

# The Challenges of Establishing Natural Standards for Fragranced Personal Care

Consumer confusion, the rise of sustainability and the appearance of retailer standards.

Jack Corley, Custom Essence Inc. Naturals Division; jcorley@customessence.com

A press conference announcing the debut of the Natural Products Association's (NPA) standard and seal for personal care products—the first natural standard for beauty and personal care products in the United States—took place at 9:00 a.m. on May 1, 2008, at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York. It was an event that few knew of, and perhaps fewer embraced.

A panel of industry representatives that had worked on the development of the standard with Mike Indursky, one of the standard's architects and a key advocate, attended the press conference, including representatives from the NPA, Aubrey Organics, Burt's Bees, California Baby, Farmaesthetics, Trilogy Fragrances and Weleda, as well as some influential public figures.

The purpose of this standard, as defined that morning by Indursky, "is to protect the integrity of the term 'natural' as it is applied to personal care products such as lotions, shampoos and cosmetics. Companies that could meet the NPA's high standard for use of the term natural on personal care products would be able to be certified and use a seal easily identifiable to consumers in the labeling and marketing of their products."

The motivation behind the standard was as a survey conducted at that time by research firm Yankelovich, which showed that while the public was more interested in natural personal care products than ever before, they were confused about what constituted a "natural" product. Key findings included:

- Seventy-eight percent of American women thought natural personal care was currently regulated or didn't know if it was, while 97% thought it should be.
- Two thirds of American women thought a personal care product labeled "natural" should contain at least 95% natural ingredients.

The NPA standard and seal was introduced as a way to mitigate this confusion and enable consumers to easily identify those products that meet a standard for natural personal care.

That was six years ago, and much has changed over time.

The "green movement" has given birth to the "sustainability" movement, and while "natural" is an important part of the sustainability movement, it is not the only aspect in which companies and industries are interested.

In fact, many organizations that were fighting the green movement just a few short years ago, are now leading the charge for sustainability, realizing that there is profit to be made in being environmentally responsible.



Given this evolution, what has been the impact of the NPA standard on the personal care industry since its introduction?

## Natural by the Numbers

Since its introduction in 2008, there have been 758 personal care products and 480 ingredients certified by the NPA. While this may seem impressive, it is necessary to look at the number of new natural/perceived natural personal care products that have been introduced in the U.S. in that time. Thousands of these products have been launched, yet few have embraced the NPA or other natural standards as a method of validation and natural authentication.

Why? The standards are designed to rid personal care products of perceived toxic and dangerous chemicals and it is difficult, for example, to manufacture a hair care product without an anionic surfactant like sodium lauryl sulfate, which is deemed unsafe by the NPA.

In addition, the NPA standard does not permit formulations containing phthalates, fragrance materials that have been extracted with petroleum-based solvents, as well as any synthetic aromatic ingredients.

## Other U.S. Natural Personal Care Standards

The only other truly U.S.-based personal care standard, NSF 384, is still being formed. NSF 384 may well compete with the NPA personal care standard. Allan Rose, standards development liaison for NSF, says of this American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standard, "It is still our goal to have the process

complete and the standard published by the next [Natural Products Expo West] meeting in March 2015.”

The NPA will have to decide whether to continue to go it alone or team up with NSF. The jury is still out as to what direction the organization will go. While there is fundamentally nothing wrong with having more than one U.S.-based personal care standard, as it brings exposure to an industry inundated with “greenwashing,” it does tend to confuse consumers. There have been discussions centered on the larger-scope subject of “sustainability,” i.e. does it make more sense to focus on a sustainability standard initiative for personal care which would encompass natural?

This is being investigated and reviewed by the NPA, according to Dan Fabricant, CEO and president of the NPA.

Unlike the National Organic Program (NOP), which falls under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and lays out a fairly rigorous standard that includes provisions for organic personal care, the U.S government has shied away from getting involved with the natural personal care controversy. In the opinion of this author, such a standard should be developed and administered by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), but the FDA has remained noncommittal in defining the term “natural” as it relates to personal care products. It is thus left to nongovernmental organizations and other entities to develop their own interpretation.

Frustrated retailers such as Whole Foods have taken it upon themselves to define their own prohibited ingredient lists in personal care products. The company’s body care quality standards

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state, “We encourage our vendor partners to use plant-based and naturally-derived ingredients, pure essential oil fragrances, gentle preservatives and non-petroleum ingredients.” Actually, from a marketing perspective, it is quite brilliant for retailers to create their own premium standards as it helps foster brand identity and convey to their customers how serious they are about health, safety and wellness.

Other retailers are concerned about litigation<sup>a</sup> and have asked brands to remove references to “natural” from front panels altogether.

These and other issues illustrate just how difficult united natural personal care standards can be—and why one may be necessary to support industry growth.

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<sup>a</sup>Several lawsuits have been filed challenging the brand and the retailer about “truth in labeling” with respect to the “natural” authenticity of certain personal care products. For example, phthalates and purported endocrine disruptors like 1,4-dioxane have been found in some products claiming to be natural.

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