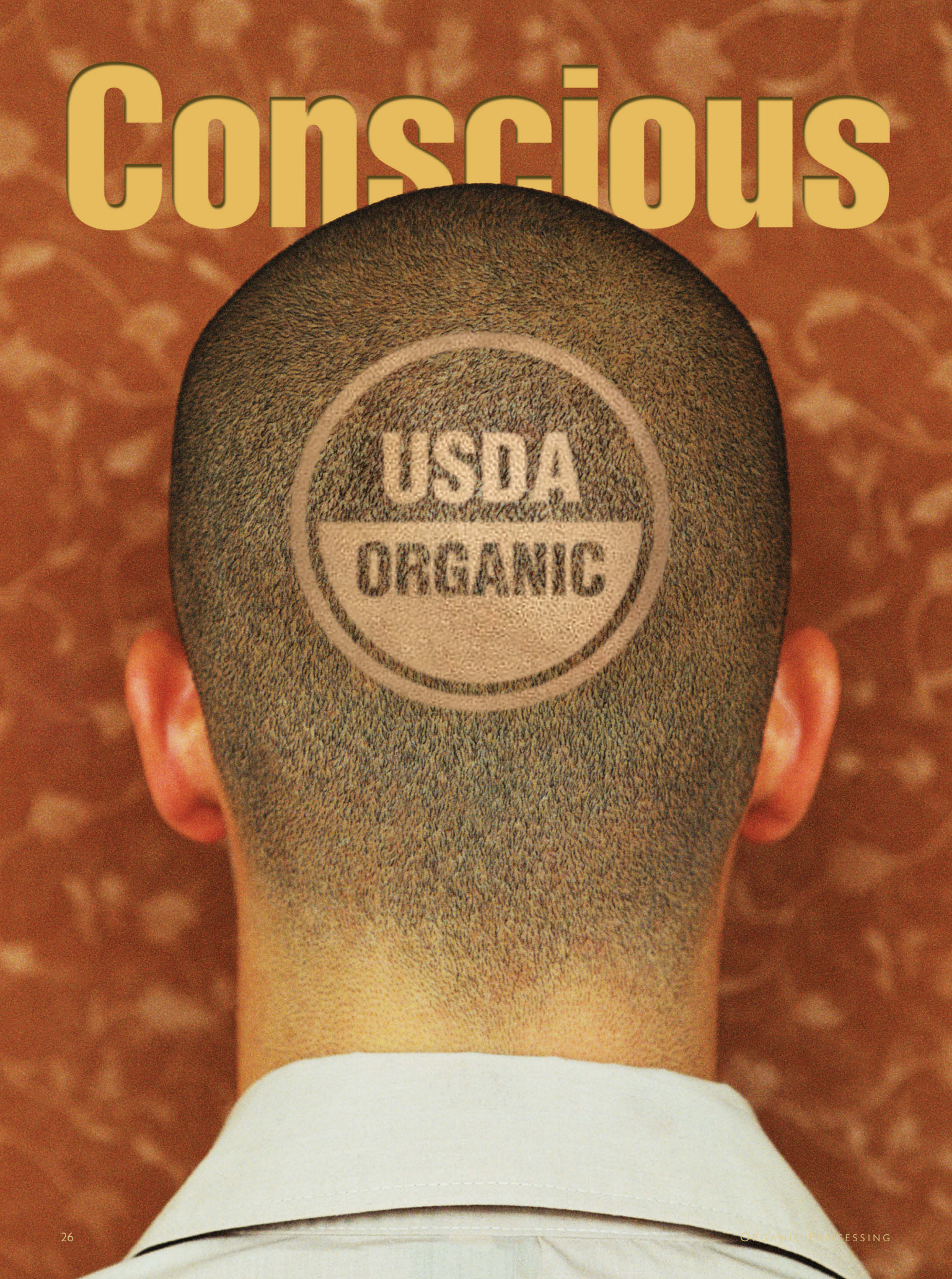
# Conscious



# Branding:

## Redefining "Marketing" to Engage and Empower the Organic Consumer

*By Yadim Medore and Kevin Williams*

### Think Different!

Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Dylan, Pablo Picasso, Amelia Earhart.

What does a computer company have in common with these world luminaries?

