

Organic Food Purchasing Behavior and Attitudes

Blogosphere Discussion Summary – Q2 2006

Introduction

Momentum is building around the organic movement in North America. Umbria collected and analyzed conversations that took place in the blogosphere over a three-month time span (April – June 2006) in an effort to understand key trends in the organic food purchasing. The highlights of that study revealed how consumers talk among themselves about where they buy, what they buy, why they buy and who they buy for. Umbria's analysis was also able to project what demographic groups were doing the most talking, and what each demographic segment cared the most about. Presented here are selected quantitative and observational findings from the analysis.

Research inquiry: Where do consumers buy organic food, what do they buy, why do they buy and who do they buy for?

Time period: April-June 2006

Umbria Methodology

During Q2 2006, Umbria examined the volume and nature of organic food purchasing conversation in the blogosphere around four U.S. retailers: Wild Oats Markets and Whole Foods Market, leaders in the “natural marketplace” space; Safeway, a primarily conventional retailer that launched the private-label *O ORGANICS*[™] brand of organic foods; and Wal-Mart, which introduced certified organic products into its stores this summer. Relevant conversation around these four brands provides an interesting cross-section of attitudes and trends related to organic purchasing across a broad range of income levels and geographic accessibility.

The data analyzed in this report includes only blogosphere mentions of organic foods in relation to one or more of the four targeted retailers. Furthermore, the dataset contains only postings that Umbria's natural language processing algorithms have classified to meet given confidence levels for mention sentiment (positive, negative), blogger age (Boomer, typically 45 – 60 years of age; Gen X, typically 30 – 45 years of age; Gen Y, typically 15 – 30 years of age) and blogger gender (male, female) classifications. Lastly, it is worthy to note that this data underwent three levels of machine and human de-spamming to ensure that nearly all spam postings were eliminated from the analyzed dataset, leaving only true consumer-generated opinion

content to examine. The result of this multi-layer processing: thematically clustered data that is relevant to the intended analysis, fully-classified for sentiment, age and gender and essentially spam-free.

Discussions averaged more than 4,000 mentions per month in the blogosphere from April to June, 2006

Conversation in Context

As we evaluate discussion in the blogosphere in Q2, it is important to keep in mind key events that helped shape or spur conversation. Some of these key events included:

April 2006

Release of "The Omnivore's Dilemma" by Michael Pollan, which investigates what Americans choose to eat and how that food is produced. Organic methods of production and "buying local" are items of discussion.

Early May 2006

Wal-Mart announced its commitment to offer a larger selection of organic products in its stores.

The New York Times ran articles on its front page and in its Magazine addressing "mass natural" and the implications of a retailer like Wal-Mart offering organic foods on a large scale and at highly competitive prices.

Shares of Buzz among Major Organic Retailers

The level of discussion about organic/natural foods in the blogosphere was relatively stable during Q2 2006, although there was a spike in conversation in May when Wal-Mart announced their intention to sell certified organic products. Market-leading retailers Wild Oats and Whole Foods dominated blogosphere conversations but generated frequent 'sister mentions' of farmers' markets and local natural food stores. Safeway's *O* ORGANICS private-label brand was mentioned sparingly, but volume did increase slightly throughout the quarter. Media coverage propelled mid-quarter discussion of Wal-Mart's intention to offer considerably more fresh and packaged organic food in its stores. However, few bloggers talked about a desire to purchase organic products from Wal-Mart.

Three Key Drivers to Organic Purchasing and Discussion

Health benefits, taste, and environmental effects are popular reasons bloggers cite for buying organic. Of the three, better taste and quality is the leading motivator in online discussion. Online diarists frequently take the time to write about specific purchases, even posting full grocery lists and photos of resulting creations... or mishaps. Organics are certainly moving beyond gourmands and the environmentally conscious to mainstream whether that means hormone-free meats and dairy products, organically grown fruits and vegetables or certified organic ketchup and tortilla chips.

Why they buy:

Primary: Better taste and quality

Secondary: Health benefits and environmental effects

Females Drive Blogosphere Discussion of Organic Foods and Selected Retailers

Notable in this recent study was the dominance of female bloggers across all age groups for this topic. Over-indexing in organic food purchasing conversations appears in all female age groups for all four of the selected retailers. Volume of discussion was driven most markedly by Gen Y females who enjoy browsing and the less conventional shopping experience at higher-end organic retailers. Even though the total numbers were much smaller, more than twice as many Boomer females and Gen X females talked about organics than their correlating representation in the blogosphere, as shown in the index Table 1 below.

