

# CSI organic!

» By Tom Rafferty

**S**o I type "organic food" +fraud into Google. I get 175,000 hits. Nice, neat, round numbers always bother me – I would have preferred a number like 177,263 – but that's not the point!

I had a recent meeting with an organisation that has the rights to an anti-counterfeit product with wide application in supply chain activities. I was particularly interested because I've been doing a lot of work in Asia this year. If you've been to that part of the world, it's rampant with knock-off goods – clothing, handbags and watches are freely available in Singapore, KL and Honkers. On a recent trip over the Hong Kong border to Shenzhen, within a five-minute walk of the border crossing is a shopping centre that appears to be the world's capital for fake everything!

So back to my Google search – it appears that in organic-land everything is not rosy, everywhere. Now I'm not very close to this phenomenon – I just did some very quick and dirty research on Google (my school-aged children assure me that reading books as a form of research is sooooo last century! – a scary concept).

There's a website out of the UK (SafeFromScams.co.uk) that, in their own words "was formed to offer a unique reference point on staying safe from scams". They cover a wide range of areas where consumers can get ripped off, from automotive scams through to travel scams. Under the fake goods section there are five subsections, one of which is "organic food scam".

It appears that there are some unscrupulous people out there (cardboard boxes anyone?). Late in 2005 a British butcher was fined £6,000 for selling non-organic beef and a greengrocer £3,000 for fiddling the fruit! A couple of company directors in Ireland were actually sent to jail for selling conventional beef – trouble was, it was only suitable for use as pet food... down boy!

Earlier this year, Wal-Mart (the company the whole world loves to hate) found itself facing claims it defrauded customers "by mislabeling non-organic products as organic".

The Cornucopia Institute, an advocacy group promoting sustainable farming, claimed to have found mislabeled products in eleven of twelve stores they checked, in five different states. Wal-Mart responded that these were "isolated" events... I'm sure they're being truthful so I assume the largest



and most professional retailer in the known universe managed to achieve this status with really bad category management practices!

Right here in our sunburnt country we've had the lovable Indira Naidoo (ex SBS newsreader now spokesperson for Choice

and the Australian Consumers Association) banging the drum over the "multi-million dollar organic food rot" – come back Mary Kostakidis! All is forgiven, and while you're passing the hairdresser's drag Lee Lin Chin out, I miss her organic hairstyles!

I will resist going through the 175,000 examples on the web, but you might care to run the search yourself. Passing off stuff as organic is obviously a problem everywhere – I suggest that Australia will be no different. Of course, the business practices in wholesale produce markets and retail in this country are beyond reproach. So the temptation to intentionally mislabel and gain a windfall profit doesn't exist here, does it?

One of the most important assets in any business is the strength of the brand. The BFA has a brand worth protecting, and you should be developing one worth protecting too.

The organic brand in South Korea for example has been savaged, and the government has been forced to step in. The government of South Korea controlled certification of land for growing organics. Unfortunately no one had control over distribution!

Certified organic stickers could be downloaded from a website, printed and applied to packaging. Government research suggested the volume of organic produce available at retail exceeded the productive capacity of the land by a factor of ten – now that's a lucky country!

Strangely enough, the Korean consumer was more than a little underwhelmed by the news... talk about ungrateful! Subsequent

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research suggested consumer confidence in organic produce indicated even more ingratitude at the obvious abundance and productivity of the local industry.

And in a long-winded way, we get back to that meeting. An organisation called the Far East Empire Group ([www.feeg.com.au](http://www.feeg.com.au)) has developed a range of really smart anti-counterfeit products. One of these, a label embedded with DNA, is rip-off proof. It has three levels of security; is tamper evident, and if you try to remove it it's painfully obvious. It has an "invisible" UV numbering but the great feature is the DNA colour-change ink.

This clever piece of science allows the label to be easily verified, up to seven times, along the supply chain. Application of something that looked suspiciously like water (it's not, but if I knew what it was, they'd have to kill me!) changes the label from blue to pink. Inside about a minute the colour reverts to the original. Also, if you're still suspicious, a piece of the label can be sent to a lab and the DNA verified – CSI Organic!

The Korean government carried out a

pilot project on apples and pears in late 2006 and a second pilot on other fruits and veges in March and April this year. They're convinced and are now in the process of changing legislation regarding the sale of all organic produce. They also gave the DNA guys a contract to supply 10 million labels over 2008.

Organics is already a highly innovative farming system – it's time to get smarter with packaging! The organic industry has (yes, present tense) some very real credibility issues – it is bad enough that many people question the central tenets of the industry – but if you (yes, you!) allow the consumers' trust to be undermined, the game is over. While Australian symbols of integrity such as the Bud logo provide consumer confidence, you also have to do your part to protect and guarantee the integrity of your product. Don't rely on wholesale or retail channels to do this for you. Enough of the lucky country – it's time to be the clever country!

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