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Natural & Organic – Two Words that Resonate

Quite a few years ago, I was responsible for marketing at a major US chicken company. We had observed the nascent ascent of the so-called “natural” chicken phenomenon and wanted to know more about the word’s resonance with consumers. Our curiosity led us to do a consumer study on just what consumers felt about or even knew about the word “natural” as it applied to meat and poultry and, in our case, chicken.

What we discovered caused us to quickly adopt the term “natural” on all of our chicken packages. Then, as you might imagine, the USDA got involved in the term appearing on meat and poultry labels and decided to somehow define it. After numerous meat and poultry companies weighed in with their opinions and FSIS in-house meetings, a definition emerged that satisfied few and confused most.

This new definition required that if the term “natural” appeared on the consumer package of meat or poultry it must be accompanied by an asterisk. The asterisk referred to a phrase appearing on the front panel of the label defining “natural” as “minimally processed with no artificial ingredients.” This same definition exists to this day.

Of course, this label requirement required some validation, which caused all those meat and poultry companies using the term to somehow certify that their particular “natural” chicken or meat product was, indeed, natural. This resulted in all sorts of self-certifying actions by the various companies, each trying to be more complete than the competition with resulting consumer confusion.

However, my purpose is not to debate the merits of the USDA’s definition of “natural” nor the industry’s use of it as that has been debated ad nauseam for over 30 years. My purpose is to harken back to what occurred from that consumer study we did at that major chicken company lo those many years ago. Quite simply our research discovered that the word “natural” resonated quite positively with consumers.

While consumers, just like the USDA, couldn’t agree on a complete and comprehensive definition, “natural” elicited a positive image for consumers and, thus, a purchase impulse for products bearing the term “natural.” Consumers just seemed to think it meant something good.

These same meat and poultry companies who were just getting accustomed to using the word “natural” and seeing it resonate with consumers, began to see the rise of the term “organic.”

These companies were again faced with a new term which as with the genesis of “natural” had no definition. The major exception was that the “organic” movement spawned a cottage industry of dedicated zealots hell-bent on defining and forcing anyone who used term “organic” to comply with a set of regulations controlling its definition and subsequent use. These zealots commanded enough congressional attention to get a law passed mandating what could be labeled “organic.”

The meat and poultry industry was now faced with a conundrum of having two words, one with a meaningless definition and one with set of regulations defining its implementation and use. Each word resonated with consumers forcing these companies to respond with what the words meant to them. It forced them to reveal aspects of the raising and processing of their meat and poultry products few had even contemplated admitting to consumers much less being transparent enough to show them their inner workings a few short years previously.

Albeit, the defining of “organic” took some thirteen years from its inception with the Organic Food Production Act in 1989 to the promulgation of an organic certification law implemented in 2002.

This conundrum seemed to split the meat and poultry industry into those who were quick to use the term “natural” but slow to even want to adopt the more stringent certification requirements for the use of the term “organic” and enthusiastic amateur industry players who embraced organic as an answer to the loosely defined “natural” as they cautiously began to market “organic” meat and poultry.

But, let’s get back to consumers and their reaction to the two terms. “Natural” labeled meat and poultry products seemed to spring forth with unbridled restraint as to its meaning and consumers quickly rushed to purchase them. “Natural” meat and poultry labeled products quickly began to ascend purchase and consumption impulses. Consumers liked them and believed them to be better than non-natural labeled products.

“Organic” labeled meat and poultry with their much more stringent qualifying standards remained the province of the smaller and emerging meat and poultry companies until recently when the mainstream companies began to market in somewhat industrial fashion “organic” labeled meat and poultry.

Consumers have expressed their acceptance of the two terms with their purchase behavior. And, to their credit, meat and poultry companies responded to this implied consumer need with products that satisfied the need.

As you contemplate the words that consumers will associate with your company's products and image, please remember the genesis and subsequent use of the two words "natural" and "organic" and the consumers' reactions to them.

All of this means that quite simply, words matter.

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The April 2019 Marketing Trends article was produced by Mack Graves, senior advisor of Panorama Meats Inc.



Lean Trimmings

(Supplement)