Who buys:

Primary: Gen Y females

Secondary: Boomer & Gen X females

Retailers and manufacturers capitalizing on the increase in demand for organics need to cater to this group of Gen Y women, most with disposable income to spend on the perceived value of organics. The good news for retailers and CPG manufacturers is if they can be won as loyal customers now, they're likely to remain loyal to organic buying as they mature into expanding families.

A controversial conclusion one might draw is that the best way to attract this motivated Gen Y female organics consumer is to appeal to her love of food with in-store samples and special packaging, more than the fact that it is organic.

Table 1. Demographic View of Bloggers Discussing Organic Foods Offered by Selected Retailers: Retailer Index Against the Generic Blogosphere Population

	Wild Oats	Whole Foods	Safeway	Wal-Mart
Female - Boomer	237	202	138	313
Female - Gen X	243	200	121	187
Female - Gen Y	158	149	133	103
Male - Boomer	62	63	87	146
Male - Gen X	42	54	69	61
Male - Gen Y	66	83	98	44

Note: An index value of 100 indicates parity between the proportion of topical conversation for that gender/age combination. Index values greater than 100 describe disproportionately larger participation in topic discussion for that gender/age combination. Said another way as an example, if Gen Y females comprise 25% of the blogosphere discussions in a given time frame, and they represent 25% of the discussion of a given topic, they would have an index of 100. If they represent 50% of the conversation in that same example, they would have an index of 200. It's easy to see in the table above how women dominate discussion of organics.

In-Store Experiences Drive Traffic to Premium Organic Food Retailers, Building Favor if not Loyalty

Bloggers talk about the attraction of organic retailers offering luxury and grab-n-go items such as premium juices and salad bars, prepared sushi and high-quality baked goods. They also discuss how an abundance of in-store free samples at leading organic retailers often brings them – males and females alike – to the store and has them return. Retailers hope that a fun, pleasant shopping experience that eliminates an element of risk inherent in trying new foods will convert these occasional shoppers to loyal patrons for full carts of grocery staples as well.

“We also bounced around to all these Organic food stores like Wild Oats and Whole Foods. We did some serious sample hording. That was pretty fun, even though I'd never admit it to my wife... she

might think I actually enjoy shopping... which I really don't... most of the time."

"Walked in the sunshine down Lincoln and decided to stop for a snack at Whole Foods. Lo and behold Saturday is sample heaven! We dined upon tiny carrot cake with cream cheese frosting with teeny tiny spoons and tasted little bitty halibut fillets in special sesame sauce by Charlie Trotter there were also tiny cups filled with spiral cut ham and lemon green beans and little slices of fancy cheese with fig jam spread over them."

Bloggers also tend to mention multiple store brands (grocery and other) when they blog about organic/natural foods and food purchases, providing further insight into the drivers behind purchasing decisions and painting a picture of various shopping behaviors among genders and demographic groups.

"I have a soft spot in my heart for Whole Foods; if I could afford it everything I ate would be organic and all of my meat would be natural. Unfortunately I can't but I still visit whole foods stores as often as possible. The biggest reason I visit whole foods stores are spices. Unlike the regular grocery I can buy spices in bulk at the whole foods markets; at Wild Oats they let you scoop your own which is fantastic if you just want to experiment with a new flavor and at Whole Foods they have premeasured bulk spices that are less expensive than the smaller prepackaged bottles. I also find the quality of spices to be much better at the natural foods stores. You can also find exotic items such as produce at the whole foods stores as well as specialty meats and cheeses; these are often a little pricey but the staff is usually very helpful in getting the portion that you need to meet your budget if necessary. Natural foods stores usually employ a staff of people who are either already very knowledgeable about food or who are eager to learn so they are an invaluable resource."

"I am a loyal Trader Joe's shopper. I have gone every week, sometimes twice for the last five years. However today I ventured out to Wild Oats. I'd never been a big fan because it's more expensive. But today I may have been at least partially converted. Did you know that ALL yes ALL of their produce and coffee are Certified Fair Trade!?!?! Banana's mangoes kiwi...and they have lots and lots of CFT chocolate coffee tea cereal rice hot cocoa sports drinks... oh I need a hug. It is moves me. & I feel like dancing."

"we buy most of our stuff from Safeway, but our meats and cheeses come from whole foods"

"We went to Wild Oats to grab something to make for lunch. I am so excited to be so close to this grocery! All organic and natural stuff! Evansville, WHY oh WHY don't you have this yet?! After that we had to run by Wal-Mart to get some womanly essentials (oh, and a new bathing suit!)."

