



*farm tours for journalists interested in a firsthand look at organic practices*  
*offer organic dinners for influential food writers*  
*offer specials on organic products*  
*informational and promotional materials for retailers*  
*establishing september as organic harvest month*

The Organic Trade Association made the gutsy decision to stick with its mission and principles as the industry emerged 20 years ago. The fruits of its labor? The industry has sustained 20 percent growth annually in the last 12 years.

BY HOLLY GIVENS

# From Sprout to Bountiful Harvest

Cascadian Farm. Earth's Best. Earthbound Farm. Snyder's of Hanover. For 20 years, the Organic Trade Association (OTA) has been the voice of organic businesses large and small in North America. The organic agriculture industry overall is a growing one, with 17 percent to 24 percent annual growth in organic product sales each year since 1990. In total, it's a \$10.8 billion business sector that is moving beyond the niche market into the mainstream. Indeed, according to the Food Marketing Institute, almost half of all mainstream stores carry organic products.

That's impressive growth, especially in light of the economy's ups and downs during that period. Thus, OTA's biggest challenges have been sustaining and leveraging those gains to keep the industry ripe for new successes. Sound marketing strategies — and a let's-try-it attitude — have been critical to our success and that of our members.

When I joined the staff in 1995 (thereby doubling the full-time staff serving the industry's association), the marketing focus was on building the base of

customers for organic products, and that continues to be a target today. To put the challenge in perspective, even with growing awareness of the importance of healthy eating in the past 15 years, the U.S. organic food and beverage sales now represent only around two percent of all food and beverages sold.

During that period, numerous marketing challenges have faced this emerging industry, and in looking back, those challenges centered on three themes: building identity, establishing credibility, and rallying support for the strategies of the association.

## Marketing Challenge 1: What the Heck Does "Organic" Mean?

The association's marketing efforts in the early years had two focuses. The first was an effort to codify and standardize what was meant by the term "organic." OTA leaders decided that a standardized, codified definition of "organic" was necessary to ensure long-term markets for the products of organic farms. Standardization would facilitate trade and simplify the

description of organic products as a whole. These leaders had seen how the meaning of the word “natural” on food labels had become diluted and wanted to make sure the same fate didn’t befall the term “organic.”

Someone explained it to me this way: “I knew ‘natural’ didn’t mean anything any more when I saw that I could order plastic display bins in ‘natural’ color. What’s natural about plastic?” (This was before corn-based plastics were available. Now, I can envision a time when even plastic could be created from organic corn.)

OTA members wanted to guarantee that when shoppers selected an agricultural product labeled “organic,” that product came from an organic farm and was a product of integrity. In essence, organic products have a pedigree, since every step along the supply chain must maintain the organic status that can only begin on an organic farm.

Along with codifying organic agricultural and production standards, the association developed marketing initiatives to help potential customers understand the organic pedigree. For budgetary reasons, the association focused on public relations tactics. The campaigns were not flashy but just good, solid everyday public relations work — for example, organic dinners for influential food writers, farm tours for journalists interested in a first-hand look at organic practices, and a newsletter for media that introduced new products, research briefs, and news about progress on the development of organic regulations. OTA’s executive director also accepted as many speaking engagements as possible, and association staff

referred members for speaking opportunities as well.

One major initiative was establishing September as Organic Harvest Month. This provided a time to celebrate the bounty of the season and to leverage a range of activities happening across the country to draw attention to the work of organic farmers. To encourage additional awareness and trial of organic products, OTA developed informational and promotional materials that retailers could use to draw attention to the organic products they offered, and many OTA manufacturing members offered specials on their products. Member volunteers compiled lists of activities throughout North America, so OTA could serve as the official clearinghouse.

OTA also offered a contest to recognize excellence in organic product merchandising. The contest was successful for a few years, but when the number of entries began to drop off, OTA discontinued the program. However, the association has continued to encourage activities during Organic Harvest Month, such as celebrations and promotions happening in stores, farms, and fairs nationwide, and member businesses are encouraged to use the opportunity to promote their products.

### Marketing Challenge 2: How Do We Establish Credibility within Our Industry and Our Association?

During the 1990s, as efforts to codify organic production standards began to bear fruit, the industry faced challenges to claims and assumptions about organic agriculture and products. During

this time, federal regulations for organic production were being written and circulated for public comment. Initial drafts of these standards did not meet industry or consumer expectations. Industry members, for instance, found the standards too lax in several key areas.

To address these concerns and focus consumer outrage productively, OTA formed a strategic alliance with two other organizations (Sustain and Citizens for Health) to encourage consumers to send in comments on the proposed regulations. The campaign was administered primarily through retail outlets and was one of the first times OTA used Web sites and e-mail communications to spread the word and encourage action. Our tactics and the work of our strategic alliance were highly successful. The campaign helped produce a record-breaking number of public comments to any regulation proposed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, drawing further attention to our emerging industry.

