

Companies are realizing that sustainability issues are here to stay

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Prefer farmers markets to supermarket chains? Organic Vermont goat cheese to Velveeta? Then there's a market segment with a hip acronym just for you: LOHAS, or people livin' a Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability.

LOHAS consumers are an influential group, and businesses are responding to their nudges for foods grown more responsibly and closer to home. The word "sustainability" is sprinkled all over food companies' annual reports and stirs the imagination of food entrepreneurs large and small. But sifting the ingenuity out of a food system that once brought us frozen TV dinners and Twinkies, and baking it into long-term sustenance for the planet, may well be likely decades away.

"We're still at the front end of it," says Tim Griffin, an associate professor and director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment Program at the Friedman School. "Private investors are starting to see some profit in it; large multinationals are paying attention, and a lot of people want to do the right thing. But it's not easy."

Sustainability never was a humble concept. Growing out of the environmental movement of the late 1960s, [sustainable agriculture](#) hit the buzzword circuit in the 1980s, with Wes Jackson's publication of *New Roots for Agriculture*. In it, he laid out the environmental cost of an industrialized farm system and argued for ditching pesticides and herbicides in favor of more natural techniques.

Early efforts sowed greener farming that used less water and fewer chemicals. Sustainability was defined in terms of the proverbial three-legged stool: economically viable, environmentally friendly and socially just. Kick out one leg, and the whole thing topples over, so the philosophy goes.

Today the checklist for what makes a food practice sustainable is equally noble but even more complex. To wit:

- Oxfam International's "Behind the Brands" scorecard rates multinational corporations on seven checklist items related to the treatment of land, people and resources in countries from which each gets its food.
- The National Capital Coalition is building "natural capital accounting" metrics to assign dollar values to the resources we're gobbling up in the name of food and other product production.
- The Ellen MacArthur Foundation supports efforts to better define and implement a utopian ideal of a "circular economy," whereby technological, biological and chemical resources are repurposed and reinvested in the soil or other place of origin.

The Business Side

While shifting consumer values may drive some of the corporate world's focus on all things green, Shauna Sadowski, N05, believes the evolving definition of sustainability is rooted in a bottom line that's about much more than profits.

"This is very much a business imperative," she says. "The world's food supply depends on goods that come from natural resources, and natural resources are finite. If you run out of fresh water, you aren't going to get it back."

Sadowski is director of sustainability for Annie's Inc., maker of organic macaroni and cheese and other food products, and also president of the board of directors of the national Sustainable Food Trade Association. The association recently published a series of metrics companies can use to evaluate how they grow, transport and package their foods. The checklist covers 11 action areas, including land use, sourcing and waste reduction.

"I think companies are starting to realize that it is an operational risk in the long run if you don't actually

pay attention to these things. 'How does where I'm sourcing from affect my business?' and 'What is the landscape of issues I need to account for?' are key questions to ask, she says.

Sustainability is systems based, she says, which means that a company has to pay attention to a variety of factors—environmental, social and financial—to really know the size of its sustainability footprint. Sadowski's notion of what it means to act responsibly and sustainably continues to evolve; she credits the Friedman School's interdisciplinary approach to agriculture, food and the environment for a solid foundation.

"I'm still learning, but I feel as if things are coming full circle. I have the opportunity to consider ways to operate within the business models we already have and make improvements," she says. "But also, I have the opportunity to identify new ways of doing things that actually change the existing business model by integrating sustainability principles in how business is done. Thus, sustainability can be an opportunity for innovation."

Measuring Impact Is Important

For example, she says, businesses need to think—from the earliest design stages—about the entire life cycle of a product. What are its impacts on emissions, water use, biodiversity, labor and the community? It's about much more than what happens to the cardboard box after a mac-and-cheese dinner.

Venture capital and food advocacy money are also flowing to food businesses committed to sustainability, according to Alex Linkow, who directs the nonprofit Fair Food Fund program based in Boston. Linkow's group received seed funding in 2012 and now sponsors loans and business development tools for New England farmers and companies that bring farm products to market. A three-day boot camp last winter attracted food firms looking to scale up sustainable practices while strengthening their financial plans and marketing strategies.

"A number of food entrepreneurs are bright, intelligent, creative, high-energy folks who don't

necessarily have a business background," Linkow notes. "There's a certain amount of capacity building that's necessary."

The Friedman School is also translating its thought leadership into guidance for organizations that want to knead sustainable practices into their corporate cultures. Griffin, along with faculty members Sean Cash and Jennifer Obadia, N11, will each teach an online course as part of the school's new certificate program in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems.

Three online graduate-level courses will be offered sequentially in 15-week sessions starting in the fall. So far, the program has received interest from students from a range of enterprises, including an anti-hunger organization in the nation's capital and a European Union-based private food company.

