these two are using the term “aesthetics” as a form of cognitive awareness, i.e. a sensual understanding of the product in its commodified form.

An important element in the promotion and selling of a product is getting consumers to notice it exists in the first place. It is at this point that marketing steps into the picture, and a clear understanding of how a commodity is to be introduced to potential buyers is also important. Everett Rogers’ theory of diffusion can be applied to literally any type of marketing or advertising campaign. The trick lies within his multi-faceted approach to the study of communication. He asserts that the diffusion of an innovation takes place by way of communication through certain channels over time and among certain members of a social system. Many of Rogers’ examples throughout his diffusion research deal with technological advances: the adoption of hybrid corn seeds, cellular telephones, the QWERTY keyboard layout, etc. Obviously, this is not the case in organics. The industry is situated within a group of concepts and sits under an ideological umbrella, where the culture of sustainable agriculture resides. Through that culture, the rise of organics in the past ten to fifteen years comes together.
The food items within this sector represent a philosophy that people seek to buy…in bouts of consumer activism.

But there are more components to the introduction and potential acceptance of niche market items like organic food. The climate in which organics are introduced to the consumer plays a pivotal role in the approach that should be taken. There are factors outside of the control of marketing companies that must be considered, viz. that organics have a loyal following of sustainable agriculture proponents. As with any newly marketed brand (referring here to “organics” as a brand), the industry’s ultimate takeover by multinational corporations changes the larger market forces. In this paper, I plan to show how marketing in a complex capitalist society is shaped by social components surrounding the consumer. This includes an examination of influential communication structures within a given social framework, as well at the involvement of the critical mass in decision-making. Additionally, I will highlight and discuss some of the situations facing marketers of organics, such as the subculture of the organic movement and including sustainable lifestyle proponents.

2.1 Complex Market Structures Cultivate Consumer Need

The selling of organics is dictated, at its foundation, by the structure of the market itself. As with any good or service being peddled to a consumer, it must at once appear useful, be seen as something newer and better than similar items, and tap some sort of need within the consumer. Whether or not a consumer’s eye is likely to be caught by a product is based largely upon the impression the product makes (or fails to make). Wolfgang Fritz Haug examines Marxist concepts of use value, the opposition of the buyer and seller, and—more broadly—how aesthetics works in a complex capitalist market. He focuses on two things that are necessary for an exchange: a buyer who is willing to pay for an item and a seller who has that item and no longer needs or wants it. There is, of course, a silent third aspect: money, upon which the exchange value is based (and which Marx refers to as the “essence of the other”) (Haug 13). The paper bill is a standard upon which every exchange is based, on past traditions of bartering for objects. The basis of the swap is the consumer’s interest in the object, wherein the consumer buys it for its use value or perhaps to discover the use value. Haug would argue that the use value is the “bait”; it plays upon the needs and desires of (wo)men (15). Also important: the appearance of use value, which Willis examines literally in talking about packaging aesthetics.
Here, the appearance of use value is almost more important than the use value itself. If something appears to be useful, then it is considered a “slam dunk” in terms of marketing, namely expected to do better than an item that merely has use value alone. The appearance of use value can be interpreted to extend not only to the literal appearance of the product, but the marketing and image that surrounds the product. Haug argues that the appearance of use value is merely an illusion designed to manipulate the masses (16-17). If applied to the purpose of marketing, this statement fits.

As previously mentioned, for organic food items to be successfully marketed, they must attract the consumer by appearing as a new, fresh concept. For diffusion studies’ founder, Everett Rogers, this uniqueness was paramount. In fact, one of the tenets of the theory of diffusion is that, to be considered an innovation, an idea must be perceived as new (Rogers 17). The key to that statement is that it should be perceived as new. In the case of organics, it is possible to see how the concept appears novel to consumers. Though organic farming has been around for thousands of years, the mass marketing of organic food makes it appear new by granting access to a larger sector of the population. Popular retail stores, such as Kroger, Wegmans, Meijer, etc. have, over the past few years, started to stock more organic items. Now, many stores who previously left the items to be sold in small scale, local stores or in farmers’ markets have set aside entire sections dedicated to them. To be sure, this is largely a market-driven decision, since the popularity of organic products has risen steadily in the past several years. Additionally, there even is a market for stores supplying the consumer with an all-organic shopping experience. Organic superstores, such as Whole Foods Market and Wild Oats, also are growing in popularity. This demonstrates, simultaneously, a greater awareness of the products and greater consumer demand. However, the forces that decide what people need and when they need it are part of the marketing machine.

It is no secret that media are a powerful force in the dissemination of ideas. In this sense, consumer demand is contrived since the marketing campaign for a product is considered a failure if it does not tap into a subconscious awareness of for what it could be used. Every product pusher must discover the way in which marketing can be used to create the consumer’s sense of longing for a commodity. This is evident in Haug’s concept of the “structure of needs” (53): the consumer may not be aware of the desire for a product until it is introduced, in which the latent need becomes a conscious one. Marketing creates the aforementioned cyclical relationship by
telling the consumer what they want while simultaneously trying to understand what the consumer wants, such that it is a never-ending process of research, development, and advertising. The consumer is manipulated in this instance, and the marketing profession must keep the frantic pace for the machine they have created. Haug argues consumers first notice that a product will help make a daily task easier, they become hooked with continuous use, and that task becomes impossible to perform without the use of the object (23). Thus, the consumer is ‘forced’ to buy the product and then feels compelled to buy the new versions of the product as it comes out, in order to stay up to date.

Another essential link in the successful marketing of a commodity is the flow of ideas from the culture to the consumer, and even between consumers themselves. Communication structures and modes play a large part in the process of a product’s popularity among members of a certain group. This occurs on several levels and in several forms. An examination of the modes of communication throughout the diffusion process is extremely important to its understanding. People are exposed to a new idea in a variety of ways, most notably through mass media outlets or interpersonal channels. The pervasiveness of advertising and marketing campaigns in film, television, and in print sources surely plays a part in how a consumer views organic foods. Diffusion studies also take “human factors” into account: the contact a person has with other members of his or her peer group. There is a powerful nature to horizontal communication among homophilious members of a social system. Everett Rogers argues that, sometimes, these connections can be a deciding factor in whether or not to adopt an innovation and that heterophilous relationships are more influential than mass media (19). Social relationships certainly are important, and the climate in which the potential organic consumer resides will help determine communication factors.

Rogers’ idea of the innovation being spread through the social system is an interesting and notable one. The social climate will determine how a new idea is perceived and whether it will be adopted (25). The norms of the climate can be a barrier to the spread of an innovation as well as being conducive to new ideas. In the former, innovators run the risk of being seen as deviant. For example, in the 1960s and 70s, the Organic Movement spread throughout different populations in the nation. It was especially popular with hippies and other counterculture groups. The grassroots faction developed an image based largely upon an association with these groups, which turned off other parts of society. The connotation of the organic “subculture” was
something that marketing and advertising companies of organic food items had to deal with as they reintroduced the idea to people in the 90s, when it started to appear in more grocery chains. They realized that some consumers would associate the products with what they perceived as the negative aspects of the organic movement, including seeing it as a counterculture movement led by hippies. As a result, companies chose to situate the organic sector in consumers’ minds based upon the concepts of the organic movement itself, such as purity, social responsibility, and sustainability.

