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1800 Organic Hotline to the Organic Industry in Australia

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In submitting this report, the researcher has agreed to RIRDC publishing this material in its edited form.

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The growth of the organic industry can be related to an increased awareness and concerns about how our food is being produced, the degradation of natural resources caused in the process of production, and the potential risk of chemical residues in the food. In 1983 an Australian survey by CSIRO found that there was widespread concern over the contamination of food by agricultural chemicals and additives in food (Morey 1988). Parigi and Clarke (1994, cited in Hassal & Associates 1995), in a consumer survey confirmed consumer attitudes, perceptions and behaviour with respect to possible contamination of the food supply by chemicals. Their summary concluded that clean food is a universal and growing issue and that consumers are still concerned about the potential for residues in their food.

The development of Australian National Standards for the production of organic food and a quality assurance system guaranteeing the organic source of the produce have been key factors in building consumer demand. Growth projections for the industry are suggesting 20-30% per annum.

The concept of an 1800 Hotline for the organic industry was seeded from these market growth observations and the realisation that providing a public face to the rapidly expanding organic industry and supplying information to the many sectors interfaced with it was of a major importance. Over a decade of ORGAA dealing with consumer issues in relation to the organic industry convinced the committee that a dedicated phone link and information service was an extremely high priority. The realisation was that an 'Organic Hotline 1800' would supply an interface with the Australian consuming public and farming sector and that it also provided the opportunity to collect data on the range of incoming inquiries which might assist the industry in better allocating resources to further the growth of the industry.

The ORGAA project progressed with trained office staff providing the support necessary for such an operation. A data base was established recording incoming calls and how the inquiry was serviced. The 'hotline' received up to 10 calls per day from around Australia. The main scope of inquiries covered:

- Certification inquiries
- Retailer inquiries
- Grower technical inquiries
- Consumers wanting to source organic food
- General industry inquiries

An important service has been provided with this phone link with broad industry information being provided as requested. The data base itself however also provides vital information on the sectors most in need of information. This will assist major organic industry associations and State government agencies with strategic planning to ensure these areas are serviced appropriately.

The consistent inflow of calls is a reflection on the activity and interest being generated in the organic industry around Australia and is a reminder of the value of having an interface to the public to facilitate its public relations and promotional role.

Inquiry totals to the 1st June 2001

Consumers	468
Growers	145
Retailers	152
Certification inquiries	91
Processor inquiries	13
Other	443

Total inquiries **1312**

Observations on the source of inquiries

The major source of inquiries emanates from consumers who are wanting information on where to source genuine organic food. Their major reason for wanting to purchase organic food is the health aspects relating to low potential for residues, a perceived nutritional advantage and the taste factor where conventional production and marketing of food places a low priority on this quality parameter of fresh produce.

The impression from consumer inquiries is that there is a much better appreciation of what constitutes certified organic produce and how it can be differentiated in the market place but there is still a considerable proportion of the consuming public which perhaps may be recent consumers of organic produce and who do not understand the concept of certification and how to identify such produce in the market place. It is apparent that there is still a need for educational material explaining what organic food is and why organic farming is perceived to be better for the environment in management of our resources.

The marketing of certified meat products has until recently lagged behind fresh fruit, vegetables and other products. Now that the supply of meat products has increased consumers are keen to know the outlets that supply these products.

As ORGAA is a retailer/grower association it is understandable that there are many inquiries from retailers. The analysis of these inquiries indicates that there are many retailers or intending retailers that see organic retailing as a potential occupation. Information therefore on the industry size, supply and demand statistics and the sourcing of produce are major areas of inquiry. Retailers do feel quite isolated from the rest of the organic industry and do not feel that the major associations cater for them. There is a perception that the wider organic industry encompassing the certification bodies do not deal adequately with issues relating to the marketing and retailing of organic produce. This is illustrated by promotion and advertising which is generally carried out independently of the organic associations. Much of their educational and promotional material is self initiated and directed towards what they see as benefiting their consumer clientele.

Certification inquiries and grower inquiries ranked high in the inquiries received at the ORGAA office. Intending growers requesting information on certification, allowable inputs, markets and general organic farm management covered the majority of these information requests. Technical inquiries were directed to ORGAA's Organic Advisory Service. These inquiries generally related to detail involved in conversion and how to progress with certification. There appeared to be poor understanding of what conversion to organic agriculture encompassed with a common belief that it entailed substitution of prohibited

inputs with allowed inputs. Aspects of organic rotations and how to develop soil fertility based on legumes, rotations and green manure crops was not well understood.

There were a number of inquiries listed under 'other' in the statistics that were from processors wanting to source organic product for their businesses. The increased interest from the corporate processing sector again indicates that the organic industry has entered the mainstream industry and that there are considerable market opportunities to be had from developing organic processed product.

The number of inquiries to this hotline is perhaps surprising given that the major national associations are given good media and advertising exposure and that they are also represented on the WEB.

Conclusion

The ORGAA 1800 organic hotline project enabled a public face to be created for the organic industry that provided a much needed avenue for information requests.

It is apparent that despite the number of organic associations, both regional, state based and national, there still appears to be a need for such a service.

The data collected from this project provides an opportunity for major national organic associations to review their promotional and advisory capabilities to see whether they are adequately catering for the range of inquiries handled by this ORGAA project.

ORGAA commends RIRDC and is grateful for the opportunity to put such a project into operation. It has provided a valuable service and has also allowed an analysis of where inquiries are coming from and perhaps how in the future they can be best handled.