



By Stan Pohmer

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CONFUSION REIGNS

In the grocery store aisle, consumers are flooded with labels, numbers and buzzwords to "help" them decide which foods to buy, but they serve only to mystify many shoppers. Can the floriculture industry avoid going down a similar path?

I publicly admit that I'm confused. Some will say that you don't have to be an Einstein to recognize this; others will say that it's been apparent forever. So let's just agree that I've been in denial for a long time and am finally coming out of the closet on this!

Food for Thought

Allow me to explain my confusion. Let's start with eating habits: As I'm getting older — and at the prompting of my wife — I'm starting to become a bit more concerned about what I put into my body. So I'm trying to learn more about the nutritional value of different foods and diets. Looking at food labels, suppliers make statements about low fat, no fat, saturated fats, trans fats, high fiber, dietary fiber, calories, cholesterol, high/low carbohydrate values, sugars, proteins, sodium, and vitamin and mineral content.

Until recently, suppliers could make whatever claims they wanted to promote their products to the public because there were no industry or governmental standards. They could say they were low calorie, no calorie, low fat, low cholesterol, high fiber, sodium free, no trans fat, no saturated fat and so on.

And, quite frankly, I have no idea which of these are better for me because all of these claims are being made by brand-name suppliers that I have some semblance of confidence in, foods that I've been consuming for years and feeding my kids to build strong bodies and bones. So a few things happened.

Inundation. First, some self-appointed "experts" helped clarify my confusion by developing diets

that focused on what they considered to be right. We now have the South Beach Diet, the Mediterranean Diet, the Atkins Diet, Jenny Craig, L.A. Weight Loss... I could fill this page with all of the diet plans that are available to us, each touting its short- and long-term health benefits.

Now, I'm not suggesting that there's no science to back up these claims, but if there is, no one's really talking about it. A cynic might even say that the fad diets are driven by financial gain of the individual plans and companies — and yes, the weight loss industry is a multibillion-dollar industry, far larger than our floriculture industry.

Regulation. Next, our trusted Big Brother — the federal government — decided to clarify my confusion by issuing requirements that foods must communicate to the consumer. They came up with allegedly science-based criteria such as recommended daily values of all of the important (and apparently unimportant) fats, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and all of the vitamins and minerals, based on what they identified our bodies needed. They also required that all of the product ingredients be listed on the labels in descending order of volumetric content.

I was told growing up never to put anything into my mouth that I didn't know where it came from or that wasn't good for me. If I read all of the information on the new food labels, I can't relate to about 90 percent of what's listed there, so according to the conventional wisdom of my mother, I probably shouldn't be eating it. (That's one way to keep my weight down!)

Am I still confused? You bet. But at least they've standardized my state of confusion, so I'm now consistently befuddled. And it's almost comical to watch people shop; everyone is looking at the labels and comparing them in the aisles when, in reality, most people have no clue what they're really looking at or which is better for them!

Bottom line: There are no generally accepted standards against which consumers can make considered decisions on what foods are best for them. There's lots of information, but nothing that eliminates confusion across the broad populace. So how does my discourse on my confusion about food relate to your business?

An Awakening

The growing consumer interest in how they relate to the environment, the social implications of how our products are produced, and what's good for Mother Earth and the future of mankind, has led suppliers and retailers to take on the task of offering their choices of what meets these ambiguous needs for your consumer.

We've seen a proliferation of labels in the past few years, everything from "eco" to organic (spelled with a capital letter if it's USDA certified, and lowercase if the company making the statement only believes they are growing with what they believe are organic standards), to low carbon footprint, to sustainable and environmental. Individual companies like Wal-Mart, Safeway and Home Depot are creating their own labels and brands identifying products they believe are environmentally friendly or sustainable. ►

We have companies certifying that products are produced under third-party-established standards, including Veriflora, MPS, Florverde, FlorEcuador, Rainforest Alliance and Fair Trade. All these and more, and we're just at the beginning of this awakening of our new consumer consciousness!

We have people making claims that organic is the best growing practice, yet organic isn't necessarily sustainable; sustainability includes the social and environmental ramifications of a product, not whether the products are grown free of pesticides and chemicals. Sustainability may include organics, but organically grown product might not be, by definition, sustainable.

Confusion Crossover

As in the case of food, I personally believe that consumers are confused by the lack of standards on what I'll call the social and environmental attributes of our products, and we're perpetuating this confusion because there are no clear and concise standards, vocabulary or measurability. I believe in the concept of sustainability: environmentally sound production, good working conditions for industry workers, community benefits and economic sustainability for company owners.

I believe that some products can be pro-

duced both organically and economically, and, where possible, this should be the production method of choice. I believe in looking at the life cycle of products, not just the often-erroneous simplicity of measuring air miles or carbon footprint. I believe in measurable criteria against which one can be benchmarked, providing a clear path toward improvement.

Producers, retailers, certifying companies, special-interest groups and trade associations are all coming up with their own interpretation and criteria of what it means to be green or sustainable, and this is not in the best interest of our industry. Our industry desperately needs clarification on sustainable practices and processes that all of us (and our consumers) can understand and relate to, and the ability to measure compliance with these standards.

The Green Mindset

Being "green" is a lot broader than just selling products that are sustainably grown, natural and packaged with fewer materials or earth-friendly containers. Being green is an all-encompassing attitude, part of your company's cultural DNA. We can't say we're green just because we're recycling plastic containers; in reality and in the consumers' minds, it goes a lot deeper than this.

I believe we're already a green industry, yet we have a long way to go to make it part of our DNA. One of the first steps is for us to come together to define what our industry wants to be and stand for in this area, so we can eliminate confusion and start moving forward.

The good thing is that we're starting to talk and are becoming engaged in this process. Some of us have already been involved in meetings discussing certification criteria for floriculture products. There's a forum on sustainability planned for the OFA Short Course in July, and there's another forum planned for November in Texas. My challenge to you is to become part of these discussions not only to learn but also to help formulate the future of our industry.

Yes, I'm confused right now, and so are most of our consumers. With your help and involvement, maybe we can become a bit less confused and start making the right decisions for the right reasons... ☺

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