Prevailing societal norms among members of a group cannot only influence whether a commodity will be accepted, they also feed the capitalist ‘need’ to consume in the first place. Recalling the earlier examination of the “structure of needs,” marketing and advertising outfits may be able to manipulate desires of consumers, but keeping up with the aesthetics of a commodity is necessary as well. In a culture of advertising clutter, companies constantly seek to cut through “ad overload,” in order to keep the consumer interested in the commodity. Therefore, the product must be continually updated and refreshed. This can be seen in labels shouting “new and improved” or “now made with” such and such an ingredient. The products must be essentially the same (the use value must not change) but the presentation must be altered to keep the appearance of use value high. The trendiness of the organic industry, and the products created therein, is but one example of this process. Some consumers are attracted to products containing natural ingredients that give the appearance of wholesomeness and a “back to nature” sensuality. Products that appeal to this crowd are often popular because the natural ingredients are highlighted on the front of the label. It seems the more natural (or natural-sounding) ingredients and methods a package can display, the more it becomes identified with the culture of organics. The popularity of commodities made of natural ingredients extends beyond organic food. For example, it seems more and more hair care products are boasting the inclusion of this or that rainforest extract or this or that type of sunflower oil, etc. Some of these additives may not even really do anything beyond making the product seem more “pure.”

The packaging of a commodity also plays a part in the way consumers view it. It is not just reliant upon first impressions that are based upon appearance, but also the concept of the “commodity”. Willis argues that marketing turns a general category into a discrete unit that can be labeled for sale, (e.g., the dawn of oats sold in packaging versus being scooped out of a bin as in days gone by.) The packaging makes it seem untouched and cleaner than a product in which a
lot of people potentially put their hands on. In this case, mechanization equals cleanliness and better health, which is an idea that has been ingrained into the consumer’s head in history classes: that germs cause epidemics. Willis states, “in the First World, purity means being germ-free, even if the elimination of microbes require heavy doses of pesticides, chemical preservatives, fumigation, radiation, and other artificial stratagems” (335), a contradiction that organic farming and sustainable lifestyle proponents are quick to highlight. However, there is an element of spectacle and nostalgia in a quest by the consumer to seek out use value of the products.

Part of the interest in grocery stores is the largely visually stimulating and interactive atmosphere. Willis argues this sense of purity equals security for shoppers. Issues of consistency and authenticity within the concept of purity are pushed aside, as the shopper looks for a mechanized and mass produced sense of safety (335). There is a desire for the non-treated natural produce sold in open air markets in the U.S. of years past, but with a competing urgency to have each item be as sterile and untouched as possible. Willis draws attention to the contradiction, which lies in the fact that the grocery market display is deceptive (organic superstore chains aside). Many of the products look so perfect and unblemished because they have been treated with pesticides to make them grow well. Also, the stores participate in the stylization of grocery displays, removing items that are no longer fresh so that all a consumer ever sees (in the ideal situation) is a perfect and uniform selection of fruits and vegetables.

But larger marketing forces are at work when consumers visit the store. Haug contends that the “aesthetic monopolization of use value” (Haug 24), the brand, also drives consumers to purchase one product over another. It is necessary to build a brand identity, such that the product and company becomes associated not only with an icon or phrase, but with a lifestyle as well. In terms of the mass commodity market, author Patricia Aburdene commented that people shop with their values (Diane Rehm interview, 11/14/05). Thus, the trick for marketers is to align core values of a product with concepts that people value. It must become part of the consciousness simply because it has infiltrated into many aspects of a consumer’s awareness and is essential to the use value/appearance of use value/exchange value triangle. The “value” on all fronts must rest with the product’s ability to resonate with the shopper. The values that have become associated with organics are those that are aligned with the organic movement and been regurgitated through add campaigns. Willis argues that the population has a feeling of nostalgia
towards use value, and is always trying to return to it (343-344). She equates the modern day supermarket with this concept as well, noting that there is an air of theatricality associated with grocery stores. To be sure, purity, responsibility to the local grower, and environmentally sound farming practices appeal to a sector of the population, but what is really being sold is an underlying current of social activism. This issue lies at the heart of local organic stores and farmers markets. However, it becomes commodified in mass market form, in grocery chains that devote a section of their store to organic items, and especially in the larger big-box type organic superstores (like Wild Oats and Whole Foods, to name a few). These stores are ripe with organic ideology, with stores displaying a rugged natural complete with “earthy” “natural” tones that adds to the overall upscale setting of the store. The displays look better than in conventional grocery stores and value added products like artisan bakery items, cheeses, wines, even the option to grind one’s own peanut butter make going to the store an “experience.” The location of the stores is also testament to the demographic that the store is targeting, since the stores are mostly in suburban and middle- to upper middle-class areas.

One of the most influential tools is the power of the critical mass. From a young age, human beings are influenced by the people around them, from whom they learn how to behave and what is and is not acceptable among to the members of their social group. In being exposed to a new idea, like organic food, a consumer is likely to take into account the ideals of his or her social system. Like any new niche market that is being launched, they products must go through a cycle of newness in which they appear novel. Diffusion and adoption depend on the norms of a social system. These norms “can be a barrier to change” (Rogers 26) and people who take on innovator roles are often seen as deviant. Rogers asserts that the communication structure of a particular group of people will determine their behavior towards an innovation, as well as when it is adopted (259). The business of organic foods is highly tied to a specific population of the United States, namely educated, socially and professionally mobile people who are located in the middle to upper class areas of the economic scale. Rogers points out that the higher the socioeconomic status of a consumer, the more likely he or she will adopt an innovation (283). Many times, the consumer will have more exposure to change agents, who are often called upon to help introduce people to a new item. They also will be likely to adopt a new innovation because it is perceived as more ‘trendy,’ since fewer people have or use the innovation. Organic food is likely to stay in this trendy category as long as the prices stay high and the stores are located strategically. It is
important to note that the locations of the stores that stock the most organic items (as well as the locations of the superstores) are built in the areas where this group tends to live: suburban neighborhoods and cosmopolite towns. Accessibility of organics by other members of the population is discouraged in this way because the stores are not generally easy to access via methods of public transportation and the products are generally more expensive than traditional grocery items. To be sure, organic food has set itself apart as a luxury food group, sometimes billed as “gourmet,” and available primarily to a certain population.

