

Championing the Beef Industry

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Negative news coverage and the popularity of books like *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Fast Food Nation* and the film *Food, Inc.* are giving credence to distorted information about food production systems that is not based on fact. It is important to understand the degree to which these myths are taking hold among Americans and it is essential to target communications efforts around the myths that are most strongly believed by Americans. To begin the process of responding to the distorted or inaccurate information being given on food production, specifically beef production, it is critically important to examine and better understand how we arrived at our current dilemma.

The beef food production continuum is made up of four groups: the beef industry, regulatory agencies, public health agencies, and consumers. Consumers influence the other three factions in demand, policy, and human needs. But the consumer of 2011 is different than the consumer of five, ten, and twenty years ago.

The last twenty years have seen momentous changes in technology. Consumers no longer receive their news from primarily newspapers and network television. Twenty-four hour cable news, entertainment news, blogs, and the internet have revolutionized how consumers receive information. News is instantaneously posted on the internet, texted, or tweeted. Information is provided in headlines, 140 characters, and 2-minute video clips. This has created a culture of instant gratification, simple answers to complicated problems, and short attention spans.

To complicate matters, Americans have never been further away from agriculture both

physically and conceptually. Less than five percent of the U.S. population is on farms and this distance spans generations. Despite this, most Americans have opinions on food, but where is their “knowledge” coming from? Historically, Americans have sought the advice of institutions like corporations, and the government agencies. But today those institutions are viewed with distrust and Americans look towards people with similar values as experts, regardless of qualifications.

So the question becomes, how does the beef industry overcome these challenges?

The beef industry should capitalize on the need to fill knowledge voids of consumers and not let activists be the only source of credible information. The beef industry also needs to be considered by the consumers as a trusted source of information. Messages should be factual and positive. Research has shown that consumers can overcome negative perception of meat products when in-depth positive information is given.¹

To better address this issue, the American Meat Institute (AMI) in March 2010 retained Harris Interactive to conduct an on-line survey of 2,100 Americans. Respondents were asked to score myths on a scale of 1-100 (1-being least favorable; 100-most favorable), in terms of the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. “Anti” industry respondents ranked the meat industry below 30. The mean favorability score for the meat industry was 48.7, which was higher than automotive (47.4), pharmaceutical

¹ Fox, J. (2002). Influence on purchase of irradiated foods. *Food Technology*. 56.

(42.3), banking (40.7) and oil and natural gas (39.5). Those who are pro-industry tend to be male, Republican, conservative, married and meat consumers. Those who are “anti” industry are most likely to be female, liberal, higher educated and on some type of vegetarian/non-meat diet. A majority (63%) say they have not heard anything about the production of meat or poultry in the past three months. However, those who reported hearing something said the coverage was mostly negative (77%). The survey overall showed that Americans, unaided, continue to focus on price, quality, and freshness when making purchases. However, when probed, they did express concern about a number of issues and the top myths were identified:

- hormone use in meat and poultry production;
- eating too much red meat can increase heart disease risk;
- Americans today are eating more meat and poultry than recommended;
- antibiotic use in livestock production is a concern and use is increasing;
- most sodium nitrite comes from meat products; and
- inspectors only visit meat and poultry plants occasionally and that lack of federal oversight makes livestock abuse common.

A multiple media curriculum was developed to debunk these myths. The messaging was factual, positive, and consumer and media friendly.

Beef producers can utilize those factual, positive and consumer/media friendly messaging techniques. Not only that, but one should not be discouraged in responding to questionable statements. In responding effectively, one should acknowledge the concerns or confusion. Ask them questions to clarify their concerns. Then ask permission to share facts. If possible, don't rush through your response and, if appropriate, answer any follow-up questions. It is critical not to get frustrated or angry as that will leave an even greater negative impression than when you started. Keys to successfully communicating the beef industry's message are

to be factual, friendly, respectful, and not getting discouraged.

Florida beef producers are the local farmers and ranchers. You are not the “big bad industry” and it is essential you communicate that to your local media, community, and your local, state, and federal congressional representatives. Beef producers are experts and critical as you provide essential products and services, are employers, and contribute to the economy of the state of Florida.

The meat and poultry industry is responsible for as much as \$20.4 billion in economic activity in Florida.² Not only does the manufacture and sales of meat and meat-related products create jobs in Florida, which include firms as varied as trucking companies, machinery manufacturers, accounting firms, and grocery stores. They are good jobs that are important as Florida's unemployment is 11.6% and over 1 million people are looking for jobs and collecting unemployment benefits.²

Championing the beef industry is critically important and you must be engaged with media, congress, consumers, other allied industries, and even your critics. It is essential to target communications efforts around the myths that are most strongly held by Americans and to focus on correcting misperceptions and avoid raising issues where there is not strong concern or awareness. We must work hard not just to encourage consumption, but to also give consumers permission to feel confident in meat and poultry when they are consuming it. This can help potential erosion of consumption and help avoid public policy initiatives that are based on lack of education, science, and information.

²www.meatfuelsamerica.com. Accessed: March 22, 2011.