



## The Next Wave of the Food Revolution?

Whole Foods pioneers animal welfare labeling system

In 2003, when animal advocates showed up at a Whole Foods Market meeting to protest the poor treatment of ducks by one of the grocer's suppliers, CEO John Mackey was puzzled and frustrated. "We were doing more than anybody else, and I couldn't understand why people were picketing us," he says. "It was like, good grief, why aren't you picketing Safeway and Wal-Mart and Kroger?"

But the incident helped set off a chain reaction that may soon dramatically influence the way people shop for food. Already a vegetarian for years and a driving force behind the modern-day organic movement, Mackey began looking into the issue and read a dozen books about animal welfare. Before long, he was vegan and inviting one of the very people who'd protested his company's practices to help him identify stricter standards for the care and treatment of animals raised for food.

Six years later, Whole Foods Market, among the nation's 500 largest corporations with annual revenues of about \$8 billion, is unveiling perhaps its most ambitious initiative yet: an animal welfare rating system that delves far beyond traditional product labels and allows consumers to see for themselves the methods used by the farms their dollars sup-

port. The rankings detail almost all aspects of animals' lives—everything from the amount of outdoor access provided to the nature of bedding and foraging materials. Step 1 ensures that animals do not live in cages, while Step 5+ indicates they're raised in the most natural environment possible and slaughtered in the vicinity to eliminate the long, stressful periods of transport inherent to factory farming systems.

Developed in collaboration with scientists, farmers, The HSUS, and other animal welfare organizations, the labeling program was introduced in Southern stores beginning in March and will gradually spread to other regions over the next two years. Though the program has been spearheaded by Whole Foods, it is overseen by the Global Animal Partnership, a nonprofit created with the intention of eventually making the label available for use by other retailers.

In this excerpted interview, Mackey spoke with editor-in-chief Nancy Lawson about his high hopes for a new paradigm in the marketplace.

**Q: Why did you develop a tiered rating system rather than just one uniform label?**

**MACKEY:** The problem with any uniform label like organic or fair trade or [existing animal welfare standards] is that you end up with a tension. Either the standard's set so high that [some people] don't think they can achieve it, so they don't bother to try—or then on the other hand, once a person achieves a minimum to qualify for a standard, they have zero incentive to improve. So they do just enough to get by and nothing more.

I think the biggest virtue of this tiered system is that it recognizes that people can still get to a minimum threshold, and then they have an incentive to improve. We've already noticed that once an animal farmer gets in

the system and his product's in the case, he wants to know how he can improve his rating. You want to enlist that kind of creativity and innovation; you want to race to the top in animal welfare.

**Q: So the previous labels haven't had enough flexibility.**

**MACKEY:** Paradoxically, they're too high for some producers, and then for others, they're too low. Let's take, for example, chickens. From our standpoint at Whole Foods, there are huge welfare gains once you shift from an indoor system to a pastured system, provided the chickens have good shelter. They are outdoors, there are bugs outside, there's fresh air, there's sunlight. It's just a better

environment for them to be in. But almost all of the welfare programs that exist don't recognize that; you can get the certification and still be an indoor system.

**Q: Why do you want to make the label more widely available, rather than just owning it yourself?**

**MACKEY:** It will have a lot more credibility if it's not our label, so to speak, and it has a third party that ultimately controls the label. And we also hope that other retailers will pick up on it. We think that undoubtedly industry will come up with sort of cheapened versions that won't have the same integrity. So the more people who use this, the more recognized it will be.

**Q: You've helped open up the supply chain for organic producers who wouldn't otherwise have gotten into big supermarkets like yours. Is that the sort of ripple effect you envision for producers attentive to animal welfare?**

**MACKEY:** Yes, I think so. We are rebuilding our supply chain with animal farmers—we are working with a lot more local and regional-based producers. And we're loaning them money; we loaned a half a million dollars to one of our beef producers to put a slaughterhouse on his farm in North Carolina. Most of these guys don't have the capital to be able to do that. So we are making that kind of commitment to these more humane producers.

**Q: Niman Ranch tried to sell more humanely produced products on a larger scale but never made a profit.**

**MACKEY:** Niman didn't market themselves particularly on animal welfare. They promoted themselves on "This tastes better, and it's a gourmet type of product." We want to raise consciousness. You've got two extremes. You've got people who are carnivores or omnivores, and they primarily buy whatever meat is cheapest or they think tastes best, and animal welfare isn't a variable at all. Or you have people who are vegetarians and vegans, and welfare matters to them greatly. We think that there's an untapped market of people who aren't willing to become vegetarians or vegans but would like to buy animal products knowing that the animals have had good lives and that they've been able to express their full animal natures while they were alive. Niman was just one producer; we're going to have a whole slew of producers that will have these animal welfare ratings.

**Q: You had an ongoing public debate with Michael Pollan, who criticized what he characterized as a lack of transparency on natural food product labels in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Have you actually heard from other shoppers who have asked for products with clearer labels?**

**MACKEY:** I don't know if you have people asking for it. Were people asking for an iPod before Apple invented it? Most new

technologies, people didn't know they wanted it. I wasn't asking for Google 11 years ago, and I don't get through a day without using it, usually multiple times.

There's massive cultural denial about what we're doing to livestock animals. And once we create a viable alternative in the marketplace, people are going to begin to look. Whereas right now they're too afraid to look, because they're too afraid of what it will mean for their own lifestyle. So I predict that this is going to do as much as anything has ever done to raise people's consciousness about the factory farm system.

**Q: How can this succeed in a market where many producers cut every corner possible?**

**MACKEY:** It depends upon whether other values matter in our food supply besides price. A hundred years ago, we spent 50 percent of our income on food, and today we spend less than 8 percent. And two-thirds of the adult population is overweight; 35 percent are obese.

We've got an amazing amount of people with diabetes. Heart disease is still the No. 1 killer; cancer is No. 2. We spend more money per capita on health care than any other nation in the world, and yet our life expectancy is not very high, and we rank 72 in the world in terms of health quality per capita spent. In other words, for the amount of money we spend, we don't get much bang for our buck. We're not a very healthy country, and we've got all this cheap food, and the way we're treating our livestock animals is very cruel and very inhumane.

You can eat a high-quality product made with a high degree of animal welfare and maybe spend 12 or 13 or 15 percent of our income on food, as opposed to 8 percent. But we'd spend a lot less money on health care, and we'd have more vital and healthier lives.

It's not going to be as cheap as the Smithfield system, but the marketplace is going to vote. We'll let them decide whether or not they think animal welfare is a value that they're willing to spend a little bit more money for.



Whole Foods Market introduced the new rating system in some Southern stores in March and will gradually roll it out across the country over the next two years.