The Grande Armee Of Big Organic May Be Marching Toward Its Waterloo

By Hank Campbell — August 10, 2018

If you were living in Austria, Russia, and Sweden in August of 1805, declaring war on France, led by the legendary tactician Napoleon Bonaparte, must have felt like a suicide mission. It basically was. He stomped through Europe and it was only seven years later, longer than all of World War II, when he finally made a mistake and tried to tough out a Moscow winter in the open.

Napoleon of 1805 is what fighting against the Grande Armee of Organic Food sometimes seems like. Nothing ever seems to go wrong for them. Numerous foodborne illness outbreaks are shrugged off - somehow people even continue to frequent Chipotle stores - and high prices are no deterrent. We've debunked their ridiculous claims about having no pesticides and being more nutritious and being able to feed the planet and being more ethical, but every time it seemed like they must collapse, they have turned certain defeat into Austerlitz [1]. Except the Russians are on their side [2] this time.

Yet Big Organic may be about to lose their Waterloo because, like Napoleon, they are wasting time at the agricultural equivalent of Chateau de Goumont (Hougomont) while the real enemy is about to come crashing down upon them.

The distraction and the peril

You're absolutely forgiven if you don't know the Napoleonic Wars. You'll forgive me if I torture the analogy until it confesses to what I want. In brief, during the last grand battle of the last 111 days (1) of his military career Napoleon hoped to defeat his larger opponent by throwing a "feint" to his left and then attacking from the middle. He didn't have a lot of room for his famous
maneuverability, his army was in a box four miles wide by three miles deep, so he wanted to make some. But what should have been a pleasant morning romp through a country estate, the "feint" toward Hougomont designed to draw the Allies away from his real target, became a kill zone for him. The Anglo-Allied army never took the bait and reinforced it, and despite being outnumbered 10 to 1 by the French the Allies held out there for hours and he had to reinforce the attack. During those hours Napoleon's opposition had time to time to march up reinforcements in the center.

The Grande Armee of Big Organic is making a similar mistake in attacking Henry Miller, M.D. for his article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled *The Organic Industry Is Lying to You* [3]. He's distracting a $47 billion-per-year juggernaut who count in their ranks industry flacks like Ronnie Cummins, Naomi Oreskes, Gary Ruskin, Marion Nestle, Eric Lipton and many others.

Meanwhile, up on the ridge, watching and preparing, is a much larger army - except this one is run by Scott Gottlieb, M.D., the Commissioner of the entire U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

**Waking the giant**

In 2014, the FDA took down genetics testing company 23andMe for selling tests suggesting their disease risk and drug dosing was accurate, when predictions were laughably wrong. Sometimes the opposite of the actual medical condition. And FDA did it in hilarious fashion, writing the company must desist making spurious science and health claims but [4]

> *FDA is not standing in the way of 23andMe selling tests intended to help consumers trace their ancestry, identify relatives and tell them why they like or don’t like the taste of cilantro.*

More recently they went after vaping juice companies that were engaging in blatant copyright infringement [5]and, also likely, attempting to market their products to children. As Dr. Miller noted, they even went after a Massachusetts bakery whose marketing department listed "love" in its ingredient list. So why is Whole Foods allowed the 9 blatant deceptions and outright lies on its About page?
I won’t rewrite the whole thing here, but you can read my itemized dissection in this article. They are absolutely lying when they claim they use no "toxic" or "persistent" herbicides.

And why is non-GMO rock salt an allowed marketing claim? GMO is a legal term for a specific bioengineering technique - Genetically Modified Organism. Salt is a mineral, not an organism, so there is no Organism that can be Genetically Modified. It’s like claiming salt is sugar free on a label.

Why is Non-GMO Project allowed to claim such nonsense in a country where delicious Velveeta can’t claim to be cheese? Non-GMO orange juice, tomatoes or goods that don’t have a GMO version shouldn’t be touted as Non-GMO. It’s deceptive marketing.

But it’s allowed and I have been questioning organic industry marketing tactics for 12 years. FDA has done nothing to rein these charlatans in.

But then this week, after Dr. Miller’s article came out, a series of Tweets appeared, from Commissioner Gottlieb himself. For Organic Consumers Association, Organic Trade Association, and all of the other industry front groups promoting fear and doubt about our conventional food supply, it must have read like the voice of Zeus in their heads: "In coming weeks I’m going to put
out more detailed information on what different terms mean on food packaging, to help consumers best use claims like organic, antibiotic free, etc” (2)

Now they wait for the lightning.

**Beware the heavy cavalry you can't see**

Napoleon was irreparably damaged when two units of heavy horse cavalry he didn't know about suddenly appeared. And organic marketing has to have been alarmed by the sudden appearance of the FDA. Dr. Gottlieb is a busy guy who's remodeling FDA to work efficiently in the 21st century, he is not committing to "detailed information" on anything unless the full force of the federal government is sure to follow.

That is why organic marketers may be fooling themselves when they assure their clients that they've never lost before, and organic stickers remain under the purview of the US Department of Agriculture, specifically the National Organic Standard Board, a group of lobbyists, activists and farmers who grant the dozens and dozens and dozens of exemptions for themselves that will still allow their products to be labeled "organic."

They have a point. USDA represents all farmers, including billions of dollars in organic ones (3), so they are not going to criticize their own when they have bigger political fights to try and win. But even though USDA controls who gets to call themselves "organic", FDA can change the face of the battle. They have a compelling jurisdiction and an army of their own: "general food labeling compliance and safety issues."

And that is the crux of it. Organic food gets by on marketing and labels, including deceptive ones. It was a huge mistake on their part to let it get so bad. So it may be that there is no Napoleon running the Grande Armee of Big Organic after all, it may instead be a different Emperor. That one in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale with no clothes [8]. And so they may not know they are about to be handed a huge defeat.

NOTES:

(1) So why is it called The Hundred Days by the French when it was 111? For the same reason they adopted what they believed was a perfectly scientific basis for the meter, superior to the foot in every way, and then got the measurement wrong [9], creating something just as arbitrary as what the British had. That's just the French.

(2)
Though almost all organic is imported from overseas, where our organic standard for them is 'if
you put a label on it that says organic, and you say it is organic, and you sell it to us cheap, we will pretend it is organic.'

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