Apple, Inc. borrowed the respect that we have for these incredible forward thinkers and, leveraging our desire to be like them, created a very powerful affiliation with their brand: *We are different from the conventional thinkers, unique, forward, and we use Mac.* It worked.

### Welcome to Marlboro Country.

How in the years after World War II does the first filtered cigarette become the world-leading brand?

They didn't talk about it; instead they identified themselves (and their consumers) with the quintessential icon of the rugged American individualist—the Cowboy.

### You Deserve a Break Today!

How does a fast-food joint sell billions of not-so-great hamburgers every year?

They sell a smile, not meat.

*What do all these campaigns have in common?* They are examples of "branding," a type of marketing that caters our to emotional side, and supports this with rational methods. It's a fact that we navigate much of our world though our feelings, or intuition. Traditional branding efforts target these feelings, seeking to align a brand with who we want to be and make us want to be part of that brand's virtual community. It often capitalizes on desires or fears, operating just below the threshold of consciousness. What takes precedence is not always something tangible, but how a brand makes us feel.

While conventional companies have used branding to influence consumers for decades, the organic industry has instead primarily relied on marketing attributes or direct benefits—e.g., lack of harmful pesticides, non-GMO, better for the planet, better for you. This appeals to a shopper's logical side, and it may encourage trial, but what most companies in the organic industry are not tapping into is the power of "emotional allegiance." This is the difference between a person who buys a product based strictly on logic (e.g., price) and another who makes a purchase because they identify with the brand. This emotional allegiance will make a consumer loyal to your brand even in the face of aggressive competition or economic downturns. If properly nurtured, this emotional allegiance can last a lifetime.

Unlike conventional companies, however, organic brands don't have to create a fictional character or a false pretense of feeling good. There is no need to associate with influential figures to elevate our position. There is another option: *conscious branding.*

When it comes to emotional allegiance, organic has one major advantage: we don't have to fake it. We have real stories. We are part of something that honestly feels good and *is* good. We are a community of forward thinkers that people want to associate and identify with. Now is the time to reach out to consumers and invite them—*through conscious branding*—to be part of our virtual community.

## Conscious Branding Versus Conventional Branding

Conscious branding stands in stark contrast to traditional, manipulative branding. Both tap into consumers' emotional centers. However, where traditional branding often manipulates people into having an emotional experience, conscious branding *strengthens an emotional connection* the consumer already has. While traditional branding relies on mindless acceptance, conscious branding relies on *conscious decision-making*. And, most importantly, while traditional branding treats the consumer as a passive victim, conscious branding sees the consumer as an *active participant in a community of like-minded thinkers.*

In essence, conscious branding offers each consumer the ability to be a representative of what they want to see in the world, enabling them to be *"responsible" contributors to society with each purchase.*

## Connect with Consumers on an Emotional Level or Get Left Behind

No one can fail to acknowledge the great gains that organic products have made in increasing market penetration over the past few decades. According to Organic Trade Association data, U.S. sales of organic foods and beverages have mushroomed from $1 billion in 1990 to an estimated $23.6 billion in 2008. Yet over the past year, there has been a dramatic slowdown in the growth of the organic industry.

*What's going on?* The widely held assumption is that it's the economy. But consumers only switch brands based on price when there is no brand loyalty, when they haven't developed an emotional connection to a brand.

The real culprit behind the slowdown in the growth of organics isn't simply the economy—*it's the way we're promoting organics.*

As mentioned, the majority of organic product manufacturers today engage solely in traditional attribute-based marketing, basing everything on just the facts: no synthetic pesticides or hormones, good for the planet, etc. What the NOP standards represent in terms of better growing, processing, and husbandry practices is critical to retaining the integrity of organic—but these practices are not the basis for making someone feel connected to your brand. Simply turning the NOP rules into a list of product attributes not only misses the opportunity for consumers to be more actively involved in the causes your brand represents, it also puts organic brands at risk of becoming price-driven commodities.

## Moving Consumers Toward the Core

Some organic consumers buy based mainly on price and attributes, while others' purchasing habits are based on how they identify with key brands. To understand why, we must take a look at the types of organic consumers. The Hartman Group, a research consulting firm, has divided organic consumers into three categories.

