

It's not business as usual for vegan businesses

July 12 2018, by Kendra Coulter



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In contrast to growing apprehension about trade wars, a rapidly expanding sector of the economy is offering a more hopeful picture: vegan businesses. Scarcely a week goes by without news of a new vegan business.

Diverse plant-based restaurants are popping up in communities of all sizes. Innovative vegan foods are [becoming more accessible](#) and changing at-home meals.

Dairy producers are transitioning to [plant-based milks](#). Vegan hotels are beginning to provide appealing getaway options. Admittedly, I find [vegan handbag lines](#) particularly stunning and enticing.

This trend is not surprising. More and more people are looking to purchase products that [don't cause animal suffering and death](#). Consumers are also becoming more aware of the myriad health benefits of [plant-based eating](#). Plus, research is making it crystal-clear that industrial animal agriculture is a major driver of climate change, and [that removing animal products from our diets](#) is one of the most significant things we can do on a daily basis to protect the environment.

Despite not accessing the same level of public subsidies as animal agriculture, or having established and well-funded lobbyists and marketing boards, Canada's humane economy is thriving, and we are home to many creative plant-based leaders.

Some companies are being [bought by international conglomerates](#) keen to capitalize on this growing market or to keep their competitors in check.

More than a few are receiving global attention because of the quality of their products, and are poised for even greater success, such as London, Ont.-based [Nuts for Cheese](#). All indicators point to [continuing expansion of vegan businesses](#) and increasing investment in research and development.

While the commitment of vegan businesses to animal well-being is laudable, is this where ethical commitments stop?

Do vegan businesses aim higher?

In addition to interest in a more sustainable economy that doesn't harm other species, as a labour scholar, workforce and social concerns are also significant for me. Are vegan businesses reproducing bare-minimum labour standards and conditions, or aiming higher?

As part of mapping the trends and striving to answer these and other questions, my research assistants and I have been interviewing small and medium-sized plant-based [business](#) owners and employers across Canada. The findings are noteworthy.

Virtually all have a twinned interest in animal and environmental well-being. Through insistence on organic and/or local sourcing, sustainable energy sources and even careful selection of cleaning products, ecological priorities are being integrated into the foundation of business operations. Any increased prices are accepted by most as a necessary cost of this non-negotiable priority.

Many of the entrepreneurs are also committed to simultaneously [being allies to local groups](#) working on equity and social justice issues, facilitators of community and educators who invite people to think differently about food and sustainability.

When it comes to labour issues and the prospects for more humane jobs, the picture is mixed although, on the whole, more progressive than many non-vegan sectoral peers.

Some pay higher than minimum wage

Many of the entrepreneurs importing ingredients from the Global South regularly [seek fair trade](#) and other social responsibility certifications.

In a few cases, pay for direct staff was higher than the minimum wage and industry standards, a step seen by some of the employers as integral for promoting productivity, loyalty and respect. [Beechwood Doughnuts](#) in St. Catharines, Ont. stands out for providing full benefits to most of its workforce.

Working conditions in vegan businesses clearly vary, and a number of employers explicitly identified labour as an area they seek to improve in order to become more thoroughly ethical businesses.

This is commendable and crucially important. Vegan businesses ought to be just workplaces and support fair treatment for workers across the production chain, including the migrant workers whose labour makes so much plant-based food possible.

The speed of growth in the plant-based sector reinforces the need to stay on top of emerging developments, as well as to learn from workers and other jurisdictions.

Will [vegan](#) businesses create their own associations or marketing boards for shared marketing, lobbying and research? Will the public sector invest in this promising economic arena to encourage innovation and expansion? What role will labour organizations play in the humane economy? What compelling products have yet to be developed?

Without question, there are encouraging developments and signs, as well as important open questions. The most significant of which is: Can the future be humane? For the good of humans, other species and our planet, let's hope the answer is yes.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: It's not business as usual for vegan businesses (2018, July 12) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-business-usual-vegan-businesses.html>

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