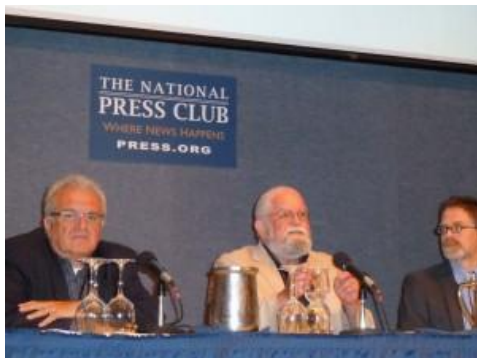


Equal Exchange, Fair Trade Execs on Certification, Consumption and Change

Becky Eisen, Smith School of Business

May 30, 2011

As Leslie Lammers put the finishing touches on [Organic Eggs Not Created Equal, Says New Scorecard](#), I spent the day at the [Just Means Certification, Consumption and Change Conference](#) at the National Press Club in Washington DC, listening to certification veterans like [Fair Trade USA](#), [Equal Exchange](#) and the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) discuss the current state of the certification industry with a host of newer organizations that have recently formed or joined the certification movement and a smattering of USDA and other federal representatives.



First Panel: Scaling Ethical Certification; Opportunities and Challenges.

I hate starting with a complaint, but I have to report that the speakers were overly polite and skipped around the hot button topics. While some made the occasional, well-cloaked jab at particular labeling scheme, most speakers overwhelmingly read from the

same script: “What is a best practice now will not be one in five years. Standards are always changing, the bar is getting higher. You need independent monitoring of compliance with standards. We should all work better together.” It was as if during a pre-conference convention they brainstormed winning campaign slogans and peer pressured each other to stick to the talking points, regardless of the panel topic or audience question.

On the other hand, a little bit of civility goes a long way, particularly in a movement that has spent far too much energy on infighting instead of growing its overall market share (for instance, certified organic food and beverage sales represented approximately 3.7 percent of overall food and beverage sales in 2009^[1]). Plus, I witnessed some interesting conversations that will shape how we experience certification in the coming years:

Simplifying Certification:



Third Panel: Great Expectations and the Need for Risk Management

There is a big debate raging over the value of simplifying certification to a numeric scale. Corey Brinkema, President of the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) stated, "In forest management, life cycle analysis is where the science is going. However, we have been trying to improve life cycle analysis (LCA) for 20+ years now...what we are realizing is that the number of attributes that are brought in to the most popular LCA calculators right now are really quite limited. We need to figure out how these tools can be used to help guide decisions, but not to make the decisions." Multiple panelists bristled at the mention of the forthcoming numeric ranking guidelines coming out of the Sustainability Consortium, while others labored on the necessity of detailed information for buyers and B2B networks. Meanwhile Scott McDougall, President of [TerraChoice](#) argued, "If this movement takes us towards some of the biggest brands [showing] quantitative [data] in labeling the goods for consumers, then I think we will lose most consumers."



Martine Bloquiaux, founder of People 4Earth

Mainstreaming:

What this actually means is: envision a world in which it is the norm for a product to have a certification of humane or organic or fair labor production. A world in which this certification label seems as normal to Joe Consumer as the USDA certified sticker on a package of hamburger meat. Sounds great. But when Martine Bloquiaux, founder of [People 4 Earth](#) asked, "how do we get there?" the talking points were rolled back out with little elaboration. In later panels, speakers did re-visit the question, including Mike Van Patten, CEO of [Mission Markets](#), who provided a [vision of consolidation](#) for the future of certification.

As the conference was coming to a close, Kerry Coughlin, Regional Director for the Americas of the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) remarked, "How many people in the room work for a company that uses a certification program?" About 3-4 people raised their hands. "See, this is the problem. We are just talking to each other." What was supposed to sum up a shortcoming of the gathering unwittingly foreshadowed the greatest challenge for the movement's future prospects.