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THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION RESEARCH

Lesser Evil: A Health Food Brand that is Embracing Multifaceted Sustainability

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Lesser Evil: A Health Food Brand that is Embracing Multifaceted Sustainability

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Paleo Foundation, El Salvador**Contact**¹Email: karen@paleofoundation.com¹Twitter: @5WordsorlessKP²Email: tobias@paleofoundation.org**Abstract**

Growing consumer demand for healthy and sustainable food products is opening up markets for health food brands. As consumer interest grows, brands that can show demonstrable and verifiable best practices in everything from ingredient sourcing to environmentally friendly packaging stand to benefit from this market opportunity. Lesser Evil is one healthy snack brand that has successfully tapped into this growing consumer awareness for health and sustainability. Their independent, third party certifications are just one aspect of an integrated branding strategy focused on multifaceted sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Third party certification, Paleo Diet, Lesser Evil, Sustainability, Grain-Free Certification

1 | INTRODUCTION

Today, most major food producers, distributors, and corporations out there understand that the average consumer has concerns about where their food comes from, how healthy it is, and the impact it has on society and the wider environment. Even if they're not fully dedicated to fair wages for migrant farm workers or cutting out trace glyphosate from foods we eat, most people do want healthy food that didn't require burning down swaths of the Amazon rainforest in order to source primary ingredients. In fact, a recent survey by L.E.K. Consulting Group titled "Consumer Health Claims 3.0: The Next Generation of Mindful Food Consumption," finds that at least seven out of every ten consumers say that they are willing to pay a premium price for food products that are branded as natural, ethical, or otherwise more healthy and sustainable. [1]

Unfortunately, so many food companies and conglomerates consider this encouraging consumer trend as just another way to use marketing ploys in order to increase their profit margins. Very few food brands willingly increase their production, manufacturing, or distribution costs in order to truly offer healthier and more environmentally friendly food products for the end consumer. Vegetable oils that claim to use healthier and more sustainable olive or coconut oil, might only add trace amounts of these oils while continuing to rely on palm and soy oils as the main ingredients in their products. While the actual product is just as unhealthy and environmentally damaging, these green-washing companies are able to tap into consumer desire for better food products in order to increase their market share.

Sustainability in the food industry really has no exact definition or necessary attributes. It is one of those words that can mean everything or nothing, depending on who you ask. Lesser Evil is one health food brand offering a wide variety of healthy snacks that, unlike most food corporations, takes sustainability seriously and has made it a genuine guiding value of the company ethos.

2 | WHO IS LESSER EVIL?

Lesser Evil was a snack food company that originally got its start several decades ago when the Atkins Diet was taking the country by storm. As the brand name suggests, the original idea was to offer people snack food options that were less damaging than the potato chips and cheese puffs that we had become used to. The brand stopped short of actually providing healthy snack food options for people. As this original low-carb diet started to lose traction amongst the population, Lesser Evil was losing customers and in serious financial stress. In 2012, Charles Coristine bought the company and began a serious rebranding process focused on developing truly healthy and sustainable products that people could feel good about eating.

According to their website, their mission states: "We envision a better world where businesses prosper by providing benefit for all. We must be the change we want by caring for our employees and customers, giving back to our communities and fostering business practices that benefit the planet. We strive to grow our business by fostering the most transparency and integrity of any food company in our industry." [2]

Among their leading snack food products, the company offers organic popcorn made with organic coconut oil, extra-virgin avocado oil and organic, grass-fed ghee.

Their Grain-Free Certified Paleo Puffs are made from organic cassava, coconut and sweet potato flours, and offer a nutritious snack option for the millions of people following the Paleo, Keto, Whole30, and other grain-free diets. Similarly, their grain free egg white curls are crafted with sustainably-sourced ingredients like American Humane certified cage-free egg white powder, organic avocado oil and Himalayan pink salt.

After the successful rebranding campaign focused on healthy and more sustainable products, Lesser Evil was able to drastically increase its customer base, and has expanded its distribution. Today, the company's Buddha Bowls of popcorn, egg white curls, and other healthy, low carb snack options can be found at retailers such as Whole Foods and Natural Grocers across the country. They also have a thriving e-commerce business and sell their snack food products on online marketplaces such as Amazon, Thrive Market and Vitacost.