A consumer is also likely to be influenced by his or her peers. Sometimes these peers will be the person who exposes a consumer to something new. Rogers calls these people “change agents” (172), and in the case of organic foods the change agent might be a person who convinces a friend to go to an organic superstore at some point. The person who was convinced might decide to start buying more organic food items, simply because he or she weighs the perceived social advantages to doing so (one of these factors, Rogers points out, is social status) and also because of the observability of the innovation. If a person sees many of his or her peers buying the products, it’s more likely to be adopted. This is all part of a larger process. The consumer travels down a path of steps before deciding whether or not to adopt the idea of organics. He or she must first become aware that the products exist. This can be achieved through mass media channels or through interpersonal communication or, more likely, a combination of the two. Through these outlets, the consumer is persuaded about the innovation, after which he or she makes a positive or negative decision about it. He or she looks for reinforcement for this decision. It can come through “selective exposure” (190), or spending more time in an area or with people who are likely to use the innovation. This can be achieved in organic sections of the grocery store but is especially easy in the all-organic superstores, local mom and pop operations, or through farmers' markets (though mass versus local retail has separate and important connotations). According to Rogers, the consumer may renege on his or her decision if no positive reinforcement is located. Again, the power of marketing relies on the ability to make people believe in the need for an innovation even if there is no thought about that need until the product is seen (e.g. a consumer sees a product and “has to have it”). This, perhaps, is what some of the most powerful marketing achieves and it seems especially common in the age of brand building and brand as lifestyle strategies. When consumers are able to attach
a name or concept to a brand, then all the products with that brand name or icon stamped upon it are easier to sell.

The spectacle and dramatization of the grocery store is also a sneaky way for companies to tap into a market of people who do not typically view themselves as big consumers. To be sure, there are many people who tend to keep up with trends and, literally and figuratively, consume on a regular basis, whether as part of a “keeping up with the Jones’” mentality or something else. For those who do not classify themselves as bound to the latest and greatest fashions, restaurants, electronics or, in this case, food incentive programs that directly link to a local cause are one way to trick them into buying more items at a certain store. This is, of course, provided that he or she brings a bag from home, since it is, after all, “going to charity.” Certainly, this is not to imply that participatory giving plans, such as the Wild Oats’ “Wooden Nickel,” will magically turn everyone into a ravaging consumer. Rather, it is merely another tactic used by companies to boost their image, create a sense of “doing well” by shopping at that particular store, and also perhaps enticing more people to shop there more often. Accordingly, as consumers return to the shopping venue, the organic lifestyle dictated by the company’s corporate headquarters becomes associated with everything about the company. Many of these stores branch out to start offering food and coffee venues inside their walls. Now, consumers can eat food while buying it or, better off, incorporate the experience of a trip to the store as a casual activity that includes shopping, enjoying a meal, and charity involvement. Klein refers to this increasingly popular business decision of disguising commerce within a community sphere as “branded lifestyle bubbles” (59), The New Age-style companies want to be seen as a place where people can relax and gather. Starbucks and Panera are merely two of many to successfully incorporate the idea. However, the town square feeling is a manufactured one that many have argued draws people away from the actual towns to peripheral parts, like suburbs or shopping centers (135).

With the concept of branded lifestyles, one of the most powerful aspects of the diffusion process is introduced: the principles-knowledge component (173). It addresses underlying information about how and why the innovation works. Organic food products do this, especially with labels on packaging that talk about the benefits of pesticide- and hormone-free products. Horizon Milk devotes a section on the side of each milk carton to explain how the product is obtained and through what “natural” means. Author Patricia Aberdeen argues that people “shop with their values,” i.e. consumers look for companies and products that project the values that are
in line with their own. In the case of organics, consumers seek companies with media mission statements that project the “desired” traits. There is also a compatibility of organics with people who worry about pesticides and disease resistance, pesticide residue in the body, and the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment (i.e. social values and norms).

As previously noted, the marketing of organic foods has been tied heavily to the tenets of the organic movement and these stores are the embodiment of those principles, producing the illusion of social activism through consumerism. This is a novel way for the marketers of organic foods to package the social activist roots of the organic lifestyle, made popular in the 60s and 70s. Consumers are able to associate shopping at these types of retail establishments as a way to be a consumer activist. That is, they can believe in and support a cause, and further it by the power of a purchase, rather than by traditional forms of grassroots activities like public protests, pamphleteering, or joining an advocacy group. A great example is the previously mentioned “Wooden Nickel” program sponsored by Wild Oats grocery stores. The store encourages consumers to bring their own bags for groceries with the Wooden Nickel incentive. For every bag, the consumer receives a wooden nickel (with the Wild Oats logo on it, of course) to deposit into a nickel “bank” on the way out of the store. Each bank contains the name of a local charity and consumers “vote” for who they want to receive the most donations from Wild Oats by dropping their nickel into their designated charity or non-profit organization. This practice serves to boost the company’s image: not only do they become highly associated with charitable giving (because the customers see and actively participate in the practice), it also creates an environment in which consumers can become active in a certain cause, whether it’s cancer research, a domestic violence prevention program, or an after school community program for children, simply by shopping at a store. In other words, the consumers become social activists by doing nothing other than consuming products. This program is a way for Wild Oats to reify the whole concept of consumer activism and their store, and it takes the abstract idea that is “social activism” and tries to commodify it. Adorno argues, in Negative Dialectics, that when one makes an attempt to fashion a tangible object out of a nonfigurative idea, something gets lost in the translation. Adorno refers to this as “identity thinking.” Accordingly, negative dialectics abhors the concept of the “homogenization of mass culture” in which quality is marked by the “standardization” of the commodity. No item can ever be made in the perfect image of the abstract; there is always a “remainder.” This practice occurs quite a bit in consumer society.
There is resistance by some people to the manufactured ‘community’ spaces that are appearing as part of shopping complexes. This is part of a larger anti-corporate sentiment that revolves around the increasing pervasiveness of large corporations. Some consumers focus upon the negative affects of globalization (of which public forum spaces, which are not actually “public,” are a part), including damage to the workforce (loss of jobs) and unfettered consumption of resources (as opposed to a more sustainable lifestyle). In times of turmoil, marketing firms must work hand-in-hand with public relations agents. In the case of organics, the battle being fought on the business front has a lot to do with procedure. Separate from the promotion of organic products to the public, the sector must also contend with other factors that directly and indirectly affect the use-value and appearance of use value of their products, and discourse surrounding the issue is only one thing to consider.

As with any large political movement, the proponents of the agrarian lifestyle have focused their efforts on the purported “root” of the cause. For those involved in the sustainable lifestyle there is a deep concern with the increasingly corporate sector of agriculture, drawing upon the same negativity that many consumers feel about the insidiousness of the companies mentioned above. With the onslaught of criticism, public affairs departments of the largest food companies are kept busy as spin-doctors. However, no matter how much mud slinging takes place in the press and on Capitol Hill, the simple solution of eliminating one side or the other is naïve and unlikely. The restructuring of corporate farms and their entities will only come through compromise and a coming together of the two areas in the future. Until then, the organic movement and the giants of agribusiness will continue to wage war upon one another in a media blowout bent upon reducing the opposition to its knees.

