

Building Consumer Trust

- 2015

Imagine yourself in a courtroom. The judge is sitting at his bench, a jury is patiently waiting to hear the case, and the courtroom is full of interested parties and on-lookers. The prosecutor rises and calls the defendant to the stand. He begins with his line of questioning, "How many people does each U.S. farmer feed?" The defendant confidently responds, "Each American farmer feeds 155 people, which is more than double the number we fed in 1970." And how much do Americans spend on their food today? "Americans spend less than 7% of their disposable income on food, which is actually the lowest of any developed country," answers the defendant. The prosecutor continues in a more stern tone. "But is it also true that you confine animals on "factory farms" and pump them full of antibiotics and hormones? And wouldn't you agree that producers are more interested in profits than they are caring for animals and the environment?"

Ladies and gentlemen, the agricultural industry is on trial and the verdict is yet to be rendered. The question being asked is, "Can our industry be trusted?"

Noted leadership author, Stephen Covey, suggests that trust is based on two dimensions: character and competence. Character includes integrity, motive, and intent. Competence includes capabilities, skills, and results. It seems illogical to question the competence of the U.S. food industry - given its track record of producing safe, affordable, and abundant food. I believe consumer mistrust stems from consumers' questions about our industry's ethics, motives, and production practices. Today, I'd like to explore several reasons why some consumers lack trust in the agricultural industry and outline several steps we can take to regain their trust.

I believe there are two primary causes of consumer mistrust in modern agriculture:

- 1) Today's consumers are three-to-four generations removed from the farm and simply lack a basic understanding of how food is produced;
- 2) There are activist organizations and for-profit companies who are cultivating mistrust among consumers about modern food production practices.

According to the "Emerging Faith in Food Production" report, 67% of consumers think it's important to understand how their food is produced. Unfortunately, only 23% of consumers surveyed consider themselves to have excellent knowledge of farming and ranching. Since most consumers don't have any personal agricultural experience, their understanding of food production is limited to what they see on TV or read on the Internet. Take biotechnology for example. You and I may understand the damage weeds and insects can have on a crop. We also understand how biotechnology and modern weed management has spurred the adoption of no-till, which has reduced soil erosion in the U.S. by 1 billion tons per year. However, many activist organizations have referred to Genetically Modified Organisms as "Franken Foods" and have planted a huge seed of doubt about this technology in the minds of American consumers.

Secondly, I believe consumers lack trust in today's food system because activist groups and food businesses have cultivated mistrust between consumers and producers. The two most influential activist groups are PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and HSUS (The Humane Society of the United States). These organizations have focused their efforts on taking undercover videos of people abusing livestock and then using those videos to raise money and fund their anti-animal agricultural agenda.

In fact, according to an article in Meatingplace Magazine, HSUS saw their revenues increase 31% between 2007 and 2011 thanks, in large part, to these videos.

But it's not just radical activist organizations that cultivate mistrust. Some very successful food businesses are also fueling the fire against modern agriculture. One example of this is Chipotle Mexican Grill.

Chipotle's marketing slogan has been "Food with Integrity". They have spent millions of dollars developing creative marketing campaigns criticizing how most food is raised and grown here in America and fanning the flames of consumer fear around antibiotics, GMO's, and "factory farms." While slogans like "G-M-Over it" generated plenty of free publicity for Chipotle, it also misled the public. First of all, it insinuated that GMO's are dangerous and harmful – even though 16 major international science organizations, including the American Medical Association, have concluded there is no good reason to avoid consuming current GMO's. Secondly, their campaign led people to believe they were using no GMO derived products, when, in fact, they still sell soft drinks made from high fructose syrup produced from GMO corn and meat from animals who consume GMO grains.

In spite of the people and organizations that are attempting to cultivate mistrust, I am confident we can begin rebuilding trust among our consumers with three important strategies.

First of all, we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, "Are we doing everything we can to raise, and produce food responsibly?" We must constantly strive to improve our production and management practices and we cannot tolerate any bad actors.

Secondly, we need to be willing to be more transparent. One example of the way farmers and ranchers are becoming more transparent is by capitalizing on the increased interest in agritourism. For example, Fair Oaks farms in Fair Oaks, IN started 10 years ago as a tourist – friendly dairy farm. Recently it has begun the “Pig Adventure” - 22,000 square feet of museum-quality exhibits have been built, giving people an up-close look at modern hog production. They have already hosted 125,000 tourists to the farm including consumers, school children, and even retail and foodservice executives. This is a great example of someone who is taking transparency to a whole new level.

The third way we can build consumer trust is by preparing ourselves to be better advocates for our industry. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association has a program called Masters of Beef Advocacy. This program is an online educational experience where producers learn how to communicate about the key issues of beef production. There have already been more than 5,000 beef producers who have completed this course.

Ladies and gentlemen, the agricultural industry is on trial, but the final decision will not be handed down by a jury or judge. The ultimate verdict will come from the court of public opinion. Have we taken all the necessary steps to improve our own operations and manage them ethically and responsibly? Are we, as agriculturalists, investing time to educate the public about where and how their food is produced? When it comes to trust, we have to remember, it can't be legislated or mandated. It has to be earned!

Bibliography

Drovers Cattle Network. (n.d.). Retrieved September 15, 2015

Chipotle sued for false advertising, misleading consumers. (n.d.). Retrieved September 15, 2015.

Strom, S. (2015, April 26). Chipotle to Stop Using Genetically Altered Ingredients. Retrieved September 15, 2015.

Keefe, L. (Ed.). (2014, February 2). *"Change in Momentum."* Meatingplace Magazine. <i>The Issues</i>.

"Chipotle's 'Beef', With American Beef Frustrates U.S. Ranchers." (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://beefmagazine.com/blog/chipotle-s-beef-american-beef-frustrates-us-ranchers>

"Emerging Faith in Food Production," Sullivan Higdon & Sink FoodThink, 2014.

"Consumers Still Hunger for More Transparency from Food Industry." (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/consumers-still-hunger-for-more-transparency-from-food-industry-252345401.html>

Food Insight. (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from http://www.foodinsight.org/Fact_Sheet_Benefits_of_Food_Biotechnology

Gabbett, R. (Ed.). (2014, June 1). *"Show & Tell."* <i>The Issues</i>.

"How the Best Leaders Build Trust" by Stephen M. R. Covey @ LeadershipNow. (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://www.leadershipnow.com/CoveyOnTrust.html>

NAMA Webinar: SHS FoodThink Presents. (2014, June 24). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://shsfoodthink.com/nama-webinar-shs-foodthink-presents-dont-work-agriculture-anymore/>

Rosenberg, E. (n.d.). *"U.S. Spends Less on Food, Percentage-Wise, Than Other Countries"*. Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://www.thewire.com/global/2011/04/dont-look-united-states-household-food-spending/36279/>

Social. (n.d.). Retrieved April 10, 2015, from <http://www.fb.org/index.php?action=issues.biotech>

Strom, S. (2015, April 26). Chipotle to Stop Using Genetically Altered Ingredients. Retrieved September 15, 2015.