"So I'm on a fast. A juice fast not a true water fast. Today is day one. I just went to Walmart (the armpit of the world) and finally bought a juicer. I think it's called Mr. Juicer. Intriguing name. I can't wait to make some juice. I can't express my enthusiasm for this all natural organic juice I'm going to make myself! Yes! Jesus said to keep your fasting to yourself that only fools proclaimed they were on a fast... obv. referring to religious reasons. Well I haven't told anyone and I figure a blog isn't really a proclamation is it?"

Environmental Impact a Factor for Some

Environmental sustainability and buying locally was another major theme among bloggers discussing organic purchases but not as strong a consideration as direct and personal health benefits.

"My Heritage O's taste like burnt dirt and the only thing they've got going for them nutritionally is fiber. Plus those suckers cost nearly seven dollars for a 32oz bag. How do hippies afford this sh**? Now don't think that I don't care about the environment. If I didn't, I'da bought a box of Fruity McLoopers for three dollars at Safeway. I'll finish my Heritage O's and I'll probably buy another bag when I'm done. Why? Because they use less packaging, they're 100% organic (to the max), and when we get down to it, what's good for the environment is good for me. If I want all those potassium-zinc-copper-magnesium-vitamin B52-plutonium vitamin things, I'll drink a cool glass of rich chocolatey ovaltine. Or I'll eat a banana and lick a copper pot. You know, whatevah."

"I worked as an environmental geologist prior to the birth of my son. Therefore, I'm a little more aware of bad stuff in the environment. Because of this, I tried very hard to eat organic stuff while I was pregnant and really try to make sure that's why my family eats these

days. Even though organic is super trendy these days, you're probably not going to get a great selection at your local Safeway. They might have organic apples, bananas and carrots (at two and three times the cost) but that's it. What's a mom or dad to do, if they really want to provide for their kids and not feel guilty about it, too? Well, most parents, myself included, will justify this by buying organic when it's possible for their family to do so. If it falls within their monthly budget and if the produce looks good, that's when they spring the extra bucks for organic. Unfortunately, this might not be enough. Especially if you live on a farm. It turns out that families who live and work on farms are at much greater risk for cancer. From drgreene.com (a website I love very much!): It turns out that farmers in the United States have higher rates of several cancers than we find in the American public at large. Even though they are healthier than the general population in many ways, farmers appear to have higher rates of leukemias, lymphomas, myelomas, brain cancers, and cancers of the lip, stomach, skin, and prostate. But it's not just the farmers themselves who get sick; it's their families as well. Farmers' children have higher rates of reproductive tumors, leukemias, and brain cancers - kidney and bone cancers, too. It's their exposure to various pesticides that increases their risks.

So, you're thinking to yourself, the average suburban American kid doesn't live on a farm. His or her risk should be considerably lower, right? FYI, organic produce tends to be a lot uglier than conventional produce but sweeter or more flavorful."

Pet Owners Going Organic

The organic movement is gaining force with pet owners as well. Some owners mention purchasing natural/organic pet food, even at a higher cost than conventional pet food. These consumers are quite certain that this diet results in a healthier, happier pet – even if they purchase conventional food for themselves and their families.

Wal-Mart Entry into Organics Viewed with Reservation and Suspicion by Many

Not all blogosphere conversation around organics is light-hearted. Bloggers post serious thoughts about the personal and ethical issues they consider when deciding whether or not to "go organic". When Wal-Mart announced it would begin carrying organic products, it spiked a debate among bloggers. Many who weighed in believe

that Wal-Mart will dilute USDA organic definitions and pervert the ideals of organic farming, local consumption and support of small, independent businesses.

"A few weeks ago I made a post about voting with your dollars, i.e. buying organic and fair trade products so major manufacturers are forced to take note and change their ways. Well I still think that's the right thing to do but I may have been a little naive in believing it would only produce positive results. From what I've been reading Wal-Mart's choice to sell organics in response to consumer demand is a double-edged sword. Yes a wider audience will be educated (hopefully) on the benefits of organic farming but a large corporation like Wal-Mart actually has the power to weaken organic standards."

"According to this article in today's Globe farmers are being wooed and even headhunted by milk processing companies to convert their operations to organic. The big companies are even paying them to help with the switch. Now of course we need to start wondering about the definition of organic especially with the much ballyhooed entry of Walmart into the organic business. As you know Walmart tells its providers what price they will pay for merchandise. Some \"organic\" milk comes from cows that are kept in feeding lots and never see the light of day. The real organic farmers want the FDA to define organic with the assurance that our bovine friends actually get to graze in pastures and engage in normal behavior."

