

**Urban Markets and the Virtual Rural:
Whole Foods Market's Re-Presentation of Agricultural Production**

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For context, view commercial:
Whole Foods Market, "Values Matter Anthem," *Youtube*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DCow4J-pDE>

This past fall Whole Foods Market embarked on their first national brand campaign. Titled "Values Matter," this series of commercials serves to exemplify Whole Foods' mission of bringing the highest quality and most ecologically sustainable foods to people across the nation. With Whole Foods Market's stock dropping during 2014, the choice to embark on this ad campaign has been of interest to investors, business analysts, and stock market speculators as well as others in the food industry. Critics have argued that the chain has maxed out their customer base and that, in general, consumers are no longer willing to shell out the cash for fancy foods at high prices. The company must become competitive, something, arguably, they did not have to do in the past.

Since their inception, Whole Foods has relied on the positive, enthusiastic word-of-mouth testimonies of existing customers to attract new shoppers into their doors. This no-cost marketing tactic has been very successful, enabling the company to grow into a nationwide retailer, and even extend their operations into Canada and the UK. Now, attempting to gain greater recognition for their exemplary standards and pioneering work in the retailing of organics, Whole Foods has given themselves the title of "America's Healthiest Grocery Store." Under the guidance of their new global vice president of communications, "seasoned marketing leader,"

Jeannine D’Addario, the new campaign serves to clearly present how the company’s mission is enacted on the ground. In her words:

Whole Foods Market has been subtly telling our story for decades, and now is the time to overtly communicate what we’ve spent more than 35 years creating as change agents in the food world... We are excited to share our stories, and to have deeper conversations with our customers so they can make meaningful choices about what they decide to buy and support.¹

D’Addario’s statement suggests that Whole Foods shoppers may not always be making the ‘best’ choices for their health and the health of the planet. This sentiment is reasonable considering the purchases made by 25% of Whole Foods customers account for 75% of the company’s total sales.² This statistic indicates that while there is a strong core customer-base dedicated to the Whole Foods’ brand, the vast majority of people shop at Whole Foods some of the time and/or only for some things. Accordingly, the company’s interest appears to be the assurance, or reassurance, of these occasional shoppers, helping them to understand the power of their purchases, which could help to add to Whole Foods’ overall revenue.

But “Values Matter” also comes at a very important time in Whole Foods’ corporate growth. Instead of focusing on declining stock when discussing the company’s choice to embark on this multi-platform brand campaign, I believe critics should consider how the opening of new stores in second-tier cities, where household incomes are lower than that typically sought by Whole Foods, has resulted in the need for rebranding. By presenting a clear image of the care and compassion that goes into the production of food for Whole Foods, shoppers are given the

¹ Whole Foods Market, “Whole Foods Market® Launches First-Ever National Brand Campaign,” *Whole Foods Market: Newsroom* (20 Oct 2014), press release: <http://media.wholefoodsmarket.com/news/whole-foods-market-launches-first-ever-national-brand-campaign#sthash.AaW400NB.dpuf>.

² James L. Harbin and Patricia Humphrey, “Whole Foods Market, Inc.” *Journal of Case Research in Business and Economics* 2 (May 2010): 4.

means to see why things at Whole Foods might cost ‘a bit’ more. Here, Whole Foods breaks with the notion that it is simply a nice but expensive place to shop by calling on contemporary ideologies that have come to transcend class boundaries, such as the importance of personal health, fair labor standards, animal welfare, and preservation of the environment. By linking these values, not to Whole Foods stores, but to the land on which food is produced, the emphasis is taken off of who the imagined Whole Foods shopper *is*. Instead, we think about what we value, and how shopping according to our values can contribute to a better world.

The customer is viscerally drawn into the world of Whole Foods, which is enacted on farms, fisheries, and ranches across the US and the globe, with the Whole Foods brand positively impacting the totality. In this representation the consumer-viewer sees how working with and for Whole Foods affects the lives of many more people than those employed in the stores. The “Values Matter” campaign makes these people real, and, in turn, makes it appear as if purchases made at Whole Foods matter. Dispelling the alienation of labor that takes place with mass-production, Whole Foods presents the consumer with the laborer, rendering the humanity back into production. The ads serve as a point of contact between consumer and producer, where the consumer is given the opportunity to realize the human labor that goes into the production of their food. And yet, this is a one-sided exchange. The producer, or more accurately, the representation of the producer, generalizes, homogenizes, and typifies the laborer within pastoral imagery that serves the Whole Foods mission. The laborer himself is not brought closer to the consumer. He remains dependent on the sale of his commodity through Whole Foods, and therefore must create value for the company.

