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SC Johnson: Coming Clean

By Marc Gunther
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As a runner, I'm a fan of GU energy gels, including a flavor called "Tri-Berry." The ingredients include many things...

"MALTODEXTRIN (GLUCOSE POLYMERS), FILTERED WATER, FRUCTOSE, GU AMINO ACID BLEND (LEUCINE, VALINE, ISOLEUCINE, HISTIDINE), NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL BERRY FLAVOR, POTASSIUM AND SODIUM CITRATE, GU ANTIOXIDANT BLEND (NATURAL VITAMIN E AND VITAMIN C), CALCIUM CARBONATE, FUMARIC ACID, SEA SALT, SODIUM BENZOATE, POTASSIUM SORBATE, GU HERBAL BLEND [CHAMOMILE, COLA NUT (HAS CAFFEINE), GINGER], CITRIC ACID, PECTIN"

... but only a passing reference to berries. Tri-Berry, indeed.

What's inside the stuff we buy? Even when it comes to food, it's hard to know. (*Fumaric acid? Cola nut?*) As for other things -- including the household products that we breathe and touch, like cleaners and air fresheners, the ingredients are usually a mystery.

SC Johnson Co., the \$8-billion a year, privately held company that makes Windex, Glade, Shout, Off!, Pledge, Raid and Ziploc-branded product for the home, is going to change all that in a big way.

Last week, SCJ made a couple of announcements that are likely to shake up the home cleaning industry.

First, the company says it will disclose the ingredients in all of its home cleaning and air care products. This includes products with fragrances -- which, up to now, have been closely held secrets because the fragrance industry had argued that it needs to protect confidential business information.

Second, SCJ says it has told its fragrance suppliers to stop using a controversial category of chemicals known as phthalates. Right now, SCJ cleaning and air freshener products include a phthalate called DEP.

Let's take these one at a time, because each is interesting in its own way. (That's also why this post is longer than usual ...)

The disclosure issue, which has been roiling the household products industry, leapfrogs SCJ over its biggest mainstream competitors. (Seventh Generation, a smaller company that makes natural household products, has led the way on disclosure issues for years, driven by its pioneering CEO, Jeff Hollender.) While the home products industry has adopted a right-to-know initiative that calls for household product firms to list ingredients on either a label, or a website, or an 800 number, SCJ says it will make its information available in all of those ways. You can checkout the website at www.whatsinsidescjohnson.com.

More important, SCJ will list all of its ingredients—an unprecedented move. By contrast, the industry-wide plan makes an exception for a category called "Fragrances, dyes and preservatives," again, because of the concern about business secrets.

Kelly Semrau, who is vice president for global public affairs at SCJ, told me last week that the company had come up with an ingenious solution to the fragrance industry's resistance: Instead of

listing ingredients specific to each product, the company will publish a comprehensive list of all of its fragrance ingredients so consumers know what could be potentially included in the products they buy.

A "palate approach," she calls it: "We're rather put all the ingredients up there, and begin a dialog with stakeholders, than have it be a black box."

In a company [press release](#), Erin Thompson Switalski of an environmental health group called [Women's Voices for the Earth](#) is quoted as saying: "SC Johnson just raised the bar for the entire cleaning products industry."

The phthalate decision will also increase pressure on competitors to follow suit.

Several advocacy groups -- notably the Environmental Working Group -- have been campaigning against phthalates with scary newspapers ads and websites like www.nottoopretty.org that point fingers at brands like Arrid Extra Dry and Poison perfume ("For baby, it could really be poison") and Arrid Extra Dry.

The FDA and European regulators have approved the use of phthalates, the chemical industry says they are safe -- and so, apparently, does SC Johnson. But Fisk Johnson, the company's chairman and CEO, asked his scientists whether they could reformulate their products to eliminate phthalates.

"If we can make our products just as good, and without the phthalates, why wouldn't we do this?" Semrau told me. "That was the question that Fisk put on the table."

There's a risk, of course, of allowing scare campaigns to drive business decisions. (I've written about this problem when it comes to BPA and baby bottles. See [Wal-Mart: The New FDA](#).) Neither the media nor retailers nor ordinary consumers are trained to assess scientific research. But until we can rely on an aggressive and independent FDA and EPA to police the products we use -- they have failed in the past to meet that standard -- it makes sense for companies like SC Johnson to both be cautious and to stay ahead of consumer sentiment.

"We cannot walk away from science. Science should drive public policy," Semrau says. "But when you are a consumer products manufacturer, you have to listen to consumers."

Frances Beinecke, the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, wrote on [the NRDC blog](#): "What is promising to me is that SC Johnson has made this move voluntarily, after NRDC raised the issue of phthalates in air fresheners last year ... The company's response is a testament to the power of consumers to make a difference."

I emailed Rich Liroff, the executive director of the [Investor Environmental Health Network](#), who knows more about these issues than anyone I know, to ask him what he thought of the SCJ decision. He replied:

"This represents a precautionary business judgment by SCJ that even though they believe that regulators' judgments are on their side in terms of continued use of phthalates, the better competitive position to adopt is to side with their consumers lacking faith in regulators' judgment and to make a focused effort with their supply chain to eliminate chemicals of concern. So rather than taking the position so many other companies have taken -- "the regulators say our products and chemicals are safe" or "we are in compliance with all applicable rules and regulations" -- SCJ is acknowledging that such positions are no longer adequate for consumer-facing manufacturers and retailers.

Two final thoughts. First, this issue isn't going away. [See [Rich Liroff's blog post](#) on the subject.] Just last week, Rich told me, a group called the [Campaign for Safe Cosmetics](#) released a report showing that that toiletry products for children contain formaldehyde. And The Walt Disney Co. released a [healthy cleaning policy](#) saying that it would take a "precautionary" approach to reducing

its chemical use.

Finally, anyone who knows SC Johnson and Fisk Johnson won't be surprised see them leading the way on an environmental issue. Back in the 1970s, SCJ took CFCs out of their products before they were banned. And at last year's Brainstorm Green conference about business and the environment), Fisk spoke eloquently about how the company has been trying to avoid using coal-fired electricity in its manufacturing plants, turning instead to methane from a nearby landfill and wind power. I'm really pleased that Fisk will speaking again this year at [Brainstorm Green](#).

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