

Yes, the customers are always right (even if they are wrong)

The old adage that the “Customer Is Always Right” has never been truer than it is today, especially with regard to food and agriculture.

We grew up in an era when a significant percentage of the US population was no more than two generations from the farm and kids who grew up in the city or its suburbs spent part of their summer on the farm with grandpa and grandma. Though they were living in urban areas, most people understood normal farming practices.

Today farmers and their families constitute less than 2 percent of the US population and any connection consumers have to farming and agriculture are tenuous at best. As a result, most people have little understanding of agricultural practices and the nature of food production.

At the same time, these consumers are more concerned about what they eat and where and how it was produced. Parents want to know that the food they feed their children is not only wholesome, they think about farm animals the same way they think about the puppy they just adopted from the local humane shelter.

The increased standards they have for the food they purchase and their lack the lack of knowledge about agriculture can create a disconnect and even distrust between them and those who produce the food they eat.

This situation creates both opportunities and pitfalls for agricultural producers.

Too often we have listened to farmers try and convince consumers that there is no difference between GMO and non-GMO grain or the routine use of antibiotics in meat production is necessary. And when they do that consumers tune them out, regardless of the facts.

In the not so distant past, in response to videos showing cruel treatment of farm animals, some farm groups have lobbied state legislatures to pass so called “ag-gag” bills to criminalize those who made the videos and downloaded them onto the internet for all to see when they should be working to ensure the humane treatment of all farm animals.

Just like most other areas of life, food production is a trust-based business. People want to purchase products from those they trust.

In recent years we have seen an increasing number of producers take advantage of the opportunity to grow their agricultural operation by aligning their production practices with the concerns they hear from consumers. They may market their production directly to consumers who are invited to visit their farm so they can learn how their food is produced. Alternatively, they may market their production through Organic Valley or Laura’s Lean Beef or through a grocery chain’s house brand of organics or attribute-identified product like cage-free eggs.

To move trust to the next level, grocers are posting pictures of representative farm families in their store. They are sharing stories of how the food they sell is produced. The key is that these producers have directly or indirectly created a chain of trust between themselves and the people who are the ultimate customer.

To some extent what we are seeing is not unlike the farm produce stands we saw in the 1950s and 60s along every major road. Consumers quickly learned who was friendly and had consistently good corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, and green beans and who didn’t; they regularly returned to those they trusted.

In the end those who made the most sales understood that they needed to pay attention to their customers desires and earn their trust.

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