

What do all those food seals mean?

mnn.com/food/healthy-eating/blogs/seal-certified-sustainable-food-know-what-they-mean



Buying certified products might make you feel good about yourself, but knowing what those certifications mean may make you feel even better. (Photo: mangostock/Shutterstock)

I'm not one to recommend purchasing food simply because its front-of-package labeling makes it look like a good choice. What goes on the front is usually decided by marketers, people whose job it is to make you think you must have whatever they're selling.

Official seals or certifications — like USDA Organic, Certified Humane and many others — are marketing tools, too, even if those products are truly better choices. Still, it's not always clear what those labels mean and how important they are. (Think about how long it took for everyone to understand the importance of the Energy Star label.)

I came across an interesting infographic that indicates consumers sometimes have no idea what some labels really mean.

CLAIMS, CERTIFICATIONS & SEALS ON PRODUCT PACKAGING FAMILIARITY AND INFLUENCE ON PURCHASING

Food and beverage marketers have developed an array of iconography in the form of claims, certifications and seals on food and beverage product packaging as a quick-reference aid for consumers. They are intended to communicate to consumers the presence or absence of certain characteristics or about the type of ingredients of "what's inside." Here's a look at some of the more common icons and the link between how familiar consumers are with them and their impact on purchasing. The most influential relate to organics, pesticides, animal welfare, fair trade and GMOs.

• **Familiarity:** Know a lot/little about it

• **Impact on purchasing:** Much/somewhat more likely to purchase

USDA Organic



64% 66%

ENERGY STAR
Certified



55% 79%

Certified Kosher



53% 31%

Fair Trade



53% 65%

Non-GMO Project
Verified



44% 68%

Certified Vegan



44% 33%

American Grassfed



40% 70%

Certified Humane



37% 74%

Animal Welfare
Approved



36% 77%

Certified Pesticide
Residue Free



32% 75%

Rainforest Alliance
Certified



25% 62%

Certified Halal



23% 34%

Certified Carbon
Neutral



23% 60%

Food Alliance
Certified



20% 59%

Transitional Organic



18% 61%

Fair for Life



18% 58%

GAP 5-Step Animal
Welfare Rating Program



16% 62%

FSC Certified



16% 57%

MSC Certified



16% 58%

Oregon Tilth
Certified Organic



15% 51%

ASC Certified



15% 58%

Certified B
Corporation



14% 53%

Demeter Certified
Biodynamic



13% 55%

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Source: Sustainability 2017, The Hartman Group

Certifications and seals of approval are on all sorts of packaging. What they really mean, though, is not always clear. (Photo: [Hartman Group](#))

Under each individual certification, the percentage on the left indicates how many people "know a lot/little about" the certification. The percentage on the right indicates the "impact on purchasing" the certification holds (if someone is "much/more likely to purchase" the product because of the certification).

Take a good look at those percentages. In every instance, except for the vegan certification, many more people may be influenced to purchase something because of a seal than actually know what that seal means.

Do your research



It takes just a few minutes of online research to have a basic understanding of a sustainable certification. (Photo: rawpixel.com/shutterstock)

Looking over this list, I'm familiar with all of the certifications except Transitional Organic. It doesn't seem as if my lack of familiarity with the certification is that out of the ordinary. Only 18 percent of the people surveyed had a little or a lot of knowledge about it. But 61 percent say it would make them much/more likely to purchase something with that certification.

I did a little research on what Transitional Organic certification is. The Organic Trade Association is partnering with the USDA on this seal. The certification is given to those in the middle of transitioning to organic certification by the independent Quality Assurance International, a USDA-accredited organization.

It takes three consecutive years of meeting the USDA's organic standards for farmland for products from that land to be certified USDA Organic. The Transitional Organic certification is put on products that will be certified USDA Organic, if the crops that make the ingredients in the product meet the USDA Organic standards.

Before this certification, products could say they were in transition, but there was no time limit. This recently approved seal prevents the term to be used on products that are in "arrested transition" where "producers never fully achieve organic production but cycle in and out of a quasi-organic system in order to access the premium market."

It took just a quick internet search and about five minutes of reading to get the hang of what Transitional Organic certification is.

If you see one of these certifications on something and you don't know what it means, finding out can be as simple as taking the phone out of your pocket and doing a quick search right then and there.

If you buy a product with a certification you're unfamiliar with, take a moment when you get home to look it up. You may find the certification is in line with your priorities. Or, you may find it wasn't what you imagined. Either way, you've become more educated and responsible about what you buy.

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