3 | AN OVERARCHING COMMITMENT TO HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SNACK INDUSTRY

Healthier ingredients are only one aspect of the overall vision for a sustainable company that drives Lesser Evil. In a recent interview with Forbes Magazine, Coristine says that "we're becoming more energy-efficient. We're composting our waste. We're now the first snack brand to use biodegradable packaging. We're also committed to providing organic products at almost the same price point as conventional popcorn. [3]" Unlike most food companies, Lesser Evil owns their own manufacturing facility. This allows the brand a rigorous level of control in regards to the quality of ingredients, the manufacturing process, and how workers are treated. The vision for a truly sustainable business practice that guides Lesser Evil can be broken down into three essential elements, which we will explore below:

SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC INGREDIENT SOURCING:

The ethic of sustainability at Lesser Evil begins with providing their customers with natural, non-GMO ingredients. The company operates under the assumptions that “lesser is better,” and attempts to reduce as much as possible the long ingredients lists filled with chemical additives and preservatives that have come to dominate most industrially produced food products.

According to a letter to their customers, Coristine says that “as for our products — it’s all about sourcing the very best ingredients and providing them at a value proposition that no other brand can. Because we own our own facility, we don’t have to pay a middleman to manufacture our products like many food companies do. We also have built an amazing supply chain and warehouse our own ingredients which adds to the cost savings. While we source many of ingredients as locally as possible, there are some ingredients we have to source internationally.” [4]

Some of the international ingredients they use in their products include organic cold-pressed, extra virgin coconut oil from the Philippines, cold-pressed avocado oil from Mexico, and organic grass-fed ghee from New Zealand. All of the popcorn they use is locally sourced and 100 percent organically grown.

Despite the fact that most of the sustainably-farmed and produced ingredients they use cost up to three times as much as conventional crops produced with an abundance of agro-chemicals, Lesser Evil is still able to sell all of their snack food products at cost-competitive prices. Coristine adds that “our mantra around food is that we would not put anything in our snacks that we wouldn’t feed our own children.”

PRODUCTION EFFICIENCIES

One of the hidden environmental and social costs of the dinner on our dining room table is related to the production of those foods. Even the most environmentally-conscious consumers who prioritize sustainably-farmed ingredients and fair trade food products rarely think about the greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental consequences that come from the production and manufacture of foods.

The food industry is responsible for up to 26 percent of all global greenhouse gas emissions. [5] While much of those emissions are tied to crop production and changes in land use patterns, almost one-fifth of food-related emissions come from the supply chain, including processing, transport, packaging, and retail.

Lesser Evil is committed to reducing the carbon footprint of its manufacturing and production facility. Coristine says that “we also believe in global warming and believe the time to act is NOW. In connection with the state of CT we are participating in energy saving initiatives at our factory and office.” [4] The fact that they also source locally much of their ingredients also cuts into the emissions associated with the transport of food.

Caitlin Mack, Senior Brand Manager for Lesser Evil says that: “I think that the world is continuing to evolve. We’re seeing things with our planet and global warming and as a company we are trying to do a small part. Our goal is to have what we’re making have as little negative impact as possible.” Owning their own factory and manufacturing facility has also allowed the company to take direct control of the process of cleaning up the inefficiencies involved in production.

They have installed on demand water faucets and use an energy recovery ventilator that utilizes the hot air from the facility and uses that to melt oil instead of using any extra heating source. The company is also in the process of installing solar panels on their factory. According to Mack, "owning our own facility allows us to impact the manufacturing process to be as green as possible."

PACKAGING THAT IS LESS DAMAGING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

In recent years, millions of shoppers around the world have taken the "plastic vs. paper" shopping bag debate to more profound levels. Reusable, cloth bags are commonly used by shoppers across the country. A 2018 survey found that 38.68 percent of people aged 18 to 29 years claimed to regularly use reusable grocery bags made from cloth or other materials. That number increased to almost 50 percent for shoppers over the age of 50, perhaps challenging the assumption that younger consumers are more environmentally conscious than older generation. [6]

While reusable shopping bags have avoided the production of millions of plastic and paper "one-use" bags, the amount of throw-away plastic, paper, and cardboard that we accumulate when purchasing items throughout the aisles of a supermarket is a more worrisome source of waste associated with grocery shopping. Even if you try to purchase mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, the majority of other common food items that the vast majority of people rely on come packaged in absurd amounts of plastic.

The growing trend of plastic-free supermarkets expanding across Europe offers a hopeful example of cutting plastic out of our food sourcing. [7] Lesser Evil contributes to this "less-waste" ethic by using only enhanced biodegradable packaging for their products. Specifically, the company uses NEO plastics for their packaging.

This type of plastic incorporates a type of enzyme that helps break down more quickly. "We are always wanting to up the level of the packaging," Mack tells us. We care about this and we know that's consumers care about that as well." The company also composts a large amount of its factory waste, thus further reducing stress on landfills around the country which are quickly filling up.