"All this on top of word that Wal-Mart is readying a huge move into organic foods (as I mentioned in a previous column) which is the mixed blessing to end all mixed blessings given how it will immediately eliminate antibiotics chemical fertilizers and hormones in tons of mass-produced foods but also given pathetic and diluted USDA regulations will mean the other two vital parts of the organic movement -- ideas of sustainability and of supporting local producers -- are completely trashed."

Organic Food is Too... Expensive/Trendy/Inaccessible/Hippie/Snooty/Hypocritical... and So On

While positive conversation about organic food and these retailers was generally positive, negative commentary could be found by a variety of bloggers disenchanted

with organic food in one or more ways. Common complaints were that organics were part of a trendy and overhyped craze, that "organic" was a code word for "overpriced", organic food was a status-conscious choice and/or that bloggers were not convinced that a switch to organic foods would have any impact on their lives.

"Here are my feelings on organic foods: While I do concur that health is paramount, I think organic foods are for weenies. What happens to the peach farmer who can't spray his peaches? You buy *organic* peaches expecting to sink your canines into a nice juicy piece of fruit and instead you get.... an nice, juicy, hairy green worm (or whatever color you prefer.) And that's OK, right? Because at least you know it's natural. And do you *really* think that your produce is going to be organic just because it wasn't sprayed with a chemical? What about the chemical runoff that's in the *pure* water that you're watering your crops with? And what's more is that people here are so careful about the foods they ingest and then they proceed to get completely sloshed. Is beer organic? I don't know, but weed definitely is. I mean, when you grow it yourself, you *know* what's in it. And even worse than the organic food is the organic *clothing*. An organic, recycled, homespun, free-range, un-chained, humane, hand-woven, cotton shirt costs you \$170 here. Whereas \$6 will do you at Wal-Mart. I mean stores here sell *recycled underwear*. And it's all so they can protest the government and practice Kabbalah, Candleabra, Herbology, Minerology, Astrology, Gastrology, Buddhism, Hinduism, Cannibalism, Wicca, Wicker, or whatever in the crap else mother nature or father time tell you to do. As long as you don't eat meat while you do it, you're OK..."

"Anyways, spent waaaay to much money b/c I went to Safeway and I tried something new and got a bunch of Organic stuff. But it came to about \$120 and if I knew it was going to be that much I could have gone to Winco and gotten sooo much more but that is all the way across town."

"The food is mostly organic stuff - and it comes with a price. Their meats are wonderful (and they come from the more humane farms easing my carnivorous guilt a bit) and so is their produce but they too can have ridiculously priced shelf goods. Organic stores one would think would attract granola types. Wild Oats houses a crowd of SUV-driving Westport soccer moms whom I assume are either trying to assuage rich white liberal guilt or who simply think organic

is just so much more fashionable (or they just like to show off how much money they have by spending a lot of money)."

"So it is today that I implore you calorie-counters and vegetarians; TAKE THE ORGANIC CHALLENGE! Buy five pieces of fruit or vegetables from Kroger and five from Wild Oats have your friend blindfold you and take a bite out of each. Thirty bucks says you'll have no f***ing idea which apple is the organic one."

Conclusions

Umbria was able to identify compelling quantitative measurements and observational themes through its snapshot analysis of Q2 2006 blogosphere mentions of organic food in relation to four selected retailers, Wild Oats, Whole Foods, Safeway and Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart's publicized intentions and related media coverage drove a spike in conversation that was otherwise relatively stable over the analyzed quarterly period.

Females dominated this conversation, indexing highly across all three demographic segments and for all four retailers. Notable male contributions included mentions of free food samples at Wild Oats and Whole Foods and Wal-Mart mentions (Boomer Males).

Surprisingly, taste and visual product appeal often motivated organic food purchases. Health and environmental concerns and perceived benefits were afterthoughts and added bonuses for these consumers. Ethical issues were at the heart of postings by bloggers who examined organic foods with more of a philosophical approach.

All of this information combines to form a picture of the consumer attitudes, preferences and behaviors that currently shape mainstream organic food purchases in the U.S.

About Umbria, Inc.

Umbria is a marketing intelligence company that analyzes the [unaided opinions](#), perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of the online world (comprised of blogs, message boards, Usenet, product review sites, etc.) and distills it into actionable insights about companies, brands, products, people and issues.

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