"Companies realize that sustainability issues are here to stay," says Obadia. At the same time, she notes, many of the foods we eat are multi-ingredient products that don't come from a single source. "A lot of goodwill for sustainable practices can get lost along the food chain," she notes. "There really is so much to know and think about."

The Triple Bottom Line—People, Planet and Profits

So what does it mean to be a sustainable company? For some, it means embracing organic practices. At Stonyfield Farm in New Hampshire, Britt Lundgren, N06, has been director of organic and sustainable agriculture since 2011. "I think over the years Stonyfield has had a tremendous amount of success with making changes to the way we do business with environmental sustainability in mind," she says.

Two years ago, the company started tracking its greenhouse gas emissions in real time using special software. Milk production accounts for more than half of the emissions; packaging, manufacturing and transporting are responsible for almost 30 percent. Refrigeration in stores and customers' homes makes up 7 percent.

Stonyfield is also among thousands of companies

that elect to be certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program, which aims to "foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity."

"It certainly adds costs to our supply chain," Lundgren notes, "but it's a choice we've made because we believe our consumers want assurances" that the product matches their food preferences and values. "It's a big part of our identity."

Beyond organic standards, Lundgren notes that most of the dairies in the Stonyfield network have 70 or fewer cows, and she is working on buying more dairy products from farmers based in New England.

Some companies aim to balance shopper demand with finite resources. Gorton's of Gloucester, among the oldest fish companies in the Northeast, celebrated the 60th anniversary of the fish stick last year at the same time it forged a partnership with the New England Aquarium to help the company source, catch and package seafood in ways that won't overtax the environment or fish supplies.

Consumers are also demanding transparency and traceability. Red's Best, a smaller Boston-based fish dealer, supplies a bar code with every piece of fish sold. Buy some knobby conch, and a scanner can tell you the name of the boat, the fisher and the type of equipment that snared the creature.

But while [sustainable practices](#) are winning more converts and blog postings, National Geographic's "Greendex" ranks U.S. consumers dead last among 17 countries based on the environmental impact of our consumption patterns.

Griffin also notes that even committed companies find it easier to focus on improvements to practices that can be measured by the bottom line. Quality of life for farm workers or equitable access to healthy foods can be harder to quantify. "What's your metric for justice versus what's your metric for how much greenhouse gas you emit?" he asks. "It's so much easier to measure energy efficiency and say, 'Yup. We are 20 percent better than we were only five years ago.' I don't know what that metric looks

like if you want to treat people 20 percent better."

Sadowski acknowledges the complexities, but adds that more and more companies are thinking about "the triple bottom line—people, planet and profits." The Sustainable Food Trade Association's guidance for members includes more than 200 metrics businesses can use to improve their practices along all three dimensions.

And complexity isn't always a bad thing, Sadowski says. Whenever she talks to people about her job, she's impressed with the dedication to a more sustainable food system.

"People are really interested in what's happening, what foods they put in their bodies. The level of engagement and complexity of questions I get from younger people are great," she says. "Whether or not they work in the industry, they want to play some kind of a role. They want to know what they can do."

Good Buys

Most of the foods we purchase don't have labels that scream, "Buy me, I'm sustainable." It can be hard enough to buy what's best for our health. So how do we shop for foods that are good for the planet, too?

There are no hard-and-fast rules—and plenty of exceptions to each one. Here are a few ways to guide your thinking and your spending.

- **Buy Organic When You Can** Be aware, though, that organic foods grown farther away from where you purchase them require extra fuel for transport. If your food budget is limited, splurge for organic produce when the conventionally raised version makes the "dirty dozen" list due to excess pesticide residue. The Environmental Working Group publishes a [new list](#) each year.
- **Buy Local** Join a local farm, visit a farmers' market, join a food co-op, dine at restaurants that source their food from nearby farms. There's a caveat here, too. Local does not always equal sustainable.

Talk to the vendors and learn about their practices.

- **Make Product Decisions Before You Head to the Supermarket** Google your favorite cereal or energy bar to learn more about the maker's sourcing policies and values. Or visit a site like the [Sustainable Food Laboratory](#) to see the names of companies leading the way.
- **Find Alternatives to the Grocery Store** Plug your zip code into a form on [eatwellguide.org](#) to find local food businesses dedicated to sustainability. Within 10 miles of the Friedman School, five bakers, eight caterers, 68 restaurants and one [food](#) truck made the list, which is sponsored by an environmental foundation.

Associate Professor Sean Cash offers a few caveats of his own. Checklists and scorecards may be good ways to inform consumers, he says, and a range of products also sport labels that tell and sell a story to eco-conscious consumers. "But even a highly motivated consumer might become overwhelmed," he says.

His advice? "We need to pick what matters to us most and shop accordingly. If we try to do it all, we end up paralyzed in the aisle."

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