Kimbrell notes that industrial agriculture proponents often try to paint those endorsing organic food as “elitists” who can absorb the higher cost of the food more easily than those in lower economic classes (Kimbrell 15). Consumer and educational outreach programs are a simultaneous theoretical and tangible response to these criticisms. The San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) uses land in the inner city to grow organic items to sell within the neighborhood, and it also offers internships for children in the area (qtd. in Kimbrell 301). Additionally, farmers have teamed up with inner city schools to provide fresh produce and other items to the lunch program (299). Other non-school related programs that try to bring consumers closer to the source of their food are community supported agriculture farms (CSA), wherein
people can purchase a share in a farm and receive a portion of the goods it produces, thereby helping the farmer to make a more reasonable wage from crops (292).

Conservationists often point to the disappearance of farming positions within the United States as proof of the growing domination of corporate farming, citing a loss of sixty-three million jobs in the past seventy years (Kimbrell 17). What is more, the ideology of farming becomes iconic within the current culture. Many recall with nostalgia the heyday of American farming with a nod toward a simple and pure life. Wes Jackson, president of the Land Institute, labels it as “wholesome” (qtd. in Kimbrell 65). However, the landscape began to change, literally and figuratively, after the World Wars of the twentieth century. With the advent of pesticides to make crops more resistant to pests and diseases, agriculture began to be referred to in terms of the culture in which it was embedded. Ron Kroese defines this shift in the environment as that which becomes embedded in a war epic: Agriculture had been re-framed as a battle against the “land” that could only be won with pesticides (qtd. in Kimbrell 93). These ideological attacks upon corporate farming go hand-in-hand with an increased interest of the media in agricultural health issues. The proliferation of information that points to the negative effect of pesticides on seeds and people led to increased public awareness in the past several decades. The battle is also waged by environmentalists, who point out that the United States’ method of global food sharing is not efficient because the fuel it takes to transport non-seasonal and reduced cost produce nationally and internationally increases pollution (Norberg-Hodge qtd. in Kimbrell 62-63).

With increasing globalization of the food market, industrial farming companies continue to control the main sources of information and resources of agriculture. This is evident in large seed companies, like Monsanto, whose control over the intellectual property regarding genetic seed manufacturing contributes to a striking lack of diversity in crops. The far-reaching effects of these gatekeepers of information lead to other disturbing trends, including alienation of the consumer from the farmer, as well as the commodification of life through genetic engineering of seeds. As consumer choice in food selection is continually monitored, the prices for fresh produce are split among a more and more converging industry. It is probably difficult for many consumers to imagine the path their food takes to get to the grocery store, and while they have what can be construed as a seemingly abundant array of choices in the produce aisle, the global food market is paying a price. As the current system is arranged, farmers are increasingly being driven out of business because they cannot make a living wage. One area where this is especially
relevant is in the produce sections of grocery stores around the nation. Items are shipped from all over the country and all over the world so that U.S. consumers can have the choice and low prices to which many have grown accustomed. But the way shoppers get a price break is through the perpetuation of a system that provides foods with increasing amounts of pesticide residue (which has garnered criticism about its effects on health), a dependence on a “global” grocery market (which undermines local production by offering a wider and cheaper variety of produce that local farms cannot compete with), the proliferation of high fossil fuel usage (in order to transport non-native fruits and vegetables to markets when they are not in season or supply produce that is not grown in the United States), and an overall surplus in the production of food in America. When examined separately, some of these effects of corporate agriculture may not appear too earth shattering, and may even seem beneficial. One might ask, is it really so bad to be introduced to produce that is not indigenous to one’s area? The answer is yes and no. While it may be an excellent way to incorporate a variety of fruits and vegetables into the diet (an act that health practitioners across the nation can agree with), sustainable agriculture proponents argue that the long-term effects of pesticides on health and the environment are too damaging to justify the practice.

2.2 Conclusion

The successful marketing of a whole new group of items, in this case organic foods, revolves around understanding the complex capitalist market, as well as an in-depth knowledge of the diffusion of new ideas among a certain group. Working from the theories of Haug, Willis, and Rogers, the process can be broken down into a series of communication acts situated within societal norms and mores. An exchange between the buyer and seller amounts to an accumulation of use value and the appearance of use value. From this point, the organic food item is infused with cultural meaning. Adorno’s concept of “identify thinking” occurs as consumers and marketers simultaneously try to make sense of an object that they cannot see, smell, or touch. The conversion of a commodity from a concept to a physical thing causes it to lose some of its meaning in the translation; it revolves around the anticipation and desire surrounding the possession of a commodity, and this possession in relation to the other things one already owns (Willis 336). For marketers, it hinges upon making something appear to be needed by the consumer, whether or not it actually is.
However, other factors also determine the rate of acceptability the commodity will receive. Protests against a company and a movement surrounding a way of life—an environmentally conscious sustainable lifestyle—are likely to divide consumers on the merits of a product. Organic food companies have grown to meet the widespread demand for organic foods. As the argument continues between corporations and lobbyists, the mass marketing of organic foods continues to be a high-growth and lucrative business. However, as the demand for organics increases, the industry comes to what Michael Sligh refers to as a “crossroad[s]” (Kimbrell 278), in which it will have to continue to evolve to stay true to the foundations upon which the movement was built while feeding an ever-growing demand from consumers. This will be the organic industry’s biggest challenge.
CHAPTER 3

TALKING ABOUT AND SEEING ORGANIC FOOD

3.1 Communication Methods and Authenticity

The conceptual organization of “organics” as a category of food is dependent upon many factors and, as with anything, who defines it is at the foundation of this understanding. Chapter 2 discusses the role of diffusion and commodity aesthetics as lenses through which to view the marketing of organic food. These theoretical perspectives can also shed light upon contradictory and differing definitions of “organic.” In this chapter, I intend to show how Horizon benefited from the debate surrounding the use of added growth hormone in milk and its potential effect on consumers. This corporate strategy relied upon a clear understanding of risk communication factors and was responsible for securing the company’s place at the forefront of a health issue. The campaign targeted parents as well as children in its scope. Horizon used what became an ultimately successful marketing campaign as a catalyst to align the company with other socially and environmentally responsible practices (or perhaps the other way around).

Marketing campaigns color how consumers view organic products, but they are obviously not the only way consumers learn about new products. In his studies on diffusion, Rogers says many people seek to reduce uncertainty through communication before adopting something new. There are many sources of information that a potential organic consumer will turn to when trying to find out more on the subject: they may talk to friends or family who already buy the items, decide to learn more about a specific organic company, turn to activist group literature and reports, or trust the opinion of the critical mass, among others. A potential consumer may also learn about organics based on what it is not, such as if they talked to someone who gave them negative feedback about the products or the industry. This feedback could refer to the fact that organic foods are often portrayed as a luxury item. Therefore, an organic lifestyle is not practical because it is too expensive or is class-based.

