Keeping it Natural: Organic Foods

Introduction
Many Americans are looking for a more natural and chemical-free alternative at their grocery stores: organic foods. Organic fruits and vegetables are grown without the use of pesticides or fertilizers and are processed without radiation or additives. Animals that are classified as “organic” are raised without antibiotics and growth hormones. Although the prices of organic foods are higher than commercially grown foods, the organic food industry is quickly growing. Many people assume that the popularity of organic foods will eventually die out, but research shows the opposite. As the organic food industry grows, people are becoming more aware of their food options, due to the increase of organic food products. Organic has moved beyond fruits and vegetables and can now be found in frozen meals, soups, dog food, makeup and lotions, candy and other products and foods that have been traditionally commercially grown and prepared.

Organic Consumers
Organic food retail sales have been growing quickly in the United States. Between 1998 and 2005, organic food sales were growing by 18% per year (Dettman & Dimitri, 2007). Understanding what type of consumer is causing such an increase in sales has become important for research and marketing professionals who are trying to target their product to a particular audience. Research conducted by Onyango, Hallman, and Bellows (2007) found that the typical organic food shopper was young, usually female, had a college education, considered them self to be liberal, and attended a house of worship regularly. According to Onyango et al., “the regularity of organic food purchases is influenced by both socioeconomic factors and the presence or absence of particular food attributes deemed important” (p. 409). Research by Dettman and Dimitri concluded that households without children were more likely to purchase organic vegetables than those with children.

Although studies suggest that households without children are more likely to purchase organic foods, children have a powerful influence on what foods their guardians purchase. Since adults are in charge of buying food for the household, it is easy to forget the influence children have at the grocery store. A study in Europe found that girls (aged 15-16) who were highly educated had more positive feelings toward organic foods than boys of higher and lower education (Stobbelaar, et al., 2006). With the increase of organic food sales in the U.S., it will be important to research and market these foods to children and young adults.

Taste Difference
Many people swear that organic foods taste better since they are not altered by pesticides or fertilizers. On the contrary, Zhao, Chambers, Matta, Loughin, and Carey (2007) found that there were not any significant taste differences between organic and conventionally grown vegetables. According to the research found by Zhao et al., “Consumer sensory analysis of a number of different types of vegetables produced in our carefully managed, replicated plots did
not show significant differences between organically and conventionally grown vegetables in overall liking or for intensity of overall flavor” (p. 90).

Health Benefits and Risks

While health benefits are often associated with the term “organic,” there is no scientific evidence to support that assumption. No research has been done comparing an organic diet to a conventional food diet (Siderer, Maquet, & Anklam, 2005). With organic foods growing in popularity, it will be important to have scientific research backing up claims that these foods are better for one’s health. It is especially important to have research about health benefits (if any), since organic foods cost more than conventionally grown foods.

It can be easily assumed that organic foods are safer since they are grown without pesticides, but in 2006 many perceptions were changed when E. coli was found in sealed bags of pre-washed organic spinach. Earthbound Farm brand, owned by Natural Selection Foods, recalled all bagged spinach products when nearly 100 people were reported infected. While conventionally grown foods use chemical fertilizers, organic foods use animal manure for fertilizer that can contain E. coli and salmonella. Rewashing contaminated vegetables only spreads E. coli and makes it harder to contain.

Conclusion

With health concerns on the rise, an organic natural food product is the only alternative to conventionally grown foods. Like the saying “you are what you eat,” organic foods are devoid of chemicals and pesticides unlike so many of the food products offered at the grocery store. The organic food industry is growing and is branching out to the busy consumer. Brands like Boca Foods, Kashi, Amy’s Kitchen, and Annie’s Homegrown are making it easier for consumers to eat and purchase organic foods. Eating organic foods may not appeal to all consumers, but it does provide an option to those who want to know what they are eating and how it was grown.

Audience

The target audience for this brief is public relations and marketing professionals who are intending to advertise the organic food industry. People who are interested in food science and nutrition will find this brief helpful for trying to better understand organic foods. Students who are looking for a career with the United States Department of Agriculture or a related agricultural field will find this brief useful.

References