In this unproblematic narrative of the ability of contemporary agricultural producers to meet the demands of increasingly discerning consumers, and to do so with an invigorated sense

of purpose and even joy we find not only the homogenization of labor, but also of the consumer. The commercial I showed reproduces the ‘we’ the consumer in contrast to the people who produce in telling the viewer it is ‘we’ who want to *trust* (them). The consumer interpellated by Whole Foods may be without socio-economic class, but they are surely in contrast to the laborer of the food industry. Only producers can ensure that “people, animals, and the places our food comes from [are] treated fairly.” They are the crucial link that ensures “what is good for us is for the greater good too.” The producers working with Whole Foods see that “value is inseparable from values.”³ This statement, taken from the “Values Matter” campaign, serves to undercut the notion that ‘value’ is purely based on cost, suggesting that cheapness can be the result of lower standards of production, and lead to higher long-term costs.

However, it also reflects the value of ‘values’ as something worth paying for, meaning that ethically produced commodities *can* and perhaps *should* cost more. The implication in these promotional vignettes is that knowledgeable consumers are willing to invest in the assurance that the goods they purchase contribute to a better world. Whole Foods asserts that consumers *want* to know, and that this desire will lead them to seek information before they purchase—information that can be obtained from Whole Foods as a transparent source regarding food industry practices.⁴ And while Whole Foods presents the consumer as knowledgeable and having agency to drive the market, the ad campaign, and corresponding re-design of the company’s website, undeniably suggests the power of marketing in shaping consumer practices. In this case, consumer savvy becomes something profitable, as making the best purchasing decisions means

³ It is herein that we find the confluence of environmental, social, and financial sustainability as indicative of a “conscious capitalist” firm, wherein capitalism is the means to achieve a better world. See Whole Foods Market, “Values Matter TV Commercial: Produce,” *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Uj_FCY_qyM.

⁴ The company constantly reiterates their industry leading standards and transparency. See “Whole Foods Market® Launches First-Ever National Brand Campaign.”

accepting that the best is not necessarily cheap. Shopping at Whole Foods is, as such, an expression of ethical values through what one finds monetary value in.⁵

“Values Matters” is a digital mediation between consumer and producer that artfully re-presents Whole Foods as a unique entity with the singular ability to make the vast cosmos of the food industry coalesce under their standards. While the television ads draw consumers into Whole Foods’ world, it is the coherence and interactivity provided by the website that compels consumers to see the full spectrum of ‘good’ enacted by Whole Foods. Yet, the wholeness of Whole Foods is purely self-referential and virtual. The “Values Matter” narrative does not actually represent the producers and laborers or nutritional and ecological initiatives affiliated with Whole Foods and their commodity partners, it utilizes these things as evidence of Whole Foods’ goodness. To return to my earlier claim, it does not result in the end of alienation, but creates a new form of alienation based on a false recognition of producers by consumers, and further alienates consumers from the actual impact of their purchases.

The effectiveness of this campaign is based on the ability to affectively engage consumers to turn them into Whole Foods shoppers. For this to take place, the world presented by Whole Foods must read as real, offering a semblance of human connection and orientation to a common sense of good. And yet, in capitalism this affective fellow-feeling must paradoxically be based on the choices made by individuals as self-interested shoppers, not as communal beings. Whole Foods shoppers, connected to nature and other people through the virtual, are alienated as they interact with the fictitious holistic commodity circuit of “Values Matter.”

Through their engagement with the campaign, consumers come to see their shopping as the best,

⁵ With Whole Foods investing an estimated \$15 to 20 million, between 2 and 5 times more than previous ad campaigns, the perceived power of this multiplatform approach cannot be understated. Alison Griswold, “Whole Foods Desperately Wants Customers to Feel Warm and Fuzzy Again,” *Slate* (20 Oct 2014): http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2014/10/20/whole_foods_ad_campaign_can_values_matter_marketing_erase_the_whole_paycheck.html.

if not only, means to enact their values and care for others and the planet. In this individualistic vision of action, the importance of connecting with actual people is winnowed away. The difficult discussion that needs to take place—one regarding the needs of producers and consumers, including the constraints of production and realities of consumer demands—is never granted the opportunity to take place, and, in fact, becomes completely irrelevant. Instead, what is offered is the convenience of a branded form of apolitical inaction that maintains the notion that there is such a thing as a socially and environmentally responsible form of production that is available for all consumers to choose. Dismissing the inequities and insufficiencies of the food system, the ‘deeper conversation’ Whole Foods that wants to have is one of Whole Foods as the best possible option—a discussion that requires an aseptic virtual world that is as staged as its stores in order to elicit consumer desire.