

Be critical of even the most progressive

 By [Patrick Carmody](#)

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Last year's article [Woolworths Foods: customer champions, environmental villain?](#) was met with a vociferous response from the South African marketing community – effectively from one camp, “How dare one question the credibility of the shining star of the SA retailing firmament?” Part II explains in more detail why we need to have a critically engaged relationship with even our most progressive companies.

One commentator was concerned that the article didn't acknowledge that Woolies Foods is trying its best to be sustainable (it recently rounded up the press and made a commitment to sustainability). As stated in the article, Woolies Foods is very progressive in some respects but its progressiveness in terms of delighting the customer hides the fact that customer-centric offerings are harmful to the environment and therefore society in the long term.

A simple exercise on three very popular and convenient product lines proves this:

Product	Convenient (customer friendly in the short term)	Sustainable (customer friendly in the long term)
Packaged sandwiches	Yes	No
Bottled water	Yes	No
Ready meals	Yes	No

Not a cost issue

Some of the comments focused on the excessive pricing practices. The exorbitant cost carried by these convenience products is not the major issue as 1) there are clearly people that can afford the luxuries on offer and 2) convenience does not come cheap (we choose to pay for preparation, cold chains, packaging etc).

It is a known fact in grocery retailing that the retailer makes more profit on value added products (ie products that have been processed and packaged beyond their original state) as the consumer perceives more value and forks out extra cash. Where Woolies are pulling the wool over our eyes is that a lot of its brand messaging shouts organic, free range, free from etc but a lot of what they sell are 'value added' food products which are nowhere near as healthy or inexpensive (value-packed] as whole food bought at a farmers market or greengrocer.

What Woolworths Foods and all national grocery retailers will be guilty of going forward is using green press statements and in-store claims around peripheral issues which they are getting right, effectively masking some very 'un-green'

practices which make them a lot of money.

Further reading

Joanna Blythman, Britain's leading investigative food journalist, has written a great book called *Shopped*, which exposes Britain's leading grocery retailers (Tesco, ASDA and Sainsburys) for misleading the British public into becoming a nation that blindly accepts mass-produced processed food at the expense of a more diverse range of suppliers and independents.

ABOUT PATRICK CARMODY

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