Admittedly, some of that attention came from those who would rather not see organic agriculture succeed on a large scale. Industry detractors used their own communications networks to disseminate misinformation about organic agriculture and production, and such misinformation continues to surface to this day in reporters’ questions. When OTA has discovered misinformation in print sources, we respond immediately through calls to reporters, corrective letters to editors, or suggested op-ed pieces on similar topics. With time, these tactics have helped improve our relationships with reporters and have resulted in more balanced coverage of industry issues, since editors have

#### Total Foods and Organic Foods Consumer Sales and Penetration, 1997-2003

	Organic Food (\$Mil)	Organic Food Growth	Total Food Sales (\$Mil)	Organic Penetration
1997	\$3,566	na	\$443,724	0.8%
1998	\$4,272	19.8%	\$454,071	0.9%
1999	\$5,043	18.1%	\$474,678	1.1%
2000	\$6,104	21.0%	\$498,379	1.2%
2001	\$7,359	20.6%	\$521,831	1.4%
2002	\$8,624	17.2%	\$538,033	1.6%

**Source:** Nutrition Business Journal estimates based on OTA’s 2004 Manufacturer Survey, annual Nutrition Business Journal surveys of manufacturers, SPINS, and other sources.

learned that they can contact us for comment.

Another challenge has been to encourage members not to oversell the attributes of their products. Most of the people in this industry are very passionate about organic agriculture and products, and many want to make statements about their products that have not yet been fully documented in the scientific literature. OTA handles this potential problem by serving as a somewhat conservative model for claims about organic products: a position that has not always been universally appreciated by members. OTA has provided members with fact sheets and background materials to help them talk about organic agriculture and products in similar ways, with the goal of creating a more consistent depiction of the benefits of organic agriculture and products.

Meanwhile, OTA has stayed the course with positive, accurate messages about the benefits of using organic products. As a result, the trade association now has high credibility with the media and is well respected by government agencies. In these ways, OTA has helped address issues of credibility.

### Marketing Challenge 3: What Can We Do to Rally Support?

In many ways, the industry continues to work on the themes of identity and credibility, especially as we deal with ongoing growth. Emerging new-product categories, such as personal care products, pet foods, and fish, require the industry to work on defining the term “organic” for labeling purposes. During the standards-creation process, I often hear members ask each other about their assumptions, which is one way to ensure that the work of standards creation will be credible. As for rallying members in support of OTA’s strategies, we have been researching ways to better use member expertise in an organization that now has 15 staff and added experience. Eventually, we anticipate a different internal structure that will provide added flexibility to association activities.

## Dealing with Growth in an Emerging Industry

**Focus on the basics.** Deliver timely information for members, provide good media relations, and develop a good sense of what’s newsworthy for those you want to reach.

**Decide on your messages and stick with them.** Go for something that will be true for a while despite the rapid changes you see. For us, it’s talking about the attributes common to all organic products and the message that organic products are a choice that can fit into anyone’s lifestyle.

**Get media training.** Everyone in your office who might come into contact with reporters and many of your association’s most active members should have training in working with the media. Although not everyone will use the training the same way, having this base of knowledge available helps staff and members feel more confident in working with the media.

**Listen to members’ concerns and issues.** This will help you spot information needs of or potential story topics.

**Cultivate an early-warning system.** The last thing I want when trouble is brewing is to hear about it from a reporter. Scan member discussion groups and talk to staff in other departments to learn about potential promotion opportunities and potential hot spots.

One of the first projects to help address the continued growth has been a complete revision of the association’s Web site ([www.ota.com](http://www.ota.com)), which is now integral to our member communications and promotion activities. We’ve followed up with a new version of our popular free online directory. These two changes have been designed to continue positioning the association as a crucial information resource for those in the industry. Other information now available online include a searchable, six-language directory of places and companies that offer U.S. products for export, summaries of OTA’s manufacturer survey, press releases, reports on the international market, and links to separate sites for consumers and for OTA’s trade show and conference. Anyone looking for connections to any part of the supply chain will find help at OTA’s Web site.

### The Payoff: Bumper Industry Growth

In addition to an aggressive marketing strategy at OTA, several other factors help explain the industry’s steady growth. First, any time health and diet issues are in the news, some people decide to change their habits. Shoppers often consider the use of organic products as one way to meet their goals of a better diet or improved health.

Second, many businesses in the industry

now have grown enough to afford larger, more visible marketing campaigns, including advertising and significant sponsorships of activities of interest to their customers. Numerous businesses also have become quite innovative in how they reach new and current customers, such as the blog by Stonyfield Farm ([www.stonyfield.com/weblog/DailyScoop/index.html](http://www.stonyfield.com/weblog/DailyScoop/index.html)), the online ask-me-anything nutritionist at Horizon Organic, and support of educational initiatives such as the Swim for Clean Water Campaign featured on Organic Valley’s site ([www.organicvalley.coop/partners/swain.html](http://www.organicvalley.coop/partners/swain.html)).

Third, the vision of OTA’s leaders who worked toward stringent federal regulation is paying off. Having a “USDA organic seal” and standardized labeling practices have increased the visibility of organic products.

Finally, the consistent work of the association and its members has helped keep organic agriculture and products in front of potential customers. Our down-to-earth strategy reflects the deep-rooted belief that the organic industry can sustain, and even expand, its phenomenal growth regardless of a challenging and ever-changing environment. **X**

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