

January 11, 2006

# Idealism for Breakfast: Marketing Good Intentions by the Bowlful

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WORLD peace is not something most people would expect from a bran flake. But saving puffins and gorillas, improving the environment - and yes, promoting world peace - are a few of the pitches you'll find on the back of the box, in a growing crop of "alternative" cereals. Counterparts to traditional brands, they are the Birkenstocks of the breakfast table, the latest in a long line of health-oriented varieties that date to the early 1900's, when ready-to-eat cereals were the health foods of their day.

Nearly all of the current ones are organic or "natural," and their labels crow about specific benefits like helping the environment, managing weight and promoting peace.

Their ingredient lists include green tea, omega-3 fatty acids, hemp, cardamom, flaxseed, gobs of antioxidants and evaporated cane juice. They claim to be low-fat, high-protein, low cholesterol, wheat-free, vegan. Just as prominently displayed is what they don't contain: artificial colors, flavors and preservatives, refined sugar, hydrogenated and tropical oils, trans fatty acids, not to mention sulfites and monosodium glutamate. (MSG is a red herring because I can't remember a cereal that ever contained it.)

One thing few of them can boast about is taste. I sampled about 100, and words like cardboard, sawdust, soggy and stale often came to mind. And natural dried berries don't taste any better than artificial ones.

"The people who buy these cereals buy them for very subjective reasons," said Lara Christenson, a senior analyst with Spins, a market research group for the natural products industry. "For ecological reasons, for sociological reasons. Do they have good labor practices? Do they have good recycling practices?"

Committed consumers of these things are heavily concerned about that."

Barbara's Bakery says it sends a percentage of its profits to a wildlife refuge. Peace Cereals says it sends 10 percent of its profits to its own foundation for peace and to outside groups. EnviroKidz donates 1 percent of its sales to protecting wildlife. Nature's Path has reduced the size of its boxes by 10 percent, while keeping the contents the same, contributing to "global sustainability," the packages say. (Nature's Path, a Canadian company, also owns EnviroKidz, one of the few cereals of this kind marketed to children.)

When you get past the hype (Peace Raspberry Ginger cereal also carries a quote from Mother Teresa), 75 percent of these cereals deliver on their basic nutritional promises - more fiber and less sugar - but the amount of whole grains in them may not be greater than in conventional cereals.

So reading the fine print on their labels, though taxing, is essential.

Peace Maple Raisin weighs in with 17 grams of sugar per serving, more than a tablespoon, and Mother's Cinnamon Oat Crunch has 15 grams. Many more have 10 grams of sugar per serving. Some are high in sodium: a serving of Peace Mango Passion has 400 milligrams; Cascadian Farm Hearty Morning 360. The Peace cereals also tend to be high in calories, with 200 to 220 per serving.

Nutritionists question the value of some ingredients.

Green tea, found in Kashi Heart to Heart, contains antioxidants, which some research suggests may fight cancer.

But "the science isn't there yet on antioxidants," said Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition for the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "It's a good buzzword."

Moreover, the Food and Drug Administration has said that the cancer-fighting claim for green tea is "highly unlikely."

Two sweeteners, evaporated cane juice and honey, are no improvement over the refined sugar found in conventional cereals; the level of any other nutrients they may offer is so small as to be insignificant.

Peace brand cereals also contain combinations of ingredients like fenugreek, ginger, cardamom and epazote leaves that the company said act as digestives and are used in ayurvedic medicine, an Indian healing system.

And one looming question remains: when a cereal claims to be a good or excellent source of whole grains, what does that mean? Neither the amount or percentage of whole grains in a cereal is required on the label. Only three of those sampled listed the actual grams of whole grain: Kashi 7 Whole Grain Puffs, Whole Grain Honey Puffs and Mighty Bites. Each provides 16 grams, one-third of the daily amount recommended in the newest federal Dietary Guidelines.