With a number of resources from which to gather information, there are bound to be differing opinions on what exactly “organic” food is and should be. Still, however powerful and pervasive marketing may be (as Chapter 1 points out), people do not necessarily fall blindly for the tactics. It is likely that a person who started buying organic products—even if it was only after the
products became more popular—already had some sort of propensity for buying them. It is also important to note the importance of socioeconomic status in the innovation process, which Rogers says is “highly related to the degree of change agent contact,” and that, combined with status, correlates with the presence of innovation (159). Quite possibly, one of the reasons that organic marketers chose to target those in the middle to upper strata of America is that they are more likely to explore the items in the first place.

One of the easiest ways to tell if an item is organic or natural is to look at the ingredients on the package. Another way is to look at the packaging itself. Chapters 1 and 2 juxtaposed the organic packaging with Willis’ notion of the appearance of use value. It is this packaging and presentation of the items that often set it apart from the standard food items. However, what happens when consumers judge the product solely on if and how the packaging strikes them as authentically organic? Organic produce is a good example. In its natural state, consumers can pick it off a tree or vine, or out of the ground. In a farmer’s market, organic produce is displayed as-is in barrels (or other containers) or spread out on a table (or other surface). Many grocery stores have separate sections for their organic items, and these sections are often visually different than the rest of the store. There also are organic superstores, like Whole Foods and Wild Oats, which seek to sell the organic brand, literally and figuratively, in concept stores. No matter the size of the retailer, they all alter nature to some degree because they pick the freshest produce with the best color, though there is even more uniformity at larger retailers who often sort the items even further by picking those similar in size.

In a sense, “organic” is subjective. Each outlet for organic produce contributes to the experience of consuming organics and allows the buyer to create his or her own meaning in the purchase of these items. Consumers can choose which outlet fits within their definition of what it is to be organic. So, some people may choose to grow their own produce or shop entirely at farmers markets, others will gravitate to corporate organic retailers, and many more will combine the two extremes to buy their organic goods.

3.2 Marketing with Risk

Risk communication is used in many areas, but one of the more contemporary examples is in the field of organics. The term “organic” is fairly ambiguous; different groups define it according to their understanding of it. Often, “organic” has different meanings for the corporations who
produce organic food, sustainable lifestyle, and the health industry. In marketing terms, organic food is often set off in a separate section with natural foods, though there are subtle differences in the type and concentration of the ingredients. Organic food is a natural food, but not all natural foods are necessarily organic. The government defines food as “organic” when it is produced under strict guidelines, based on the types of pesticides farmers use and how long the soil it has been growing in has been pesticide free (in the case of produce), or the type or amount of antibiotics used for sickness and the extent to which pasture is used for roaming and grazing (in the case of livestock). To environmental activists and other proponents of sustainable agriculture, “organic” is one word used to describe a lifestyle, a political movement, and a general concern with the protection and most efficient use of the world’s resources, one in which the combination of the words “organic” and “industry,” seem contradictory. For some of the consumers who shop in trendy superstores like “Wild Oats” and “Whole Foods,” to name a few, “organic” refers to a type of food that is likened to a healthier diet and communicates status and prestige. Consumers who are not in the target demographic for organics (or people and organizations who are against the widespread popularity of the items) may view organic products as an expensive substitute for their non-organic counterparts.

When faced with an issue that is likely to arouse feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, and uncertainty in the public, organizations must understand the potential issue, understand why it may cause these feelings, and then figure out the best course of action to help eliminate or, more likely, diminish the public perception of a threat. Past research has shown that good risk communication has all the essential elements of good public relations: free-flowing information, honest communication, trust building, and policy change when necessary (Covello, McCallum, and Pavlova; Covello; McComas, Metzler; Palanchar and Heath; Powell). This practice often involves keeping the public informed about issues that can directly affect their health. Thus, corporate policy must place an emphasis on the importance of disclosure, both for the sake of the organization and of its publics.

Companies Must Communicate Openly with the Public and Their Employees

Organizational structure must be such that full, timely, and understandable disclosure can be achieved, so it is necessary for a sense of transparency to infiltrate the entire company culture (Metzler). This practice builds a sense of trust. The publics of an organization need to feel that
relevant and important information is not being held from them. Metzler argued that, in order to concoct an effective risk management campaign, it is necessary to understand what concerns the public already has and to address those first (155). If the company puts the public’s concerns first, it allows for the formulation of a relationship built on interdependence, and should be undertaken before addressing any company concerns.

**Larger Issues at Stake: Hazard and Outrage**

An important aspect of knowing how to ease the public’s concerns is to understand what larger societal constructs may be influencing their decisions on a certain issue or class of issues, and will most certainly affect how they are likely to react to various messages. Of course, there will be publics that are more involved in the issue than others. The task should be to communicate with those who care the most and those who have conflicting attitudes. These groups can be an organization’s greatest ally or worst enemy, depending on how they are treated during a crisis. Sectors of the population that do not have definite feelings one way or the other, as well as those who are apathetic to the issue should not be the target for communicators. These groups are not likely to be influenced, often because they do not feel that they have a vested interest in the situation. McComas discussed the powerful influence that social norms have in the effectiveness of risk communication (75). According to Palenchar and Heath, understanding various publics increased the efficacy of information because each group “experience[s] different amounts of uncertainty, control, and support or opposition for the industries that create the risks” (127). Therefore, defining the target audience for a risk communication campaign must take into account that there are likely subgroups within the target audience and that the message will most likely need to be altered for each separate public (Covello 13). Messages must be tailored to address these concerns and, as there is likely to be more than one public who will be receiving this information, tailored to each group.

**The Spokesperson**

Choosing an appropriate spokesperson is very important because the spokesperson is the mouthpiece of the organization, and its direct link to the stakeholders and other key publics that it serves. He or she should be able to explain matters clearly, while also including all relevant information. It is the responsibility of the spokesperson to not only inform members of the
public, but also put them at ease. When a company or organization is facing the task of disseminating information to the public that might be cause for upset, they should simultaneously be delivering messages designed to ease fear or anxiety and be responsible for making sure the company’s viewpoint is communicated. Often these two may overlap.

**Conclusion**

As long as an organization adopts a proactive approach to communicating with the public, it has a greater likelihood of being able to shape the public’s opinion of issues that arise. In addition, it is important to consider ethical reasons for public disclosure, and to shape messages accordingly. As research continues to show, consumers are more likely to support a company that is socially responsible to its stakeholders, of which the people who buy a product or service are a part. It is in the best interest of an organization to push for complete, timely, and comprehensible disclosure, as well as an understanding of how to build trust among each of the public’s with which they interact.

It is important to acknowledge that transparency is an ideal model. There are many corporations that strive for a two-way strategy; others have not seen the method as a practical one, since the majority of benefits are projected in the long-term. The latter are content just to give an *impression* of openness and, in many cases, the public will never know the extent of a company’s openness except in hindsight.

