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## NEWS ANALYSIS

# Organic industry seizes opportunity

Recent crises with major names offer eco-friendly brands a chance to grab a piece of the consumer pie

BY AARTI SHAH

WITH CONSUMER PRODUCTS, like Mattel toys and microwave popcorn, making news as potential health hazards, non-toxic and organic products could become even hotter commodities. The public backlash against these mainstay brands, combined with a heightened awareness of environmental issues, could give green companies a chance to make some sizable industry strides.

For organic clients and their agencies, the recalls have represented an opportunity to seize upon the public's growing suspicion of mainstream products – and its awareness of alternatives – to tout organic, locally grown, or eco-friendly brands.

"It is a good time for organic, non-toxic companies to step up," says Bill Walker, VP/West Coast at the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit that raises awareness about harmful ingredients in products. "The problem is there is a big disparity between their ability to address the public [compared to] bigger companies."

Consumers' concerns about the toxicity of the products they are using – notably those they ingest or put directly on their skin – is on the rise, he adds. For instance, the public is catching on that "natural" is often mar-



Whole Foods is among entities to benefit from consumers' rising interest in items they consume

keting language that companies use without any standard to define it.

"There is a growing market among savvy consumers, [who are] saying, 'We're not going to trust you anymore to just tell us what's in here is safe – we want to know what's in here,'" says Walker.

Consumers, however, are more trusting of the word "organic" – even though it is largely unregulated when applied to non-food products.

The ascendancy of Whole Foods' popularity can be attributed, at least in part, to consumer's growing interest in better understanding the products they consume. The company, which now has 270 international locations, professes to carefully test and monitor every product it stocks.

David Landis, president/CEO of Landis Communications, which represents Whole Foods in Northern California and Nevada,

says the grocer was able to gain public trust by immediately offering baby bottles that didn't contain Bisphenol A, when it was revealed earlier this year that the chemical was leaking into conventional bottles.

"When health is concerned, it's kind of a no-brainer," Landis explains. "In view of all of these other trusted brands that have had issues, it's an opportunity to move in

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and take away some of the mindshare."

The agency recently embarked on a campaign for Whole Foods about the environmental costs of buying imported produce. Another program dubbed "From Ranch to Plate" educates consumers on where and how their beef is grown, Landis says.

"I think a little bit of what we're doing as PR [pros] is giving the public what they want, but we're also leading the public and educating them in the process," he adds.

While there are plenty of organic-only companies and providers, purveyors of traditional products are also launching lines to meet the growing interest in such products.

Safeway offers an "O" organic line to provide an alternative for consumers who might be anxious about the recent flurry of recalls.

While much of the organic discussion seems to center on food, the Mattel crisis also highlighted the opportunity for companies making organic toys and other edible products.

"We've been seeing an increasing number of retail outlets moving to try and offer natural cosmetics and natural personal care products," Walker notes. "And they realize that customers are becoming more educated about what 'natural' or 'organic' means."

But Courtney Newman, VP of social impact at Allison & Partners, says access to green non-food products continues to be a problem.

"If you go into a Toys 'R' Us, there aren't a lot of green options," she says. "Hopefully like Home Depot [with its] Eco Options brand (see p. 17), other large chains will start following suit so they can really call out to customers." ■