

Selling the message

Countering anti-organic myths

Coverage of organic food and farming in the Australian media has largely produced positive, feel-good stories that are topical and interesting. It has been welcome publicity. But the honeymoon may be coming to an end, writes BFA nutritionist SHANE HEATON.

As the organic industry in Australia continues to grow, it will be standing on increasingly larger toes. The organic approach inherently criticises the agrochemical approach, despite genuine efforts to promote a positive approach to farming rather than a simple rejection of all things chemical by the organic industry around the world.

During the 1990s in the UK, organics went from pretty much where it is in Australia now in 2005 – niche but growing – to a mainstream feature of the food industry, with supermarkets promoting their organic credentials, major food manufacturers coming on board, the price premium coming down, consumer demand booming, and consumer awareness of food and farming issues at an all-time high.

But the other thing that grew at a similarly rapid rate was the number of negative stories appearing in the media about organics.

'Organic food isn't good for you, and he can prove it'; 'Organic food is a waste of money'; 'Organic food in E-Coli safety alert'; 'Can organic food damage your health?' ran the (often front-page) headlines.

The media likes to portray a balanced approach, or perhaps it's truer to say that the (often more sensational) contrary view is more interesting to viewers and readers. So just as everyone was starting to think organic was a good thing, journalists enjoyed getting the 'big scoop' that it was all a great hoax, the public was being ripped off, and we'd all been hoodwinked!

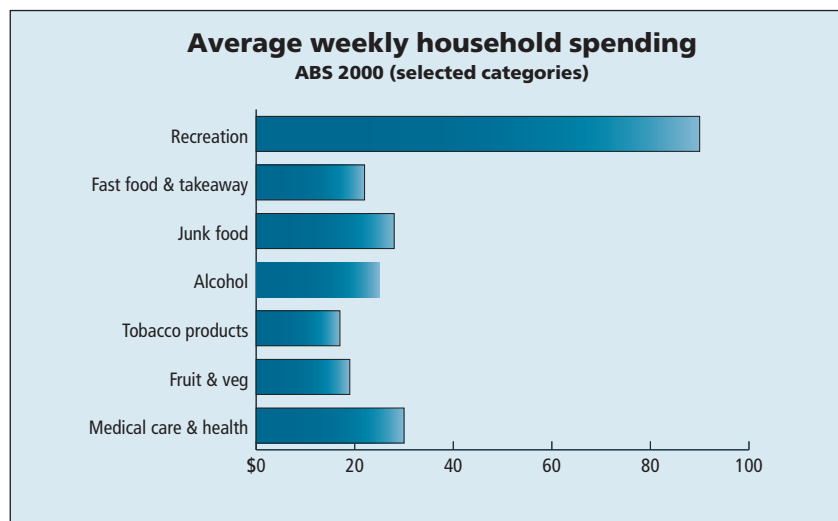
ORIGINS OF ANTI-ORGANIC MEDIA STORIES

These anti-organic messages didn't come from good investigative journalism uncovering the truth. The agrochemical and biotechnology industries have enormous commercial interests in maintaining the status quo and not letting organics spoil the party.

They have considerable resources, and fund numerous scientific, semi-government, or simply official-sounding bodies in various worthy agricultural, scientific and food safety fields.

So they have many many 'scientists' indirectly on their payroll – the funding for these scientists' research or organisation comes from the monolithic food industry.

Some of them have a personal slant against organics, which is encouraged along by loyalty to their funders, and thus a few key anti-organic scientists emerge. They get a taste of the



media interest in their personal opinion, and an 'anti-organic expert' is born! This is precisely what has happened in the US and UK, and I expect it'll soon happen here, too. It's a measure of the industry's success, which, as the saying goes, is determined by counting your imitators and multiplying it by your detractors.

The messages are always the same, and a few key anti-organic myths are repeated again and again in the hope that people will start believing them. The media are simply puppets in a battle for the public's hearts, minds and stomachs.

WAR IS UPON US

It's already begun in Queensland. A survey a few years back, poorly conducted and scientific nonsense, found that organic produce contained similar levels of pesticides as conventional produce. In November 2004, Brisbane's *Courier Mail* published a piece entitled 'It's good for you, isn't it?' questioning the health benefits of organics and quoting some up-and-coming anti-organic 'experts'.

A university professor in plant molecular genetics (GM enthusiast do you think? Possible anti-organic bias?) makes some of the usual claims – there's no evidence of a nutritional difference between organic and non-organic food, pesticide residues don't remain on conventional produce, blah, blah, blah. A senior university lecturer in nutrition and dietetics also chips in with comments like, "there's no distinct difference in terms of nutritional content ... organic is not a guarantee of ►

health ... don't buy it, you're being ripped off ... this confuses people in terms of what's healthy".

