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CEO works to differentiate his flour

By [MITCH LIES](#)
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In 2006, four years after purchasing the Stone-Buhr Milling Co., Josh Dorf was driving through the wheat fields of Eastern Washington when a thought struck him.



"I starting asking myself, why isn't our wheat coming from here?" Dorf said.

"We were selling a well-sold brand in the Northwest, but none of the wheat was coming out of the Northwest," Dorf said. "The wheat was coming out of the Dakotas and Montana. It was just commodity rail wheat without any provenance to it."

The thought later would lead to a marketing strategy as Dorf sought to differentiate his flour from other brands.

The result, which Dorf launched in 2007, is a find-your-farmer program that allows consumers to track wheat from a bag of flour back to the farm where it was grown.

The program includes a partnership with Shepherd's Grain, a group of mostly Washington state wheat farmers who grow and market sustainably grown wheat.

Stone-Buhr flour today is sold in Walmart, Safeway, Albertsons, Kroger and other chain stores, and it is recognized in buying circles as an affordably priced specialty flour.

But success didn't come easy or quickly for the 41-year-old CEO.

Dorf's first attempt to differentiate Stone-Buhr from other flours "was a complete flop," Dorf said.

It involved tapping into the organic trend and selling flour in the high-end grocer Whole Foods.

The main failing point?

"I learned the upscale natural grocer customer doesn't bake a lot from scratch," Dorf said. "The bakers are at Safeway. They aren't at Whole Foods."

The next big question was whether a company could attract sales with a sustainably produced locally grown product in a Safeway.
Dorf found he could.

"The person at Safeway now is concerned about provenance and buying local," Dorf said.

"I credit Whole Foods with that," Dorf said. "They drove that local message into the mindset in a way no one else did."

When Dorf left the hi-tech industry and entered the food products business in 2002, he had no experience in agriculture.

"I was looking at the business from the fundamental basis," he said. "It could have been widgets."

Dorf purchased Stone-Buhr from Unilever, a global products company that includes among its food brands Lipton, Knorr and Slim-Fast.

"In the beginning, I just reproduced what infrastructure Unilever had put in place," Dorf said.

By 2007, Dorf was marketing an all-purpose flour certified by the third-party auditor Food Alliance as being sustainably grown, complete with the find-your-farmer website.

Dorf said only a small percentage of customers actually go to the website and track the origin of their flour.

"I would like more people to do that," he said, "but I think having that ability there is the message we want to send."

The program is a hit with growers, Dorf said.

Recounting an experience he had at a Shepherd's Grain meeting, Dorf said: "I had one farmer pull me aside and tell me, 'I was at Walmart shopping with my granddaughter, and for the first time in my life, I pointed to your bag of flour, and I was able to say, my wheat is in that bag of flour.'"