4 | THE ROLE OF THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATIONS IN CARVING OUT AN IDENTITY IN THE HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY FOOD MARKET

A study titled "Third-Party Certification in the Global Agrifood System" published in the journal Food Policy states the following [8]:

Recently, third-party certification (TPC) has emerged as a significant regulatory mechanism in the global agrifood system. It reflects a broader shift from public to private governance. Traditionally, government agencies were responsible for monitoring food safety and quality standards. However, the globalization of the agrifood system, the consolidation of the food retail industry, and the rise in private retailer standards have precipitated a shift in responsibility for this task to third-party certifiers. This development is reconfiguring social, political, and economic relations throughout the contemporary agrifood system...At the same time, TPC also offers opportunities to create alternative practices that are more socially and environmentally sustainable.

Lesser Evil, with its rigorous focus on sustainability, has naturally found an ally in third party certifications as they seek to take their healthy and environmentally sustainable snack alternatives into the mainstream. In the past couple of years, several of the products marketed by the company have achieved Paleo Certification, Keto certification, and Grain-Free certification from the Paleo Foundation. The brand is also certified USDA Organic, non-GMO verified, and Kosher certified.

Caitlin Mack, the senior brand manager at Lesser Evil, believes that these certifications fit into the company's sustainability-focused business model. "We started with Paleo and Grain-free/Gluten free certification," Mack says. "We thought there was a gap in the marketplace. People are looking for grain free products due to dietary restrictions and lifestyle choices, and honestly there are not a lot of tasty options in the grain-free market." In the past couple of years, the company has created innovative, grain-free products such as their Paleo Puffs, Power Curls, and Veggie Sticks that fit in with their growing portfolio of grain-free and certified Paleo snack options.

Mack believes that the company's Paleo certification has played a major role in increasing its customer base. "Even if people aren't eating a Paleo diet, they understand the different values behind the Paleo diet," Mack says. "If they choose a snack, they want minimal processing, clean ingredients. So our certifications let people know that everything is tested. This ups our trustworthiness."

Though Lesser Evil was originally focused on carving out a niche within the popcorn market, their product innovation, and Grain-Free and Paleo certifications have opened a whole new market for the brand. "At first, we were heavily focused on popcorn as our key product line," Mack says.

"With our Paleo Puffs, it unlocked a whole new market in the grain free space. Consumers know us now for our grain-free products. We get a lot of people saying that they love Cheetos, but can't eat them anymore due to diets. They found the Paleo Puffs and it really checks all the boxes for them. This really opened up a whole different type of market and our consumers have come to know us as the trustworthy brand providing grain-free snacks."

Increasing levels of trust with consumers who are taking an increasingly proactive role in sourcing healthy food options is key for brands within the health food industry. "You can make any claim you want, but adding third-party certifiers adds a level to that trustworthiness," Mack believes. "Knowing that there was another check that meets certain guidelines and qualifications is important, and people are becoming more familiar and understanding that process."

Though Lesser Evil has prioritized their Paleo and grain-free products, they also believe that all of their different third-party certifications bring their own niche markets and appeal to different consumer interests. "People have become more conscious about what they eating. Non-GMO and USDA organic are benchmarks that people expect," Mack states. "The Paleo and Grain-Free certification is an added level of clout for our products...another check in place to meet all those guidelines that people want."

Displaying third-party certifications on packaging, websites, and other promotional material is the most standard way of letting consumers know of the third-party certifications that a brand possesses. However, Lesser Evil also developed specific marketing strategies focused on using these certifications to help their brand stand out from the competition.

We always tout our third-party certifications in our different marketing channels,” Mack says. “Before COVID, we were going to lots of consumer events, and these certifications are certainly good talking points to have.”

Lesser Evil also uses their third party certifications in most of their retailer meetings. “Buyers (with retailers) know about the trends and like these certifications. Giving them that extra level of certification is beneficial to them. At the end of the day they want the best products for their consumers,” Mack affirms.

While third-party certifications obviously appeal to organic grocers and food retailers with a focus on natural diets, Mack also believes that there is a growing interest across the market for healthier food alternatives. “I will say that in the past year or so, interest in third party certifications has moved beyond just the natural retailers,” Mack says. “Even with the everyday big box stores it is growing because it is becoming more common in the consumer lexicon. All retailers are becoming more aware of these diets and have more interest in providing these types of products,” she believes.

Through carefully sourcing organic, local, and non-GMO ingredients, maximizing the energy efficiency of their production facilities, and committing to less waste in their production and packaging, Lesser Evil offers an example of how food brands can make sustainability a central part of their business ethos. Their third party certifications are another integral part of their commitment to health and sustainability as they add a level of consumer trust.

5 | LESSER EVIL CERTIFICATIONS

Lesser Evil’s third-party certifications include:

- Paleo Certified
- Keto Certified
- Grain Free Certified
- Non-GMO Project Certified
- Kosher Certified
- USDA Organic

6 | CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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