**The periphery consumer** is the occasional buyer, purchasing organic products only on the periphery of the store: the meat, dairy, and produce aisles. She is motivated by personal benefits of product attributes with a focus on price: "Organic milk is on sale, I think it's a little better, so I buy it when it's on special."

**The mid-level consumer** always buys organic in the peripheral aisles and sometimes buys organic processed products from the center aisles. She is motivated by personal benefit with a focus on fresh products: "I have an 11-year-old daughter and I will not buy anything that has hormones in it, but I am not so sure of the value of a processed cookie. I mean, a cookie is a cookie, right?"

**The core consumer** is committed to organic products and will buy them throughout all parts of the store. She is motivated by personal, planetary and social incentives: "I buy organic because I want to eat food free of toxins, preserve the planet, and buy foods produced by workers treated fairly."

The Hartman Group's "Many Faces of Organics" report states that in a recent three-month period, 69 percent of surveyed consumers purchased organic products. Of this group, 79 percent were identified as mid-level and periphery consumers. These statistics reveal several key insights. First, a huge percentage of the population—over two-thirds—is engaging with organic products. We have likely reached saturation; the other 31 percent might never buy organic. Second, the majority of organic consumers—nearly four-fifths—are buying on the periphery of the store. It is only the other 21 percent that are fully vested in buying organic products.

"The economy has exacerbated the trade-offs between organic and conventional," says Laurie Demeritt, president of The Hartman Group. "People will buy the products that clearly offer personal value, such as hormone-free milk, but are less clear on the packaged goods that do not present the same tangible value. The periphery and mid-level consumers understand why it is preferable not to consume hormones or antibiotics in meat and dairy products; they don't perceive the value of an organic cookie."

What this tells us is that the reason organic growth has slowed is because we have maxed out the number of people who are shopping on the periphery. That is where organic growth was coming from and now the market is saturated. Therefore, growth of the organic sector will not really pick up again unless we can persuade peripheral and mid-level consumers to cross over and begin to affiliate with organic as a core consumer. The need to build the relevance of organic on an emotional level is pressing. Fortunately, the market is ripe for transition.

## The Social Sphere and The Rise of the Conscious Consumer

According to Demeritt, there has been a recent cultural shift in why consumers buy organic.

"Up until '06 to '07, it was very clear that mainstream consumers had been getting on board for the personal benefit—better for them and their families—followed by the belief that they were also buying for sustainable reasons," she says. "The entry is still personal benefit, but now sustainability has a much lower consideration because it's too vague a concept for people to understand and connect with."

"What is awakening in today's consumer is the idea of being responsible within the social sphere or world community. The consumer is saying: 'I want to be responsible. I want to be affiliated with organizations that are responsible,'" Demeritt said.

*And that is where our opportunity as an industry lies.*

If we stay on the path of just being about NOP rules and attributes, we are going to lose momentum fast. The alternative is to inspire a connection with what Demeritt refers to as the "social sphere," or the greater good of humanity. Here, we can awaken the idea of being responsible consumers by celebrating and ultimately connecting with the goodness that organic companies are doing.

However, the social sphere isn't just about altruism. What consumers are looking for, according to Demeritt, is a connection with their food. They want to put a face behind the product and connect with the human element of the food. Who grew it? Where did it come from? How was it raised?

This trend is evidenced by the increasing focus on locally grown foods. In a survey conducted by Pure Branding, natural food retailers were asked what the greatest opportunity for growth in the marketplace is. Many replied "expansion of the produce department." When further pressed, they stated the relationships they enjoy with local farmers enable them to provide fresh, less-traveled produce that consumers feel good about because they know where it came from.

The benefit of concentrating on the social sphere, or a person's connection with the world community, is clear: it increases the relevance of the organic proposition on an emotional plane. Neglecting the social sphere can actually have a negative effect on organic sales. Demeritt points out that with the social sphere taking precedence, there is a growing skepticism on the part of consumers that didn't exist a few years ago with respect to organic. The most blatant example is consumers hearing that organic cattle farms don't treat their animals any better than conventional ones. As a result, they wonder why they should buy organic. If the only motivation to buy organic products was the "benefits for me," why would this matter? Consumers want to be affiliated with brands that reflect their values and what they want to see in the world.

