

Comfort Food: The Nostalgic Marketing of Times Past

25

Aug, 2014

TACTIX



The Hill Times. Reprinted with permission.

As consumers become increasingly attentive to where their food comes from, conflicting claims are being made that appeal to the idea of a simpler time, attempting to make an emotional, nostalgic connection with consumers.

Romanticizing the past and drawing emotional connections have been tactics used by food producers, activists, environmental groups, and advertising companies at various points for decades.

But it's more than just a tactic now: opposing sides are permanently engaged in appealing to consumers' nostalgia. It's the strategic battleground upon which agenda-driven messages are crafted, and the side that most effectively creates a nostalgic appeal for consumers will win.

The Great Food Debate

"The battle to feed all of humanity is over... hundreds of millions of people will starve to death."

~ Biologist Paul Ehrlich

The famine that Ehrlich and others predicted in the late 1960s didn't take place. In large part this was due to Norman Borlaug's development of a semi-dwarf strain of wheat that doubled India's wheat production. The semi-dwarf strain of wheat went on to exponentially increase production in countless other countries.

By cross-breeding various strains, Borlaug's scientific discovery fed a nation and improved the health of its citizens.

Many of these same conditions exist today: as exponential population growth increases the demand for affordable food, industrialization and scientific advancements continue to drive the food industry. However, many consumers now see advancements as anathema to healthy choices.

Nowhere is this better witnessed than the flood of consumers buying organic and all-natural foods and vilifying genetically modified foods. One contributing factor is the tremendous success activists have had drawing parallels between "all-natural" foods and an abstract idea of the past.

“Organic”, “All-Natural” and “Genetically Modified”

No doubt the idea of eating “healthier” has fueled the rise in organics and all-natural foods as well as the suspicion towards GMOs. However, given how poorly most consumers understand these terms, it must be an intuitive appeal that leads consumers to some and repulsion to others. We can hardly blame consumers—even federal regulators’ scientists cannot yet agree on a definition to any of these terms.

Why has there been a flood towards organic and all-natural foods? Why have GMOs have been demonized? Again, the idea of nostalgia can provide one possible reason.

Consumers can allow themselves to feel safer when foods do not have ingredients requiring advanced linguistics training to pronounce, because the foods can be more easily equated to those consumed by previous generations. Organics and all-natural foods are seen as removing complex processes and ingredients in order to present a reassuring option.

GMOs, by contrast, by their very nature are about change. GMOs are placed on the defensive when they lose this claim to nostalgia. However, no stakeholder is yet willing to give it up the strategic high-ground of nostalgia.

Pastoral images are depicted on milk, butter, cheese, and other product packaging in grocery stores across the country despite the fact that much of the production comes from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). In contrast, political documentaries such as Food Inc. vilify CAFOs while romanticizing the pastoral settings, seemingly promoting them as yielding intrinsically healthier food. Scarecrow Campaign

The battle over nostalgia is not a simple struggle between activists and food producers.

With their Scarecrow Campaign, Chipotle—despite being what many would refer to as a fast-food outlet—is trying to capitalize on the explosion of organic and all-natural foods. The video’s choice of music, the animated imagery, right down to the truck from another era are all artfully chosen to evoke this nostalgic connection.

The impact has been incredible. Nostalgia allows an audience to see even an animated video as independent confirmation of opinions they may have heard elsewhere. Rather than introducing a new idea that may be accepted or rejected, the nostalgic appeal allows the message to appear familiar and more likely to be internalized.

Where Are We Going?

The food production industry has appealed to a nostalgic connection to the land, to farming, and to the individual farmers for a long time. Other groups have only much more recently effectively marketed this imagery.

Since 1970 when Norman Borlaug accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, the communications strategies of food producers have looked relatively similar, highlighting both the scientific discoveries as well as the nostalgic aspects of the food industry. As these scientific advancements in the food industry have come under attack, one of the key tools has been to challenge this nostalgic claim.

What will we see as this debate continues? – All sides will fortify their encampments with nostalgic imagery. Why? – It’s simply too effective not to.

[View online at The Hill Times](#)

