

Finding and maintaining markets: the battle for hearts

By JAN NARY

THERE ARE MANY INCREMENTAL steps in the certified organic industry's aim to go mainstream. Farmers, producers and processors need to be convinced about the advantages of organic production. Consumers need to be educated and convinced of the benefits in order to justify the premium they pay for organic produce and grocery items. Organic produce must be accessible, identifiable and differentiated from non-organic. Successful marketing is a quantum leap from successful growing; nevertheless, some certified organic producers have taken the challenge in their stride.

ACO certified organic grower Rob Bauer of Bauer's Organic Farm says the best marketing tool for organic producers is to offer only the best – and make sure the retailer has the same high benchmark.

"This is one of the great frustrations in this business," he says.

"So much depends on the retailer. If they accept second-grade organic produce then sell it as A1-grade organic, that's going to reflect on the whole industry.

"If they buy produce and keep it too long – I tracked one load of organic-labelled potatoes that remained on sale for three months, until they were wizened and shrivelled – that's going to reflect on the whole industry. If they keep topping up a tub of old spuds, labelled as one variety, with fresh spuds of a different variety, that's going to confuse shoppers and turn them away from the whole organic concept.

"Consumers want good, fresh stuff. We need to educate them that it's worth paying a bit extra for organics and we need to educate the retailers about maintaining



Rob Bauer explains the benefits of organic on a Bauer's Organic Farm tour in the Lockyer Valley, Queensland.

quality and doing more active organic marketing," he says. "Organic certification is vital for producers and retailers. To call yourself an organic shop isn't sufficient; each organic product has to be clearly identified as certified so the shopper is left in no doubt as to what they're paying for."

Rob says on-farm bagging offers unrealised potential: producers have the opportunity to put their name, logo, certification mark and use-by date on the bag and to ensure that only good produce goes in. However,

many environmentally-aware shoppers are resistant to plastic bags and individual labelling sometimes runs foul of stores' individual protocols.

Rob sees a "big disconnect" between growers, wholesalers and consumers, be they individual shoppers, restaurants or retail outlets.

"We've gone as far as to door-knock retailers, give them a sample of our best produce and let them know where they can buy it," says

Rob. "Sometimes that's what you have to do, as well as getting out newsletters, chasing the media, giving talks, going to expos and organic roadshows and having your piece published in wholesalers' and agents' newsletters."

Rob says successful marketing also involves planning: planting the right amount each year, pre-selling, and knowing who and where your buyers will be, how much they want and how much they'll pay.

He sees marketing and quality control being a role for the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) – more so than teaching farmers how to grow various produce. In the words of his late father, Herb Bauer, "people will figure out how to grow things if there's a bob in it".

"Sustainability isn't only about the environment," he says. "If organic farmers are to survive it needs to be economically sustainable as well."

Rob says certified organic produce needs to be clearly identified to compete with produce that makes tempting – albeit vague – claims: descriptions such as "pure" and "natural". A new contender for consumer favouritism is a DPI-promoted strain of broccoli that has proven to be more nutrient-dense than conventionally-produced broccoli. This is a claim made (justifiably) for much organic produce but, according to Rob, nutrient density and cost are not the final deciding factors for most shoppers.

"Flavour and nutrition can be superior in good organics but that's comparing best organic against best conventional," he says. "We've spoken with thousands and thousands of visitors over the years and the thing that really converts them to organic is finding out what's hidden in conventional food.

"We take them for a drive and show them potato fields that have been hit with contact herbicide to stop the potato growth at a 'convenient' cricket-ball size. When we tell them that the potato sucks in the stem fluid – and the poison – in its last growth spurt, they're horrified. They're just as horrified when we tell them about the systemic



Bauer branding – fresh produce is identified on-shelf.

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pesticides fed to green leaf vegetables through their roots. They're the hidden things that even aware consumers don't know – and educating consumers about them is one of the best marketing tools we have."

Steve Skopilianos' Ladybird Organics won this year's innovative marketing award (IMA) at the Ausveg Vegetable Industry Conference, one of the fresh produce industry's peak events.

Product identification and packaging won the day for Ladybird Organics; Steve introduced non-plastic, biodegradable corn-resin bags for Ladybird's pre-packed salad leaves, each bag printed with the prominent Ladybird logo, his ACO organic certification logo, product-specific information, a customer testimonial and – importantly for Steve – a short story about his family business.

"Any organic enterprise has to create its own identity, driven by the brand," Steve says.

"But, a typical mistake of many producers and small businesses is thinking they don't



Individual Ladybird Organic salad packs.

need professional marketing advice, that they can do everything themselves. It's a mistake we made when we were conventional farmers but when we went organic we did things more professionally – and hired the professionals. It's money well spent in creating brand image."

Steve says the consultants he hired gave Ladybird Organics an identity in the marketplace, incorporating the name and logos, package design, promotional writing, ad and website designs, photography and product development. Steve says that in the early days of Ladybird he took out consumer-targeted ads in carefully selected

magazines, something he says organic farmers don't usually do – "but it's essential to reach consumers outside the industry".

"Organic farmers are a little shy of engaging marketing consultants, even though marketing drives a business," says Steve.

"It may be part of an industry attitude that sees organic as something 'natural' and 'pure' that shouldn't be sullied by pro-active marketing, branding or innovative packaging. We need to utilise the internet more and not be afraid to think outside the square. There is no reason for organic to have a reputation for below-par marketing.

"It was wonderful to win the IMA but there wasn't really any competition."

Steve says educating consumers into understanding the benefits of organic, and winning their loyalty, is vital.

"Every industry has a story and we need to tell the organic story," he says.

"As well, we need to tell them the story of our individual enterprises, about the family and history behind the products. That's a way of reaching out to people when we can't meet them face-to-face." ☺

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