

Fear sells and Academics Review uses it too in misleading attack on organic marketing

It's been a little over four years since I joined Twitter and a year since I started blogging. What I originally considered a way to share information about my farm has evolved into something that feeds my passion for informed discussion and logical debate. The farmers, scientists and bloggers I've encountered have radically altered the way I view the world and certain issues, GMOs in particular. Yet every once in a while, I am reminded that to be human is to be subjective, and that bias can lead people to accept flaws in one argument that they would not tolerate in another.

The recent [Academics Review Organic Marketing Report: Why Consumers Pay More for Organic Foods? Fear Sells and Marketers Know it](#) is one such example. The report claims to review thousands of studies, research articles, newspaper reports and a wide variety of other marketing and advertising sources to create a damning indictment of the organic sector as an industry that has uniquely and deliberately profited from “fear-marketing” – the use of false and misleading information to skew consumer perceptions.

The report has garnered a lot of media attention ([here](#), [here](#), here) and seems to have captured the imagination of crop biotechnology scientists and supporters. They generally pride themselves on their ability to bring skeptical analysis and a rational perspective to issues, but the majority of them seem to have given their compatriots David Tribe and Bruce Chassy, who reviewed the study for Academics Review (which they founded), a [free pass](#) with respect to this report. Using the tools usually employed by these self-proclaimed skeptics quickly exposes the flaws of this study.

Unsubstantiated claims

The fundamental flaw of the Organic Marketing Report is the confusion of cause and effect. The report begins with the extraordinary claim that it “finds direct evidence that widespread, collaborative and pervasive industry marketing activities are a primary cause for false and misleading consumer health and safety perceptions about competing conventional foods. Further, this review finds no evidence that other unrelated sources play a significant role in creating these consumer misperceptions.” This claim requires extraordinary evidence – evidence which is never produced.

Instead, the report focuses on market research documenting consumer trends and attitudes toward food production practices. The results summarized are familiar to most involved in food and agricultural issues: rising consumer concerns about pesticides, hormones, antibiotics and GMOs in food; and declining trust in the safety and healthiness of the food supply. These factors exist independently of the organic food market – the report even provides examples (like the Alar apple scare). Both conventional and organic food marketers have been well-informed of these trends – the research Academics Review references is readily available: the difference lies in how marketers and others react to consumer demands.

The conventional food and agricultural sector's response can be summed up as an effort to convince the consumer that they are wrong – that the status quo is acceptable, even desirable, that we are “[saving the planet with pesticides and plastic](#)” and that we have “the safest food in the world” (which of course are the

same claims criticized as “fear-marketing” in the report). Various industry players have formed a variety of associations and groups to “educate” consumers about “modern food production” (again, the same tactics are deemed unacceptable when used by participants in the organic market).

The organic sector, on the other hand, has decided to address consumer preferences proactively, by creating products that meet consumer desires. They’ve lobbied for more government regulation, not less – resulting in the National Organic Program and the USDA Organic Seal. They’ve adopted the age-old mantra that the “consumer is always right” and provide choices for consumers who are willing to pay more for food produced a certain way.

The explosive growth in the organic market described by Academics Review is simply a reflection of the more effective response to date. The conventional sector has failed to adequately address growing concerns, and as a result, the organic sector has grown. It’s also very important to note, as shown above, that the conventional sector has employed many, if not all, of the same tactics described in the report – marketing is marketing, after all, and [claims of superiority](#) for [health](#) or environmental reasons are rife across all industries (as demonstrated in the embedded links).

Academics Review implies that organic marketing is solely and completely responsible for the concerns people have about their food (total causation in other words). But even the evidence they cite suggests other causes. Therefore, the report only succeeds in demonstrating correlation: the marketing efforts were happening at the same time as rising consumer concern.

I will grant that some of the examples of organic marketing cited in the report, especially the ones pertaining to GMOs, could be seen as inaccurate and prejudicial. Others simply relay information or opinion, leaving it to the consumer to draw their own conclusions (which the author hastens to do!). Without access to the complete data set, however, readers are unable to place these examples in context – they are simply expected to agree with the author’s conclusions based on cherry-picked data — another tactic roundly criticized [when the shoe is on the other foot](#).

