

GMO's: a Marketing Opportunity for Hemp?

By Jason Freeman

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO's) also referred to as Genetically Engineered Organisms are now present in over 60% of our processed foods. Since 1995 over 40 genetically modified crops have been approved in the US and Canada. However, the recent introduction of this new technology into our food chain is causing indigestion for many corporations, regulators and proponents.

There are many issues that have arisen because of this new technology. I would like to focus on two: consumer attitudes and marketing. Over the past eighteen months in Europe, Greenpeace and many other organisations have been fighting an extremely effective campaign against genetic modified crops and foods. This campaign has been so successful at convincing the European public of the dangers of genetically modified foods and crops that two of the world's largest food processors, Unilever (UK) and Nestle (UK) have agreed to faze out genetically modified ingredients from their branded products. They have been joined by grocery store chains Tesco, Sainsbury, Safeway, Iceland, France's Carrefour, Spain's Prvca and Italy's Migros. These companies were so concerned about the European public's outcry over GMO's that they did a 180-degree turn from their previous position in that GMO's were perfectly safe.

So what does this have to do with hemp and more specifically, what does this have to do with the marketing of hemp foods? Firstly, the situation provides the Canadian hemp foods industry the opportunity to market its guaranteed GM-free hemp foods to the European consumer. As there is suspicion of any agricultural commodity being exported from Canada to Europe, hemp's GM free status is definitely a marketable attribute.

Secondly, the European experience should provide us with an excellent indication of what will happen when the North American public is exposed to similar information regarding gene-altered foods. A survey conducted in June by Time magazine found that 81% of Americans want genetically engineered foods to be labelled as such.

This argument becomes even stronger when the experience in other markets is investigated. As a result of strong pressure from many consumer and environmental groups, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are introducing food-labelling legislation. In India a coalition of groups is mounting an impressive lobby against the "GM-ization" of Indian agriculture. Brazil, based on consumer fears, has rejected Monsanto's application to register Round-up Ready Soybean. This leaves Brazil, the world's second largest soybean producer, in the enviable position to supply the hungry European market place with the GMO free soybean that this market demands. Because the Brazilian government and now its Supreme Court have prevented the registration of GM soybean, Brazil can guarantee its customers GM free soy. US agricultural exports were down 20% from the year before, so it is safe to venture that the Brazilian farmers were one of the groups to profit from this decline in American exports.

These examples provide strong evidence that a large percentage of the marketplace is rejecting GM foods. Therefore, as the adage goes, "The customer is always right," the hemp food industry should provide the customer with the GM free food that the customer

demands. And not only should the industry provide this product, they should market this attribute.

One of the platforms that brought about the legalisation of hemp in Canada was hemp's benefit to the environment. The introduction of GMO's has raised many questions about this technology's environmental safety. Therefore it is a logical fit for hemp to remain GM free and for the industry to publicise this fact.

Presently, since there are no registered GM hemp cultivars, hemp is one of a few grain crops grown in Canada that can be guaranteed GMO free. Even organic canola, wheat and flax cannot guarantee this because of the proven danger of cross-pollination with their GM counterparts.

As the hemp industry matures so will the sophistication of its marketing. Educating the market place about hemp's exciting nutritional characteristics and its non-GM status will take a co-operative effort on an industry wide level. Therefore, if you are hemp grain farmer, processor or marketer and are interested in such a co-operative marketing effort, please feel free to contact me.

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