

OPINION

The Organic Industry Is Lying to You

By Henry I. Miller

In the mold of “Mad Men’s” Don Draper, clever ad execs know a thing or two about manipulating consumer ignorance, confusion and even fear to sell a product.

Nowhere is this truer than modern food advertising, where dubious health claims and questionable scientific assertions abound. The Food and Drug Administration is supposed to police such deceptive practices, as it sometimes does with ridiculous zeal: Witness the FDA’s warning letter sent to a Massachusetts bakery for including “love” in its ingredient list.

But when it comes to the \$47-billion-a-year organic industry, the FDA gives a complete pass to blatantly false and deceptive advertising claims. Consider the Whole Foods website, which explicitly claims that organic foods are grown “without toxic or persistent pesticides.” In fact, organic farmers rely on synthetic and natural pesticides to grow their crops, just as conventional farmers do, and organic products can contain numerous synthetic as well as natural chemicals. As observed by UC Berkeley biochemist Bruce Ames and his colleagues in 1990, “99.99% (by weight) of the pesticides in the American diet are

chemicals that plants produce to defend themselves.”

Pesticides are by definition toxic, and many organic pesticides pose significant environmental and human health risks. One is copper sulfate, a widely used broad-spectrum organic pesticide that persists in soil and is the most common residue found

Normally a strict regulator, the FDA gives advertisers a complete pass.

in organic food. The European Union determined that copper sulfate may cause cancer and intended to ban it, but backed off because organic farmers don’t have any viable alternative.

In addition to blatant untruths, food marketers are masters at subtly misleading consumers. A favored technique is the “absence claim”—asserting a meaningless distinction between products in order to make theirs seem superior. Generally, the FDA comes down hard on such behavior. They would never allow an orange-juice producer to label its product “fat free,” for example. To claim an absence of a certain ingredient,

there has to be a “standard of presence” in that product to begin with, and there is no fat in orange juice.

But Tropicana gets away with labeling its orange juice “Non-GMO Project Verified,” and Hunt’s labels its canned crushed tomatoes “non-GMO,” even though there are no GMO (genetically modified organism) oranges or tomatoes on the market. In fact, absence claims about GMOs are never enforced: I was unable to find a single FDA warning letter or other enforcement action against deceptive “non-GMO” labeling.

The “Non-GMO Project” butterfly label emblazons more than 55,000 organic and nonorganic products on supermarket shelves today—many of which have no GMO counterpart or couldn’t possibly contain GMOs. The clear purpose of these labels, as one peer-reviewed academic study found, is to “stigmatize food produced with conventional processes even when there is no scientific evidence that they cause harm, or even that it is compositionally any different.” The labels and anti-genetic-engineering propaganda are effective. Another recent study found nearly half of consumers avoid GMO-labeled foods.

The FDA’s inaction is all the more surprising inasmuch as

it has published explicit guidance on this issue: “Another example of a statement in food labeling that may be false or misleading could be the statement ‘None of the ingredients in this food is genetically engineered’ on a food where some of the ingredients are incapable of being produced through genetic engineering (e.g., salt).”

The FDA guidance goes even further. GMO absence claims can also be “false and misleading” if they imply that a certain food “is safer, more nutritious, or otherwise has different attributes than other comparable foods because the food was not genetically engineered.” But this is exactly what Non-GMO Project butterfly labels are all about. Its website describes certain foods as being at “high risk” of “GMO contamination.”

Giving the organic industry and others a pass to engage in such active deception undermines consumers’ choice, erodes trust in the market, and rigs the game. Consumers need aggressive FDA action to curb these abuses and level the playing field.

Dr. Miller, a physician and molecular biologist, is a fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution. He was founding director of the FDA’s Office of Biotechnology.