

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

What a food consumer wants

Recently we ran across a White Paper by the advertising and marketing agency, Sullivan Higdon & Sink (SHS) titled, “Building Trust in What We Eat: Consumers’ knowledge of and trust in food production and how food marketers can improve it” (http://shsfoodthink.com/white-papers/?utm_campaign=wp2&utm_source=agri-mkt&utm_medium=email&utm_content=wp).

The results of this marketing analysis came from “late 2012, [when] SHS conducted its FoodThink research study monitoring how consumers think about what we eat and America’s relationship with food. The study was executed among 1,457 consumers across the country via an online email survey (confidence interval of +/-2.57% at a confidence level of 95%).

“Respondents had to be at least 18 years of age and have joint or primary responsibility for the grocery and food decisions in their household. They came from a mix of demographic backgrounds and regions across the U.S. FoodThink covered a wide range of topics, such as perceptions of food production, cooking trends and changing thoughts about food. FoodThink was developed to help SHS and its partners uncover insights about food in America in order to help craft effective, unsheeplike marketing communications.”

As we read the paper, it occurred to us that while the White Paper was designed to provide information that SHS believed is of importance to food marketers, it also provides information about trust in the food system that is extremely important to farmers and ranchers.

One of the key findings was that the trust that consumers have in food production is related to the level of excellent/good knowledge consumers feel they have about production practices. The more they feel they know about food production practices the greater the level of trust consumers have in the food production practices.

For people living on a farm or in farming communities that connection is clear because they live with it and see it every day. They see newborn calves in the field and they hear them bawl when they are weaned. The castration of young male animals to reduce aggression and increase the tenderness of the meat is not foreign to them.

Those rural residents who live off the farm/ranch usually know many farmers/ranchers and know that they strive to provide a safe, nutritious product.

The chance for consumers who live in urban areas to gain that kind information about production practices is more restricted simply because their daily activities don’t bring them into regular contact with

farms/ranches and farmers/ranchers. What seems normal to rural folks can be unsettling to urban residents, thus the need for more information about the whys and hows of production practices.

The SHS paper found that fully “69 percent of consumers think it’s important to understand how their food is produced.” This desire for more information, on the part of consumers, provides an opportunity for producers and their farm/commodity organizations to provide factual information to the general public and enter into a dialogue with them.

In some cases it is consumers who will come to see some production practices differently, once the rationale for the activity is explained to them. In other cases, producers may need to modify their production practices to meet the expectations of the consumer.

SHS argues that “food packaging provides a canvas to show [the] food production story.” Their study indicated that “about 67 percent of consumers would like packaging of meat products to provide more information about the product.... 60 percent want to know if the animal was given growth hormones, 42 percent want to know what medicine the animal was given during its lifetime, 34 percent want to know what the animal’s living conditions were like, and 34 percent want to know where the animal was raised.”

While these questions were once simply the purview of the farmer/rancher, it must be remembered that the consumer is a crucial element in the production process. With their purchase at the retail meat counter they provide the money that makes the whole system work. The production system needs to take consumer wishes into consideration and provide them with the product they want.

One example we have found of this attention to the desires of a subset of consumers is Egglard’s Best Eggs. In one of the coolers in our local grocery store they may have 10-20% of the space devoted to eggs, but in that space they give the consumers the choice of brown eggs, white eggs, cage free eggs, and organic eggs—each at a different price point.

On their website they write “Egglard’s Best hen feed is a special all-natural, all-vegetarian feed that contains healthy grains, canola oil, and an all-natural supplement of rice bran, alfalfa, sea kelp, and Vitamin E—no animal fat, no animal by-products, and no recycled or processed food. We never use hormones, steroids, or antibiotics of any kind.” They even document the environmental rationale for the various packing systems they use for their eggs. Over the last decade, we have seen the size of the Egglard’s Best

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section grow as consumers have become more health conscious.

Certainly meat production and processing is more complicated than that of eggs, but the point is clear, farmers/ranchers need to pay attention to the changing attitudes of their ultimate customer—the woman or the man at the retail counter. To keep these consumers coming back, producers will need to be transparent about their production practices and willing to modify those that would reduce demand for the animal protein they produce.

Ultimately there are and will be producers who are

attuned to a premium market where the preferences of consumers have an impact on production practices, and there will continue to be producers who will provide an undifferentiated product at a lower price point.

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