*Alter Eco's AlterEcoMeter numerically illustrates how many village members benefited from sale of the product, how much revenue has increased due to fair trade/organic practices and the exact projects the money funded.*

## Conscious Branding: Key Elements

The challenge then is: How do organic brands encourage consumers along the path from buying organic in order to attain a personal benefit, to becoming active participants in the conscious values that organic stands for? You could introduce the manipulative tactics of unconscious branding employed by conventional companies, and that would work for a short time. But eventually, this strategy would erode the confidence consumers have in organic, promoting the skeptical point of view that organic products offer a false proposition because the values are not present.

Instead, we need to go back to our roots. "The advent of organic is an unprecedented process that started with the farmers, incredibly strict and self-regulating," says Theresa Marquez, marketing director of Organic Valley. "Born of beliefs that manifested in actions of dissent, organic is a revolution holding everyone to a higher standard. It is for this reason as promoters of organic products that we must employ methods that go beyond the stirring of feelings of uncertainty and the associated herd mentality to awakening the conscience toward self-directed behavior. Communications must be authentic. Like the products, they must be held to a higher standard. This is conscious branding."

Conscious branding starts with three main elements.

**Identify Your Truths and Tell That Story.** If you are just putting something out there to look good, but don't have actions to back it up, conscious consumers will know. What do you actually believe? What strides are you taking to make your actions match your beliefs? What are your passions? Use all these truths to develop your brand's story, the authentic and true image that you will present to the world. And make sure that your story is not just a little one-time article on your website. Your story needs to permeate through everything in your company, from your tagline and marketing to the actions you take.

**Feelings Are Essential.** Feelings are how we interact with the world. Branding is about bonding through feelings. Conventional branding manipulates

feelings. The difference with conscious branding is that it's based on authentic, shared feelings: hopes, desires, concerns, joys, vulnerabilities, etc. It allows consumers to get to know the heart and soul of who you are as a company.

*To offer more transparency for its products and process, Patagonia developed the "Footprint Chronicles."*

**Give Customers an Active Role.** While conventional branding seeks to persuade you to buy something, conscious branding seeks to "invite you to participate." Through your brand, you give consumers a chance make a difference in the world by purchasing your products. Organic Valley's Theresa Marquez frames this perfectly.

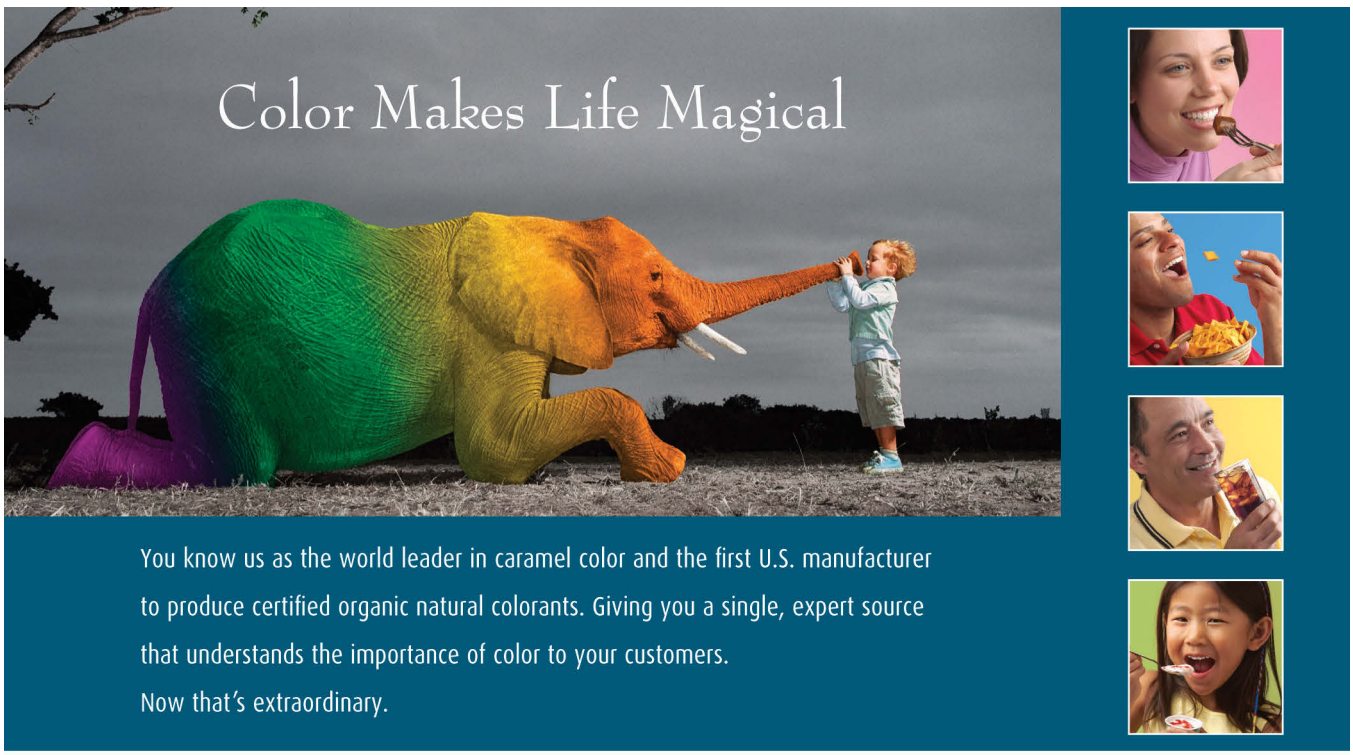
"We call those who buy our products 'citizen participants,'" she says. "Once you invite them to be a part of the solution through purchasing your product, there must be actions on your company's part to continue these participations. Give them a chance to develop and deepen their sense of being 'part of the team.'"