Levels of fiber in these products are often higher than in conventional cereals, but not all comes with the whole grain. Sometimes it is an added form of fiber, like oat fiber without the oats themselves. The Dietary Guidelines recommend foods that contain fiber found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. But there is a difference, said Dr. Barbara Schneeman, director of nutritional products, labeling and dietary supplements at the Food and Drug Administration. "When you eat fiber-rich foods, you are getting other nutrients along with the fiber," she said.

Those who shop specifically for organic food must engage in careful label reading. Of the cereals surveyed, only Nature's Path, EnviroKidz and Cascadian Farm products are certified 100 percent organic. Peace cereals are anywhere from 70 percent to 100 percent organic. Some cereals from Health Valley, Nutritious Living, Barbara's Bakery and Arrowhead Mills are organic, while none of the Kashi and Mother's are organic. Those that are not organic are generally described as "natural," a word that has no official definition but usually means the food was prepared without artificial color, flavor or preservatives.

Although organic and natural food is typically more expensive than conventional food, the prices of these cereals in New York City are about the same as or less than those of conventional cereals they seek to replace, ranging from a low of \$2.99 to a high of \$4.29 at Whole Foods. Conventional cereals there cost from \$3.79 to \$5.19.

Conventional cereal makers have been looking for ways to jump-start sales in a category that has been flat since 1995. In 2003 total cereal sales, excluding Wal-Mart, were \$6.99 billion. In 2005 they were \$6.89 billion but alternative cereal companies continue to expand. In 2005, sales of alternative cereals (excluding sales at Wal-Mart) were \$361 million, up from \$273.5 million in 2003, a 32 percent increase, according to Spins research.

Many of the alternative cereal brands are owned by larger companies, including Kellogg and General Mills. "Cereals, like milk, are one of the primary entrance points for use of organics," said Ms. Christenson of Spins, "which is pretty closely tied to children - health concerns, keeping pesticides, especially antibiotics, out of the diets of children. These large firms wanted to get a foothold in the natural and organic marketplace. Because of the mindset of consumers, branding of these products has to be very different than traditional cereals."

These corporate connections are often kept quiet.

"There is frequently a backlash when a big cereal package goods company buys a natural or organic company," Ms. Christenson said. "I don't want to say it's manipulative, but consumers are led to believe these brands are pure, natural or organic brands. It's very purposely done."

General Mills owns Cascadian Farm, and the name behind Kashi is Kellogg. Barbara's Bakery is owned by Weetabix, the leading British cereal company, which is owned by a private investment firm there. Mother's makes clear that it is owned by Quaker Oats (which is owned by PepsiCo). Health Valley and Arrowhead Mills are owned by a natural food company traded on the Nasdaq, Hain

Celestial Group; H. J. Heinz owns 16 percent of that company.

The cereals sold under the Peace label are owned by Golden Temple, a for-profit company owned by a nonprofit group founded by the late Yogi Bhanan, who made his fortune from Yogi Tea, Kettle Chips and a company that provides security services.

Of the companies that made the cereals tested, only Nature's Path, a Canadian company, has no parent company.

Don Sayles, a retired manufacturer and typical New York skeptic, was recently shopping in the cereal aisle at a Whole Foods in New York. He buys alternative cereals "because we believe the hype to a certain extent about whole grains."

And, he added with a laugh, his wife looks for cereals "with the highest protein, lowest fat and no taste."

Consider the taste of Cheerios and the alternative O-shape cereals.

"The truth is, the O cereals are never as good as Cheerios," said Jennifer Manley, a cereal shopper and researcher at Columbia University. "My 3-year-old can tell immediately."

But a few cereals do pass muster. If stone ground oatmeal were not my daily breakfast of choice, five of the cereals might be tempting: Arrowhead Mills Shredded Wheat, Cascadian Farm Wheat Crunch, Kashi Mighty Bites, Kashi 7 Whole Grain Puffs and Kashi 7 Whole Grain Flakes.

Harry Balzar, vice president of the NPD Group, a market research firm, scoffs at the idea that people will continue to eat tasteless cereals. "It just won't happen," he said. "They'll try it, but in the end it's all about taste."