Among the intense economic, social, technological, regulatory, and marketing forces swirling in the rapidly growing U.S. organic foods market, the most important determinants of business success are decidedly personal — and ethical. Just ask Heather Howell, chief executive officer of Louisville, Ky.-based Rooibee Red Tea, a fast-growing organic beverage company that received early-stage capital from the Baylor Angel Network (BAN).

Howell asserts that earning the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) organic seal of approval requires a significant time and money investment, but she emphasizes the compliance activity marks only one of many facets of running an organic food business. The success of the business, Howell firmly believes, hinges on maintaining as much transparency about its ingredients, manufacturing, and sourcing as possible. Howell and her team decided to identify the serving size of their products — naturally decaffeinated iced “red tea” for adults and children that is made from the rooibos (“red bush”) that grows in the Western Cape of South Africa — as one bottle. They did so, even though some competitors opt for multiple serving sizes per unit, which can obscure the amount of sugar in their beverages. That organizational belief matches Howell’s personal beliefs. As a mother, she wants to know every single ingredient in the food she buys for her two children. Obtaining that knowledge sometimes can be difficult given opaque labeling practices and other masking and marketing practices that are not within the purview of the organic seal requirements.

The latter surpassed $290 billion in the U.S. in 2013, according to Academics Review’s “Organic Marketing Report.” The U.S. organic segment posted a whopping 3.4 percent increase in total revenue from 1990 to 2014, according to the Organic Trade Association, which projects 2014 revenue at $35 billion. Despite their recent and meteoric rise, the organic food segment are exploding. The organic food segment, which since 2001 has been governed by the USDA Organic Seal, and the broader (and much more loosely defined) “natural” products segment are exploding. Mirabile points to a scenario conducted by University of Colorado at Denver and Rutgers University researchers in which people were asked which fictitious city they’d rather live in. The two cities were identical except in one city, tree pollinators emitted small amounts of an allergy-causing chemical, and in the other city, residue from a long-shuttered factory emitted the same allergy-causing chemical. People thought the chemical from the factory would be riskier, Mirabile adds, “because, despite being told otherwise, they couldn’t shake the concern that the factory chemical would cause other problems down the road.”

These tendencies help explain why email- and social-media-fueled news, facts, opinions and misinformation related to food health issues are disseminated so widely and efficiently today. “[Perceived] safety concerns tied to pesticides, hormones, antibiotics and GMOs [genetically modified organisms] are the critical component driving sales in the organic food sector,” according to a review of 25 years of market research published by organic and natural marketers conducted by the Academics Review, an association of professors, researchers and authors. That’s not to say that information about non-organic ingredients and practices are automatically right or wrong. What’s certain is consumers have greater access to health information (and misinformation) and they seem increasingly intent on using this information to determine if the food they buy meets their subjective definition of “healthy.”