**3.3 Horizon Organic: A Case Study**

From growing practices to government regulations to accessibility, one point of contention in the organic food industry is the use of added growth hormones (rBGH and rBST) to increase milk production in cows. It also is present in beef and poultry. The hormone in and of itself is not harmful; cows produce it naturally. However, it has critics wondering if added hormones in dairy products are contributing to the earlier onset of puberty in children. Others argue it is not growth hormone, but greater numbers of obese children whose higher percentage of fat tricks the body into starting puberty sooner (Chang). Colorado-based Horizon organic has had success in marketing their products as coming from cows that have not been injected with this hormone. Whether this labeling campaign can be directly linked to the company’s status as the top producer of organic dairy products remains to be seen. The company is very much aligned with
perpetuating the idea that these added hormones are harmful, especially to children, and their corporate strategy relies on promoting this information

**Marketing with Fear**

One of the phrases on Horizon’s website is, “Organics is all we’ve ever done. And all we’ll ever do” (http://www.horizonorganic.com/). Using the corporate Internet site as the primary text on Horizon’s current marketing campaign is one measure of their emphases. It includes stock material such as company history, the mission statement, links to press releases and contacts, among a host of other basic information. The rest of the website is primarily educational, with interactive material directed towards non-organic consumers while also continuing to foster its existing consumer base. As one might expect, the majority of the information supports the organic food community, with wholesome imagery.

The history of the company is notable, since it explains where Horizon fits in the organic subculture and how that image is modified for mass consumption. The founders of the organic dairy helped establish standards for the United States Department of Agriculture Certified Organic seal. The affiliation with what has become the modern definition of what it means to be organic—at least, a governmentally sanctioned definition—is important to note throughout the course of Horizon’s growth. The organization then becomes a bridge between organic theory and practice since the founders could be deemed “authentic” grassroots activists who helped shape federal guidelines. While it is true the company falls under the umbrella of organics, the corporate strategy of Horizon has been to market the company’s products as being produced without added growth hormone. The core values, as declared in the mission statement on the website, include additional human and cow wellness issues, including that their cows are not treated with antibiotics, and maps out the company’s plan to provide support so that more family farms can make the switch to organic production (presumably to offer services to Horizon after the dairy farm is government certified). To date, Horizon produces the top-selling organic dairy products, which they achieved by using the debate surrounding the safety of added growth hormone as a marketing strategy.

When Horizon began offering organic milk in 1993, the research on the effects of the growth hormones BGH and BST were still somewhat contradictory, which set up the perfect environment for a fear-based market campaign. As a marketing strategy, this was a lucrative one
because Horizon did not have to defend their product to the public. Rather, they had to make a case for why consumers should believe that BGH and BST were harmful. Even if more definitive studies show that added hormones have no effect whatsoever, Horizon has positioned itself as a major player in the organic food market, a market that places a large emphasis on wellness through purity. Therefore, the company can easily shift their focus away from hormones if necessary and onto their refusal to use antibiotics in their animals or feed them certified organic feed. As consumers of the dairy products derived from the cows, it is nonetheless a human health issue to certain publics.

The Food and Drug Administration released a report in 1990 stating that BGH had no effect in humans, though critics pointed out that there was no conclusive evidence to show how increased milk production in cows affected their immune and reproductive systems (Stolzenburg). Still, this finding put Horizon’s campaign at risk but the company had the good fortune of being able to ride a feeling of general distrust with Monsanto—a major manufacturer of the hormone—among a sector of consumers. Therefore, they could not just pursue the audience who was concerned with the potential negative effects that additives like, but not limited to, growth hormones. While health issues are important, it is not the only factor on which the company’s marketing and public relations strategy should be based.

In addition to health-based arguments, Horizon’s target consumer is aligned with the ideological constructs surrounding organic food and willing to pay a premium for it. In other words, their market must have enough disposable income that they would be willing to spend a portion of on higher priced food items. In a larger sense, one of the company’s targets was those with an anti-corporate sentiment who would see Horizon as a socially responsible organization among large corporations. Along these lines, Horizon must separate themselves specifically from organizations, like Monsanto, who manufacture genetically modified organisms. The ideal Horizon consumer possesses most or all of these qualities: an anti-corporate sentiment, situated within middle to upper socioeconomic brackets, and a belief that organic foods are healthier because of the conditions under which they are produced.

The issue began to resonate less frequently with consumers and dropped below the radar, and the company launched an information campaign in 2001. In order to reach as many publics as possible, Horizon’s website was divided with areas designed specifically for children, as well as some for parents. Milk is generally viewed as wholesome, a quality that is touted particularly
among organic food producers. Horizon depends on this imagery in the rhetoric it uses to refer to children and their diets. A section for parents focuses entirely on the benefits these “pure” products, and cites studies that point out the disparity between actual calcium intake and the government recommendations, including a table with nutrient requirements for children through age ten. It also provides a table listing what Horizon products are appropriate for each age group among children, highlighting products like strawberry, chocolate, or vanilla flavored milk in single servings for older children and whole milk yogurt intended for children under the age of two.

Horizon’s outreach efforts extended to school-related programs. In 2002, they opened an Education Center as a component of their Maryland-based farm, which offers curriculum ideas for teachers. They also initiated a program to provide more organic choices in school lunches, touting a line of single-serving milks. In 2005, the company launched the campaign, “Year of Organic Good Beginnings” by again reaching out to schools through various programs. The appearance of altruistic targeting of children through these outlets is also an effective way to inform parents, who might otherwise not be interested in the company or its products, to view them in a different context. These alternate methods can be beneficial to any company and have been valuable to Horizon. In large part, word-of-mouth (from children or other parents) helps the product. Parents make the primary decisions in regard to food that a young child eats, but are usually influenced by the preferences of that child.

3.4 Discussion and Implications

Horizon’s promotion of products without added growth hormone falls under a larger form of cause-related marketing in which the company participates: collaborating with mainstream grocery chains to mass-market organics. The dairy company uses the resources of these larger chains to introduce organic items to the public in order to foster consumer interest and influence buying decisions. The company is not so different from others that encourage consumers to participate in a form of activism involving a simple choice of what product to buy or from what venue. Skeptics have questioned the long-term marketing impact of pairing a company with a cause, but one study (“Doing Good Pays Off”) showed that the majority of consumers surveyed said “if price and quality were equal, they would likely switch brands to choose a product
associated with a cause,” and that this method was especially effective in “women ages 18-49 and parents of young children” (4). Of course, countless non-organic companies use these strategies as well. What is slightly different about the organics industry is just that: the word “organic.” The type of marketing in which the organic industry as a whole participates evolves around the term “organic” as an ideological construct; the industry has a very strong brand identity. Manufacturers across the board promote the food as pure, wholesome, produced using environmentally friendly methods, and offers fair monetary compensation to the producers (which accounts for the higher price). For Horizon’s target consumer, this is the perfect approach. The company’s tactics relied heavily on the use of credible sources and trust building among key publics, especially among the parents of children from infants through school-aged.

