



Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

Is the food industry under attack from an 'NGO/media complex'?

By Elaine Watson, 19-Jul-2012

Related topics: Science, Food safety, The GM debate, Natural claims, IFT 2012

With NGOs increasingly turning their attention to food production - and often doing a better job than the food industry of engaging with the media - the debate about issues from biotechnology to BPA will only become more polarized, one author has predicted.

Jon Entine, director of the Genetic Literacy Project and a senior research fellow at the Center for Health & Risk Communication at George Mason University, has written several books on this topic including *Let Them Eat Precaution: How Politics is Undermining the Genetic Revolution* and *Scared to Death: How Chemophobia Threatens Public Health*.

NGOs and advocacy groups often lead rather than follow the consumer

Speaking at the IFT show in Las Vegas last month, Entine noted that food and agriculture represented "one of the biggest growth areas for NGO (non-governmental organization) activity", but argued that in many cases, "NGOs and advocacy groups lead rather than follow the consumer".

Advocacy groups also had a tendency to hijack debates over areas of the food industry where there is a perceived risk to consumers, said Entine, who made repeated references to what he called the "NGO-media complex".

However, such groups had a strong presence on the internet and often cultivated strong relationships with the media, meaning that "narrow voices representing probably less than 5-10% of the population become much louder", he claimed.

"We've noticed a great polarity in how issues such as GMOs are discussed and increasingly there is no middle ground."

Many journalists reflexively embrace radical versions of better safe than sorry

Journalists seeking comments, meanwhile, often regarded scientists fielded by NGOs as a more independent source of information than industry scientists, he added.

"NGO scientists are often perceived as being more independent, often wrongly, even when they are often the most biased and least knowledgeable and have no business experience."

Some reporters also had a tendency to fail to contextualize risk for consumers on issues such as novel technologies (new genetically engineered crops, nanotechnology etc), he claimed.

"Many journalists reflexively embrace radical versions of better safe than sorry. But the precautionary principle taken to the extreme means you'll have no technological innovation at all because nothing is 100% risk-free. Yet this kind of approach dominates the media flow."

Are regulators responding to facts on the ground or to the perception of those facts?

More alarmingly, this also meant that in some cases, regulators - who we expect to be objective - "respond not to facts on the ground but to the perception of those facts", making "anti-science views become the template to how decisions are made", argued Entine.

GM labeling is a case in point, he argued, referring to proposals in California to force food companies to label products containing genetically engineered ingredients.

"This would be equivalent to putting a skull and crossbones on a huge percentage of foods and would not actually benefit the consumer."

The worst PR advice is to be apologetic

So how should the industry respond?



Entine: The worst PR advice is to be apologetic

"*You need an aggressive response strategy*", said Entine, who urged the industry to go on the offensive and actively engage with consumers about the benefits of food science.

"*The worst PR advice is to be apologetic. If the facts are on your side don't give into the PR. Get your positions out there and onto the web, provide credible, reasonable, sober information.*"

If you say nothing they win automatically

Dr Steve Harrison, senior director, R&D, ConAgra Foods, who was speaking at the same session, added: "*If you say nothing they win automatically.*"

But it was difficult for the industry to stay ahead of the game given the speed with which issues such as 'pink slime' now go viral, he added:

"*There is an echo chamber and even when we do come to the chamber we sound mousy and small, by the time we get our act together the story is a week old.*"

The conversation is happening, with or without you

But Lorraine Sanabria Robertson, who writes a blog called [askwifey](#) and was invited to provide a consumer angle to the debate, said consumers were not against the food industry.

And while engaging with skeptical or ill-informed consumers via twitter, blogs or other online forums might not be top priority list for food scientists, standing aloof from such discussions was not the answer, she said.

"The conversation is happening, with or without you..."

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