## Conscious Branding Tactics

Here are strategies and tactics employed by some of your peers that contribute to creating evangelical brand partners, i.e., citizen participants.

**Use Positive Reinforcement.** Reminders of positive behaviors reinforce a consumer's belief that they are facilitating change in the world, effectively elevating their self-perception and affiliation to the brand.

This fall, Organic Valley will launch one of the most innovative means of achieving this goal, using what's called the Calculator, an online interactive tool that allows consumers to view the level of synthetic chemicals they have kept out of the food system with each Organic Valley product they buy. The Calculator also can track the full amount of chemicals retained

throughout the entire relationship with the brand to date. Additionally, the Calculator will have social functionality that allows people to compare scores, e-mail friends, and share their numbers on Facebook.

The brilliance of this tool is that it not only reinforces the positive behavior of consumers, encouraging further brand interaction, but it also provides a very simple reference for the abstract concept of sustainability, making it tangible and real.

Another similar tool is the "Alter-EcoMeter." Alter Eco, a fair-trade organic company that works with co-ops around the world, now has a meter on the side of each product that tells exactly how many farmers have been helped by the project, the additional revenue the community made from the creation of the product, and the specific community project the fair-trade funding went toward.

**Create Alliances.** Support causes that reflect the values of your brand. In addition to helping these organizations, it will reflect positively on your brand. Similarly, nurture strategic relationships with other organic brands that are aligned with your values. These co-branding efforts are great ways to increase marketing efficiencies while creating the opportunity to reach a broader client base. This display of mutual trust and support also creates a halo of goodwill. Furthermore, it can provide a value-added opportunity for the customer in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Nature's Path, Organic Valley, and the Rodale Institute collaborated on the Organic Heroes campaign, a celebration of consumer "citizen partners" that also offers support to the Rodale Institute, one of the early pioneers and supporters of the organic farming movement. The program also spotlights the roles we each play within the "Chain of Organic Heroes," celebrating the role of the consumer.

**Be Open.** Organic companies are held to a higher standard that goes beyond even the rules and regulations of the NOP standards. In creating awareness of what organic stands for, we draw both the scrutiny and hope of the people who would be our greatest allies. Give these consumers the proof behind what you are presenting and they will shift from skeptic to advocate. One method is to be transparent and offer traceability. Openness is the highest form of confidence that creates trust.

*This campaign by Organic Valley, Nature's Path, and the Rodale Institute positions consumers as part of the "Chain of Organic Heroes."*

Patagonia, a brand whose innovation in sustainable apparel has changed the industry, has sought to raise the bar by producing the "Footprint Chronicles," an online interactive posting of supply-chain stories of 17 products. You can see where the products are made, materials used, waste and social implications, both good and bad. They go farther with a video titled "What's done in our name?" a narrative of the social context of global sourcing. This all serves to show that Patagonia is real and not perfect; they, like the customer, are on an authentic path of self-improvement because they care. Consumers can identify with this.

