

Do Consumers Really Understand GMOs?

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Consumer awareness and concern about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has intensified in a year of significant legislative upheaval surrounding GMO labeling, according to new findings in the "Organic & Natural 2016" report from The Hartman Group (www.hartman-group.com), Bellevue, Wash.

Despite their growing familiarity with GMOs, consumers' in-depth knowledge is currently quite limited as to which products have (or don't have) GMO ingredients or which crops use GMO seeds, the firm's research says. Millennials profess to have more awareness and knowledge about GMOs compared to older consumers — particularly boomers. About one-fourth (26 percent) of consumers say they know which products have GMO ingredients and more than half (53 percent) claim they understand what GMOs are.

However, awareness and concern about GMOs continues to rise, and some consumers are already actively seeking products containing GMO or nonGMO food ingredients.

[Clean label, and terms that signify ingredients or foods that are 'good for you,' are creating quite a few conundrums for food and beverage manufacturers. In this 2018 e-handbook, we'll take a closer look at how manufacturers can better communicate with consumers about ingredients and what exactly 'clean label' really means. Register for the E-Handbook Today](#)

It's no longer sufficient to assume analogues of conventionally packaged food and beverage products will sell simply because they are organic, the report says. The growth of the "natural" market and increased access to private-label organic products have provided alternatives for consumers while challenging branded organic manufacturers. The advent of these products has the potential to dilute the relevancy and value of organic food and beverages in the minds of consumers.

There is considerable consternation among consumers when they encounter the terms organic and natural. The terms have come to mean many different things to consumers. While each term is still an important cue, there is sizable room for debate about definitions and usage. There's a clear need to understand the relationship between organic and natural, and as well as the distinctions, from consumers' perspective.

According to the report, organic usage is rising. This year, 82 percent of U.S. consumers indicated they use organic food and beverage products, up 9 points from two years ago. And 89 percent of U.S. consumers indicated they use natural food and beverage products at least occasionally.

Natural foods, on the other hand, are becoming more complicated. Consumers today idealize food that's as close to its natural form as possible. They believe this food is better – physically, morally and environmentally. But, the language of organic and natural foods has become more complex to navigate, as more quality tiers have emerged. This complexity is challenging the status of well-established quality cues and bolstering skepticism. Therefore, consumers are turning more to common sense and trust to help them make decisions. Organic's meaning is under threat, the report notes. The term has a range of meanings related to three key ideas: grown naturally first and foremost (particularly without farm-level chemicals); made simply; and made responsibly.

Study participants described "more natural" foods as being more real, simple and whole than conventional. Yet when they see the term natural claimed on a package, many are skeptical and look for verification.

They see "less processed" foods as having not undergone substantial change since the farm. This idea is a top priority in products containing multiple ingredients.

"Local" continues to be a resonant assurance of fresher, more trustworthy food that's more likely to have been made

in accordance with consumer values.

Other findings: Organic is still deeply valued, but the purity of its meaning is under threat; and consumers make constant trade-offs in their organic and natural purchasing. Organic shopping also continues to grow at the mainstream grocery level.

Consumer concern around GMOs is still strong, but straightforward communication may mollify some consumers. And GMO avoidance has grown in the last two years.

The report is available from the Hartman Group at 425 452 0818, and at www.hartman-group.com.