Misleading claims about food are increasingly the subject of [lawsuits](#), yet the report cannot provide a single example in which an organic food marketer has been taken to court for misleading the consumer. Given that there is little conclusive evidence one way or the other with respect to most of these claims, this is not surprising, but Academics Review attempts to address this inconvenient truth by alleging some sort of conspiracy – another move directly from the playbook of those pro-GMO supporters love to criticize.

Questionable expertise

As one of these anti-organic industry critics recently noted, the appeal to authority implicit in an academic or professional designation like a PhD only holds water if it is in a relevant field. [Critiques of Stephanie Seneff](#)’s controversial review of the alleged dangers of GMOs and glyphosate have made much of the fact that she has expertise in computer science rather than in biology or genetics. It would seem equally fair, then, to question the marketing and advertising background and expertise of the scientists who stand behind and have promoted the Organic Marketing Report.

[Bruce Chassy](#) holds a PhD in biochemistry, has worked as a research chemist, and is a professor of food microbiology and nutritional science. [David Tribe](#) has a PhD in applied molecular genetics and specializes in the study of microbial pathogens. If we must doubt the qualifications of a computer scientist to tell us about pesticide safety, how can we not question the ability of food chemists and crop geneticists to offer judgement on research on organic marketing and advertising?

Biased review and publication

Prior associations and biases also should come under intense scrutiny. Many of the earliest attacks on [Seralini's rat research](#) and [Carman's pig study](#) pointed to their apparent anti-GMO biases. A quick review of David Tribe's [blog](#) or [Twitter profile](#) reveals a decidedly pro-GMO and anti-organic bias. Bruce Chassy has been making [false and misleading statements](#) about organic agriculture since at least 2009 (most notably the demonstrably false claim that "90 percent of the organic food in the United States is produced by two or three multinationals"). Given that an assessment of organic food marketing techniques is a much more subjective endeavor than evaluating animal trials, it is more than fair to question if Tribe's and Chassy's assessment of the Academics Review report was designed to confirm their biases.

For most scientific research, a publisher's reputation and the peer review process also should be assessed. Despite its lofty-sounding name, [Academics Review](#) basically amounts to a blog run by Chassy and Tribe (albeit one registered as a non-profit organization, which allows it to accept "unrestricted donations"). With no information on its other members or its source of funds, the site offers no transparency.

The Chassy-authored Academics Review [press release](#) claims that: "Our findings were reviewed and endorsed by an international panel of independent agricultural science, food science, economic and legal experts from respected international institutions with extensive experience in academic food and agriculture research and publishing." Apart from Tribe and Chassy, however, only two reviewers are listed: Graham Brookes of UK-based [PG Economics](#), whose consultancy website boasts almost exclusively of work done to promote GM crops; and Drew Kershen, a retired American law professor who focuses on agricultural biotechnology law and policy. At best, this demonstrates Chassy's own flair for exaggerated marketing claims.

Conclusion

What's most alarming to me is that those who have shared and promoted this report have done so without acknowledging these basic flaws in logic and reasoning. The evident bias, hyperbolic accusations and unsubstantiated claims of the Academics Review "Organic Marketing Report" are highly reminiscent of "Tall Poppy Syndrome": with the organic sector growing taller and stronger by the moment, those envious of its success are more eager than ever to cut it down to size.

Discussions about food marketing strategies and tactics are important – how we talk about agriculture and food, whether as farmers or eaters, can have a profound impact on what's grown and eaten, where and how. In fact, I've called on the organic sector to be [more positive in its approach](#) before.

The real challenge is to respect choices and celebrate diversity while remaining factual. Let's be honest: the advertising industry as a whole isn't a likely place to start, so it's up to the rest of us. Unfortunately, the Academics Review report and its reception shows us just how far we have to go, but for all the wrong reasons.

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