Know Your Farmers, Know Your Food

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Tennessee

2017

It's harvest time around the country. Local farmers markets and roadside stands seem to pop up overnight as farmers prepare to sell the goods they have worked long hours to produce. A small farm family heads to their local farmers market bearing their best produce and meat products. The market is bustling with customers, happily admiring each stand in their search for that perfect ingredient for their family dinner. Suddenly, a young woman's voice can be heard above the rest. She begins to tell the crowd about a Facebook article she read that says she can ingest antibiotics through her meat source, resulting in antibiotic resistance. The article also mentioned that GMOs are radioactive and could bring serious harm to the health of her family. She says that she would love to support local farmers, but she won't buy their products because she is not sure they are safe. The other shoppers place the products back on the table, and walk away.

About 325.5 million consumers live in the United States (United States Census Bureau). Less than 6.5 million consumers are involved in production agriculture, leaving 98% of consumers with a gap from gate to plate that is filling rapidly with confusion and misconception (American Farm Bureau, 2015). Statistically, 16.4 million people believe that chocolate milk comes from brown cows (Dewey C. 2017); 106 million think that meat products without an "antibiotic free" label contain antibiotic residue (Radke, 2017); 192.8 million believe that organic crops are safer and healthier than conventionally grown products (Funk & Kennedy, 2016); and 257.1 million believe that products containing DNA should be labeled (Lusk & Murray, 2015). Consumer confusion affects more than just their own understanding of the food they consume – it affects the producer as well.

The growing issue of consumer confusion is "a state of mind that leads to consumers lacking confidence in the correctness of their purchasing decisions" (Turnbull, 2000). This sense

of uncertainty and doubt clouds the eyes of people consuming agricultural products. But why? Maybe the question one should be asking is "how"? How does it happen? How does this affect the agriculture industry? How do we fix it?

The more I thought about consumer confusion surrounding the agriculture industry, I realized there is no better way to answer those three questions than to ask. I developed two separate surveys for consumers and for producers, inquiring about everything from gate to plate. Based on data collected from over three hundred consumers, 68% of respondents receive information about their food source from a media outlet (Bacon, 2017). Articles about controversial topics in agriculture such as genetic modification, chemical usage, and animal treatment run rampant among society, though they do not always tell the truth. Just like professional athletes and celebrity couples, the perception of today's agriculturalists is skewed by misleading information from a variety of media sources. Why is it easier to believe the stories about "frankenfoods" when the tales about popular celebrities and star quarterbacks are easily understood as myths? Think about how many advertisements and articles are plastered with ideas about living a non-GMO life and organic production. While not all pose a threat to the industry, several spread incorrect information that leads to misguided interpretations of American agriculture. According to The Center for Food Integrity, only 25% of consumers have a very positive impression of agriculture (The Center for Food Integrity, 2016). They just don't who to trust or what to believe.

This loss of trust is changing the agriculture industry as we know it as it tears apart accepted methods of crop and meat production. For example, consumers hear that GM technology makes GMOs unsafe, when actually this tool of science was deemed safe by the National Academy of Sciences in the 1980's. Many also fear genetically modified organisms

threaten their long-term health when researchers like Alan McHughen, a UC Riverside scientist, states that there has never been a documented case of any person made ill by consuming GMOs since their introduction into the food supply (Nagy & Bose, 2014). Ninety-seven percent of the 300 consumers I surveyed know about the use of biotechnology, but almost 50% do not know if there are any foods produced through biotechnology in their local grocery stores (Bacon, 2017). Many consumers confessed they would rather not purchase conventionally grown crops after reading and hearing negative information. Actually, GMOs have increased total crop yields in America by 360% since 1950, a fact that agriculturalists feel is vital to emphasize as they strive to feed 9.5 billion people by the year 2050 (American Farm Bureau, 2015).

Animal agriculture has faced similar issues. Antibiotic resistance, hormones, and animal treatment are major concerns. I overheard a conversation in my supermarket where two customers agreed to only purchase chicken and pork products that are labeled "Hormone- Free" because they believe it is a healthier alternative. Many consumers likely have this same thought, not realizing that the USDA prohibits American farmers from using hormones in poultry and swine production (Food Safety Inspection Service & USDA, 2015). Dairy is not scary. The tall tales of hormone and antibiotic-laced milk from unhappy cows are just that – tales. Every tanker of milk goes through five tests before it ever leaves the farm, and if there is any trace of residue, every drop of milk is discarded. It is becoming more of a challenge for mainstream agriculturalists to break free from the strong grip of consumer confusion as cost of production goes up, product demand and market price goes down, and the level of trust plummets.

So, how does one address consumer confusion and re-establish confidence in American agriculture? As of 2016, 80% of consumers show a strong desire to learn about food and where it comes from (The Center for Food Integrity, 2016). Thus, we share our story, the true story of

agriculture and the products of our toil. There has already been success on this front as organizations such as CommonGround and Label Insight spend countless hours educating the public with accurate data by using social media. Seventy-eight percent of Americans have at least one social media account (Edison Research, 2016), and out of the 100 agriculturalists I surveyed, 70% believe that it is the most efficient way to overcome this challenge (Bacon, 2017). The agriculture industry also recognizes that the draw of the farm has always been compelling, therefore agritourism is on an upward trend. Agriculturalists are inviting in consumers to pick their own products, tour their operations, and experience their lifestyle. As a result, the industry is seeing more engaged and experienced consumers, and more understanding on both sides. With more utilization of these platforms, the agriculture industry can make a positive change.

Imagine the producer, standing proudly with his products at the market with less weight resting on his shoulders. Imagine the exchange of smiles, handshakes, and words between the farmer and consumer that reaffirms the trust that was once threatened. Imagine an engaged experience where consumers gather their shopping bags and hurry home to feed their families, more confident in the safety and wholesomeness of their food. It is possible to dispel consumer confusion. It just requires action.

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