If the UK experience is anything to go by, this is just the beginning. The continued success and growth of organics will bring more negative attention, and the industry needs to be ready for the coming propaganda war. The BFA will be preparing scientifically credible and compelling counter-arguments to the most common anti-organic myths as a resource for the industry to respond quickly whenever and wherever organic attacks are voiced. Don't underestimate the anti-organic lobby – they will be similarly or even more organised and committed to their cause.

Here are some brief counter-arguments for the most common anti-organic claims. Use them freely and often:

MYTH: There's no evidence of a nutritional difference between organic and non-organic food.

REALITY: Numerous studies have confirmed that organic produce contains higher levels of a wide variety of trace nutrients important for human health. Claims that there's no evidence of differences in the nutritional content of organic and non-organic foods are based on conveniently superficial analyses of the available evidence.

Hundreds of comparisons have been conducted, but only a few dozen in a valid and relevant way, and the whole body of evidence, it's true, is inconclusive.

However these few dozen agriculturally and scientifically valid studies, reviewed by the UK Soil Association in 2001, provide ample evidence that organic crops have higher vitamin C, trace minerals and antioxidant phytonutrients.

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MYTH: Pesticide residues in conventional foods are always within set safety levels.

REALITY: Consumers intuitively know this is a false assurance. Firstly, pesticide residues are sometimes found to be above the legal limits, and secondly, the validity of the safety levels

themselves is highly questionable.

They said DDT was safe, too, before they banned it. Safety levels are set for individual pesticides, yet we're exposed to dozens every day, and no one has or can test the cocktail effect of these combinations.

Research has shown multiple residues can be hundreds of times more toxic than the same compounds alone. Pesticides don't belong in breast milk, yet Australian breast-fed babies are regularly exposed to levels above safety limits from mothers eating conventional food.

Women with breast cancer are six times more likely to have pesticides in their blood. Sperm levels are falling around the world, yet men eating organic have far higher levels than men eating conventional food.

A 34-year Hawaiian study recently found that the more fruit (and pesticides) you eat, the higher your risk of Parkinson's disease. Such evidence is emerging every month, and consumers are starting to put two and two together.

A recent Victorian Government survey of 300 samples confirmed that organic produce contains far lower levels of pesticides than conventional produce.

MYTH: Organic food is dangerous.

REALITY: Organic food is safer than conventional food in a variety of ways. The anti-organic lobby claims that because

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organic farmers use manure as fertiliser, organic food represents a greater food poisoning risk.

There's no evidence that food poisoning risks from contaminants like *E.coli* or aflatoxins are any greater in organic food. This is the view of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, and there are good reasons to expect that the risks are actually lower in organic food due to tighter controls on manure handling procedures.

Public Health Laboratory surveys in the UK of thousands of samples found fewer contaminants on organic foods than conventional foods. Organic food also allows consumers to avoid exposure to antibiotic residues and/or antibiotic-resistant pathogens; mad-cow disease has killed over 100 people in the UK but no organic cows have ever been found to have it; potentially carcinogenic nitrate and nitrite are lower in organic produce; and organic foods contain far fewer potentially harmful food additives than conventional foods.

MYTH: People can't afford organics, so promoting it will reduce fruit and vegetable consumption.

REALITY: The latest ABS data shows that the average Australian household spends more on junk food than fruit and vegetables; more on fast food and take-away than fruit and veg; more on alcohol than fruit and vegetables. Alcohol and tobacco combined account for nearly twice the spending on fruit and vegetables.

We spend five times more on recreation than fruit and vegetables. The key issues here are consumer education and how households choose to prioritise their spending. It's assumed that household income is the main determinant of demand

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for organic food, yet the industry experience is that organic consumers come from all walks of life and all levels of the socio-economic spectrum. It's my firm belief that once people become more aware of the issues surrounding food production, they'll make more conscious choices

of the food they feed themselves and their families. Who knows? Perhaps, if spending increases on organic fruit and vegetables, people will spend less on junk food, take-aways, alcohol and cigarettes.

OTHER MYTHS

Other anti-organic myths include: organics can't feed the world; to feed the world organic farming will have to plow under more wilderness areas; organic pesticides are more dangerous than conventional pesticides; organic processed foods are no better for you than conventional processed foods; and more. There are compelling responses to each, which will appear in future editions in the AOJ.

You can help, by firstly sending copies or notification of anti-organic stories or comments made in your local print or electronic media, and secondly, if you have counter arguments to hand already, respond briefly and quickly. In the media, currency and brevity are everything.

Long-winded arguments about yesterday's news aren't news. ■

Contact: Send comments, articles and organic attacks to Shane Heaton, Biological Farmers of Australia, PO Box 530, Cherside 4032; email <shane@dontjustsurvive.com.au >.

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