

Sustainable Industries

Site connects consumers and farmers

by Charles Redell - 4.14.09
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Stone-Buhr flour says it's on to a new marketing plan driven by increased demand for locally produced products.

The 100-year-old company based in San Francisco in March launched FindTheFarmer.com, a site that allows consumers to use the lot code on their flour package to find the farmer that grew the wheat used to make it.

Stone-Buhr, which stopped using commodity flour in 2007, now buys all of its flour from Columbia Plateau Producers (CPP), a group of Food Alliance-certified family farmers in Washington, Oregon and Idaho that makes Stone-Buhr's Shepherd's Grain flour. CPP sells its wheat for the actual cost of its product, plus a small profit for the farmers. Currently, it costs slightly more than \$3 more per bushel compared to commodity wheat. In stores around the West though, the price of Stone-Buhr flour is average compared to that of its competitors, according to Dorf.

Working with one group of family farmers offered Stone-Buhr more than a good marketing opportunity, says Josh Dorf, the company's president, who says working with families that have farmed the same land for generations "is important" and leads to a higher quality product.

Other companies have already taken similar marketing tactics, including Icebreaker, an Australian apparel maker with its North American headquarters in Portland. Icebreaker puts a "Baacode" on all merino wool garments and invites customers to go to a Website to trace their garments from the farm through each stage of the supply chain process. About 44,000 customers have looked into how their garment was produced since the program launched in 2008, according to the company.

FindTheFarmer.com may open up new opportunities for Stone-Buhr, which has \$2 million per year in wholesale revenues, according to Dorf. He says he is working on a deal with an undisclosed baking-mix company that wants to track the flour it uses, as well as a few institutional customers. He also says he is talking with Food Alliance to create a similar system for other crops the organization certifies.

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