

Retail Philanthropy

THERE'S NO BUYER'S
REMORSE WHEN SHOPPING
FEELS THIS GOOD

by Lisa Kopochinski

Consumers don't just want to be green, they want to be ethical too. There's a growing movement among customers to look at labels, ask questions and feel good about their purchases — without harm or exploitation to humans, animals or the environment. Sales of products making ethical claims are expected to see double-digit growth over the next five years, surpassing \$57 billion in 2011, according to Packaged Facts, a market research firm for consumer goods.

For instance, Davis resident Maureen Sorrell, an account director with National CineMedia LLC, is a longtime proponent of organic food. She's also a regular customer at the Davis Food Co-op.

"My family and I have been eating organic, locally grown produce and meat for years now," she says. "While some items are more expensive, we feel it is worth it to not be ingesting so many pesticides and chemicals."

Sorrell has plenty of company. Nationally, organic food sales totaled \$17 billion in 2006, a 22 percent increase over the previous year, reports the Organic Consumers Association, a nonprofit that calls for crop subsidies and energy independence in organic farming. Sales of organic baby food also rose last year with sales topping \$121 million — a 24 percent increase over 2005.

And, according to Packaged Facts, consumers in the U.S. are getting demanding. Retail sales of grocery products making some form of ethical claim reached nearly \$33 billion in 2006, an increase of more than 17 percent from the previous year. Although ethical products include household items and clothing, the largest segment is food and beverages, which took 82 percent of ethical goods sales in the U.S. from 2002 to 2006.

Besides reading labels, American consumers are educating themselves on business practices. Sorrell, for one,



is reading a book called "Blithe Tomato," by Mike Madison, a farmer who writes about farmers markets. "It's great because it tells you how local farmers live and what they go through. They choose this lifestyle because they want to be connected to the earth."

Organic farmer Judith Redmond, co-owner of Full Belly Farm in Yolo County says she became an organic farmer because she "wanted to be associated with an industry that is investing in the future." Full Belly Farm distributes produce within a 150-mile radius of the farm. In Sacramento, it delivers to the Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op and midtown chefs at Culinary Specialists and the Waterboy.

Customers realize that agricultural practices can have significant impacts on environmental quality and community well-being, Redmond says. "Rather than paying later for problems created by bad practices, there are many people who prefer to buy from farms that are practicing active stewardship in order to prevent the need for more expensive cleanup down the road."

As organic foods become more mainstream, they are increasingly found in generic retail establishments. In 2005, independent natural-food stores accounted for less than 25 percent of total organic sales for the first time, reports the Organic Trade Association, a North American trade group.

The craze to become environmentally conscious has even caught on with junk food. Florida-based Pizza Fusion boasts a menu that is 98 percent organic. "We're striving to make it 100 percent organic, but it's just not possible until the market grows a little more," says co-owner Vaughan Lazar. The company hasn't entered the California market yet, but it's sold 50 franchises in six states with plans to expand nationwide.

"There is even 100 percent post-consumer recycled toilet paper in our restaurants, and we offset 100 percent of our power consumption with the purchase of renewable wind energy certificates," Lazar says.

Environmentally friendly energy options aren't limited to businesses. Closer to home, Reno-based Mariah Power offers Windspire, a renewable energy appliance, to residential clients. It produces about 20 percent of an average home's annual electricity needs.

While most homeowners would need to stay tied to the California grid, the unit provides a buffer from the risk of rising electricity rates.

"Units such as Windspire serve to offset global warming by reducing dependence on fossil fuels, nuclear power and other environmentally damaging technologies," says Julie Murphy of CGPR Public Relations.

Consuming fewer tanks of gasoline and other fossil fuels is another obvious way to go green.

Sorrell says her family does what it can: "My husband [David Chandler] rides his bike across the causeway from Davis to his office in downtown Sacramento three days a week. I work from home and only drive one day a week. I drive my husband's car — a Toyota Camry — because it gets better gas mileage. My next car will probably be a Prius."

Purchasing products through retailers that donate a percent of profits is another way to make an ethical impact while shopping.

One such company is Sacramento-based Uptown Liz, which promotes companies' products that contribute and donate to nonprofit causes.

"The company does not sell any products," says founder Ramona Rus-

sell. "The products on our website are sold by various companies that donate to organizations." Consumers can search by cause or product online.

Russell created Uptown Liz in the memory of her sister Elizabeth Ann Overturg, who died at age 28 in 2006 after a long battle with breast cancer.

Russell's website says: "Our mission is to build a bridge between compassionate consumers and concerned companies to improve the world around us. We like to call it retail philanthropy — the opportunity to purchase quality products that benefit worthwhile causes. Go ahead and click, because there is no buyer's remorse here." ©

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