However, the ethics surrounding decisions food companies, like Horizon, make when marketing their products is notable. It is necessary to follow the law, but just as important to be ethical in these decisions (Metzler). The strategy of building a campaign that is more heavily based in public outrage versus actual hazard may be legal, but is ethically problematic and calls for more concrete laws for public relations and marketing practitioners to follow in regard to campaign information. At the time the company launched its line of half-gallon milk products, conflicting messages about added growth hormone created an ideal environment to launch a marketing campaign based on the fear of what could happen as a result of ingestion. To be fair, the initial company strategy may have been to take a gamble by filling the demand by a small sector of the public, who demanded an alleged “safer” product from a “safer” milk supply. While that may be one of the reasons behind the brand, the mode in which they advertised the product (with labels on the side of each product clearly stating they do not use growth hormone to stimulate production) and promote these ideals on their website, is clear and purposeful: Horizon wishes to cement its image as the largest and most successful company of organic dairy items. The company culture may truly believe it is fighting a noble cause because there will always be evidence somewhere to support their claims. This practice only perpetuates a cycle of uncertainty in the public and leads to an overall skepticism of scientific findings on health issues. Additionally, it becomes more difficult for those in the public relations community to effectively communicate with key publics in future situations involving health risks.

As mentioned earlier, the tendency to equate wholesomeness and purity to organic products, like Horizon milk, is an issue that resounds with the public long after ambiguities surrounding
the effects of added growth hormone seem less immediate. The reason the issue still remains in the forefront of Horizon’s consumers is that ties to purity are easily made, and seem especially relevant when children are involved. For many people, milk seems to recall images of childhood (sitting at the table eating milk and cookies, for example) and nurturance (being given a glass of warm milk by a caring parent to aid sleep). Any milk manufacturer can capitalize on these images, not just organic outlets. Yet, Horizon sells a type of “ultra-purity,” which is certified by the United States Department of Agriculture. It has ties to traditional, old-fashioned ideals of Americana for some consumers. In recent years, Horizon has been promoting the absence of added hormone in their products less aggressively—though it still remains prominent in their packaging—and has switched to marketing an overall wellness concept, with an added emphasis on the healthfulness of fresh produce and low fat dairy products as part of a healthy lifestyle. It also allows them to piggyback on the National Dairy Council’s recommendations to consume three servings of dairy products per day in their “3-A-Day” campaign.

3.4 Conclusion

Effective risk communication can help a company or organization sway public opinion on an issue. In the case of Horizon Organic, it allowed them to build a strong following for organic milk and other dairy products that contain no added growth hormone. Tactics the company used to lend credence to their product included citing multiple credible sources (mostly scientific studies), showing concern for people who are trying to incorporate organics into their diets, as well as their children (offering many recipes on their corporate website and introducing a line of organic products intended to appeal to children), and laying claim to a larger purpose (the company offers support, financial and otherwise, to farmers trying to make the switch to organic production). Horizon also altered their message for different key publics; their website has a section for children, which includes games and trivia, as well as a section for parents, which includes ways to incorporate more dairy into their child’s diet.

The success of organic milk has been a catalyst for the mass production of other organic food items (Sabin). Consumers may not be able to define what exactly it means to be “organic,” but they seem to really respond to the social and cause-related marketing techniques that the industry uses. Whether it is a purposeful move or not, organic companies who have been acquired market themselves separately from their parent companies. Some argue it is strictly a business decision
because they target different groups of consumers. This may be true, but it also serves to symbolically separate the two entities, which may be some consolation for consumers who believe no corporately owned organic company can stay true to the integrity of organicism. The livelihood of the industry, for some, depends on this differentiation.
4.1 Discussion

One of the most important battles of food culture is the struggle over what organic means. The organic movement has always attempted to maintain a critique of contemporary culture but today, in its repackaging, some of these critiques are lost. There are many domains for which the definition of “organic” has implications. This battle illustrates, for example, that consumption is a political and social construct and elicits a strong emotional response, as with the success of Horizon Organic’s introduction of growth hormone-free dairy products. However, basal arguments regarding the issue of compatibility between industrial food production and smaller-scale organic production—and the resulting corporate organics hybrid—remain loud and heated among key players like producers, wholesalers and retailers. Many activists continue to argue that this difference will ultimately alter the way organics are conceptualized in the marketplace. Julie Guthman acknowledges that the marketplace for organics increasingly exists as two parallel sectors. She describes production as “increasingly bifurcated into two very different systems of provision: one producing lower cost and/or processed organic food for the quasi-mass market and appealing to meanings of health and safety; the other producing higher value produce in direct markets and appealing to meanings of organicism, political change, and novelty” (“Commodified” 305).

Mass market appeal leads to an alienation at all levels of food production. The current industrial food economy places distance between the consumer and the source, which large-scale chains pushing sizeable quantities of product intensify. In that sense, some activists argue that Whole Foods and Wal-Mart are not that different from each other. This is just one of the overall sentiments that were echoed in Michael Pollan’s discussions with frequent visitors of a remote organic poultry farm—some of whom routinely spent hours traveling there each week…

Many of the… customers I met (though by no means all of them) had come to see their decision to buy a chicken from a local farmer rather than from Wal-Mart as a kind of civic act, even a form of protest. A protest of what exactly is harder to pin down, and each person might put it a little differently, but the customers I met at Polyface had gone to some trouble and expense to
“opt out”—of the supermarket, of the fast-food nation, and, standing behind that, a globalized industrial agriculture. Their talk of distrusting Wal-Mart, resenting the abuse of animals in farm factories, insisting on knowing who was growing their food, and wanting to keep their food dollars in town—all this suggested that for many of these people spending a little more for a dozen eggs was a decision inflected by a politics, however tentative or inchoate.

Methods promoting efficiency in farming and a global food market are largely incompatible with organic methods. In a capitalist market growth and "progress" is good; in a sustainable culture, growth is not as important as supporting small, local operations. Proponents of organic farming believe that the United States need only make a few changes in the overall perception of farming, i.e. one focuses on community-scale production that becomes a self-sustaining operation. Agricultural businesses point out that the lack of output in organic farming is one of the major reasons conversion to organic methods are impractical. In 2002, Alex Avery of the Hudson Institute cited projected global population increases and the amount of land area currently used for farming as support for industrial methods. He forecasted “mass human starvation or widespread destruction of wildlands for agriculture” without them (“Is the ‘Organic Ethic’ Ethical?’”).

Beyond basal anti-globalization arguments, the economic value of organic farming faces challenges as it becomes more difficult to maintain a constant wage from year to year. Farming is work, so what happens to producers when the wholesale cost per item decreases? This argument has been discussed more frequently as so-called “big box stores”—most notably Wal-Mart, known for setting wholesale prices among its suppliers—have unveiled plans to introduce store-brand organics lines, With a large market share, many organic companies are afraid not to supply to these stores, but also worry about the consequences of distributing for the same reason. But organic farms are having trouble keeping up with consumer demand, and this leads to worries about how such challenges will affect long term consumer interest in the products, that is if the consumer does not get the products because of short supply, is it likely to cool overall interest in organics? For example, product lines may have to contend with taxing the already strained organic farming supply (Julia Sabin). Since the majority of farms that would be interested in going organic must still go through the lengthy certification process, not being able to meet the demand that such retailers require, as a result of the comparatively small number of
certified organic farms.