**Build Connections.** Enabling consumers to picture where the product comes from and know details about the people growing it changes the nature of the relationship and personifies your brand.

Organic India celebrates the community of farmers who create and benefit from its products by featuring photos of actual members on the front label and telling their stories in advertisements. This allows the citizen participants to understand the social values of the brand that go far beyond the NOP standards. This effort contributed to triple-digit growth for the specialty tea brand.

Another example is how Organic Valley features the family farmers on nearly every point of consumer contact. This reinforces the position of the organization as a farmers' co-op—a true democratic organization, while the familial connection builds on the feelings of trust and security. According to marketing director Sarah Bratnober, Organic Valley plans to provide a direct connection to these farmers online.

**Celebrate Your Passion.** Most organic companies have passion for what they are doing and how they are doing it. Don't take this for granted; it is an incredible asset. True passion and commitment is contagious; people are drawn to it, inspired by it, and want to participate in it.

In the early years of many organic companies, the founders would go out on the sales calls, do the demonstrations in store and be at the social events that their customers would go to. Their passion is what motivated them and created believers. As organizations grow larger, it becomes easy to lose the dynamism of that excitement.

Small Planet Foods, a group of brands owned by General Mills, could have easily lost the small-company energy of Larabar when they acquired the brand, but recognized early on

that the value of the brand resides in the excitement generated by being in touch with their customers. As described by a Small Planet marketing executive, "By getting people excited, they want to participate. Then they want to learn more…it's much easier. We would see founder Lara Merriken connect with people at running events and realized more resources need to go into actually meeting the people and building relationships.

"Our focus is one-to-one marketing. We recognized that we are not for everybody; instead it is about connecting with people in an intimate partnering process," said the representative from Small Planet. "This put focus on bottom-up marketing, events, and social networking versus traditional media and we adjusted our budgets accordingly. Larabar now has a full-time person on staff who monitors blogs to encourage ongoing and personal dialogues with people as the brand is mentioned within the blogosphere."

## Go Beyond the Rules

No matter what kind of tactics you use, make your brand become more than a list of attributes. Make *organic* mean something more than just "pesticide-free" or "better for you." Make your brand come alive and be something people want to identify with.

Laurie Demeritt of The Hartman Group believes that the present status of "organic" is too narrow a word to encompass all the virtues the consumers are embracing, and as the industry is currently trending we would agree. It's not enough to rely on the moniker of organic. However, as more brands provide the context for conscious consumers to become involved in and affiliated with organic brands, we'll see the emergence of more conscious "core" consumers, the industry will thrive, and *organic* could become synonymous with a wholesome and responsible lifestyle rather than just a set of rules. □

**Yadim Medore and Kevin Williams** are principals of Pure Branding (www.purebranding.com), a brand consultancy that exclusively supports natural and organic companies to achieve their social and financial missions. Through conscious brand strategy, Pure Branding helps companies find their true voice and use that voice—through all as-pects of advertising, marketing and packaging—to inspire consumer participation and create authentic brand connections.

Clients include leading international natural and organic brands in food, personal care and nutraceutical segments. Yadim can be reached at yadim@purebranding.com.

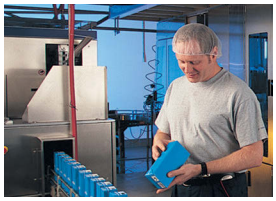
*Creating Healthy Solutions*™

**SunOpta – The Leader in Organic & Non-GMO Grain-based Ingredients**

Customized and specialty food ingredients for today's healthy food products.

Vertically-integrated from farm to packaged product to bring you unsurpassed quality & value.

***Call us today for all of your organic needs!***



**From the Farm** → **To Our Manufacturing Plants** → **To Your Customer's Table**

Whole Grains • Soy Ingredients • Sweeteners
Vegetable Oils • Feed Products • Milled Corn Products
Specialty Dairy Powders • Sunflower Ingredients
Packaged Snacks • Customer Ingredients

SunOpta
*Grains and Foods Group*

**1-800-297-5997, x116**
1-507-451-6030, x116
www.sunopta.com/foods
foodinfo@sunopta.com