While the demand for organics may be high, farming is still unpredictable. The number of family-owned operations in the United States continues to decrease, and many farmers are forced to find alternative methods of supplementing their income. One option is to sell directly to restaurants. In some cases, these additional funds may result in higher compensation for farm personnel. More often, Guthman argues, these methods are necessary to meet the costs associated with the land, “eventually diminishing on-farm value retention” (“Commodified” 303). Land value is based upon many factors including any and all alternative uses. Planners must decide in which ways the land will be most profitable, such as farming land, a housing or mixed use development, a golf course, et cetera. Of course, profit motives are not the sole deciding factor. Land planners have other factors to take into account, including any protective measures that exist on the property (like easements) and township or city plans, for example previously established land use patterns like rural, urban, or suburban.) Often, industrial methods of farming (when farming is chosen at all) are continually more profitable than organic methods. Federal organic certification can actually contribute to the value of the land, though not enough to counter the profit potential of high output land. Sustainable organic farming, despite increased market demand, is not situated as an overly profitable venture, unless it is on a larger scale. Corporate organic operations, like Horizon, have had success. However, their use of feedlot-type farms is representative to critics of producing food that is not at all organic.

Revisiting a common criticism, corporate organics may “talk the talk” when it comes to promoting an anti-industrial sentiment, but many are skeptical. Globalizationist attitudes surround large food production markets, whether the retail outlets look industrial or not. However, critics warn that “ethical eating” of organics may not be ethical at all. Guthman points out the dangers in disparaging farming methods based upon efficiency while proselytizing organics because “organic production depends on the same systems of marginalized labour as does fast food” and “organic salad mix led the way in convenience packaging” (“Fast Food” 56-57). This "battle" shows how consumption is a political and social construct, and for this reason it elicits a very emotional response. One may feel that organic food is healthier than industrialized food and, thus, wish to consume it on that basis. Guthman refers to this as “reflexive eating,” in that consumers adapt their behavior to perceived positive and negative health effects (“Fast Food” 46) of a given type of food. Taking the categorization one step
further, one could associate the consumption of organic food with small body size, especially since industrially produced food (with its high fat and sugar content, as well as processed carbohydrates) has been largely blamed for the obesity epidemic in the United States. Patricia Price’s studies on body image and consumption habits suggest that trumpeting slimness ignores the sometimes destructive paths taken to get there, including eating disorders, poor self-image, and cosmetic surgery (“No Pain, No Gain” 55).

Still, Susan Willis argues that consumer desire and the anticipation of use value drives the consumer to continue his or her purchasing behavior in the pursuit of new items (337). To be sure, the mass marketing of organic food has resonated with consumers and produced spectacular growth. One of the major reasons is that the majority of companies—whether they are independently owned or if a larger company has acquired them—promote similar core values based on sustainability, environmental stewardship, and wellness. As of 2006, marketing experts have made a distinction between corporate social responsibility that goes beyond cause-related marketing, noting that “corporate altruism has more to do with a broader social statement than a single charitable partnership” (“The greed for goodwill: Corporate America funds charities to boost its image--and fortunes”). “Organic” has become a brand name based upon its sector of extremely loyal and devoted consumers, enjoying success much like Apple or Volkswagen. While accessibility remains an issue, retailers argue that there are still plenty of people who believe that paying more for food is a part of an experience. Organic foods are seen by many as a luxury item but with mass marketing of the products, it consequently follows that more people will have access to these products. With the growth of the industry, many have taken issue with the manner in which the term “organic” has been posited as a marketing tool versus an agricultural method.

Those in the organic movement continue to push for an overhaul of national farming methods. However, restructuring agricultural processes so that only sustainable methods are used seems insurmountable because consumers have grown accustomed to the choice between organic and non-organic items in traditional markets. Organic food is portrayed often as the antithesis of industrial food. It becomes a choice based on health and wellness and not solely on environmental or business ethics,
4.2 Final Thoughts

This thesis has focused upon how organics, which became popular among many social activists in the 1960s and 1970s, has become a major niche market in the United States that is expanding each year. Marketers used the ideals of the organic movement—such as purity of the food and responsibility to the land and to local markets—to call forth feelings of activism in consumers that the purchase of organic foods promises to satisfy. Marketing campaigns focused on middle- to upper-class consumers who would be able to afford higher premiums for the organic items. To entice members of this market segment, organics had to be set apart from standard industrial food and organics from any stereotypes with which it had previously been associated, i.e. organic food had to be something that many people would want to buy, not just liberals and hippies. The food had increased visibility when it started to appear in mainstream grocers, and became associated with upscale tastes and gourmet cooking when organic superstores, like Wild Oats and Whole Foods started to expand their market shares.

But as the products become more popular with consumers, organic food producers are simply having a hard time keeping up with the demand. Even corporate food labels, like Dean Foods and Smuckers, have started offering organics. This has some organic activists concerned about how the ideals of the organic movement will be adhered to as more companies look to produce the food and more retailers look to sell it. Government agencies, like the Department of Agriculture have set specific guidelines for how food that is labeled organic must be produced, but even those regulations are still in flux. Further research should watch as the foundations of organic production continue to grow and change.

Current legislation is making it easier for industrial food organizations to obtain an organic label. In the fall of 2005, the Agriculture appropriations subcommittee decided to allow a number of non-organic ingredients to be used in certified organic food a decision that even has the backing of some key leaders in organics. The Organic Trade Association explained that “the amendment was intended to protect the industry from [an earlier ruling that] would have forced many manufacturers to stop using the U.S.D.A. Organic seal and instead re-label products to state, for instance, ‘cookies made with organic flour’ or ‘frozen lasagna made with organic tomatoes.’” (qtd. in Warner 1+). This ruling has been met with protests from the organic industry, which says that allowing even trace amounts of non-organic ingredients is counter to the idea of purity.
The tenets of organicism are threatened by increasing demand and pressure to keep costs down. What is the long-term effect on organics as government standards become more defined and corporate organics become more popular? The research in this thesis may have helped organize and explain what has happened, but it comes at a time that may have been too early to tell what the long-term effects may be. Another issue to consider is health claims. After many years of claiming that organic food is better for the environment and people, some may be changing their minds. Anti-corporate food crusaders have accused the organic industry of making false health claims in order to charge more for their products. Some industry experts, like Katherine DiMatteo of the Organic Trade Association, have gone on record to say that the food may not be more nutritious than standard products. How will conclusive scientific evidence on the health claims of organic foods impact an industry that bases a large part of its social marketing campaign on claims of wellness?

Bibliography:
Covello, Vincent T., David B. McCallum, and Maria T. Pavlova. Effective Risk


"The greed for goodwill: Corporate America funds charities to boost its image--and fortunes." Adweek 47.11 (2006), 14.


