

Putting Trust on the Table: Boosting Consumer Confidence in the Food Industry

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Only 17 percent of consumers trust food companies, according to the report, [“Building Trust in What We Eat.”](#) [1] by Sullivan Higdon & Sink FoodThink. Recent research suggests that much of this mistrust stems from little knowledge about how food is produced, as well as consumer perceptions that food makers lack transparency and place profits above values.

As food production continues to become increasingly automated and processing companies grow larger, consumers are trusting food companies less. The industry can help remedy this by providing more education about the production process and by connecting with consumer values.

Consumer education is key in building trust. Data from the report shows that those with more knowledge about food production tend to have greater trust in food processors than those with less knowledge. But while 69 percent of U.S. consumers think it is important to understand how their food is produced, only 40 percent of Americans say they have a “good level of knowledge” about food production.

And not only does education matter, but it also matters who is providing it. Americans place the most trust in information about food production provided by friends and family (66 percent), and a majority (59 percent) believes that information provided by regulatory agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, holds true.

More than half (52 percent) of Americans do not believe food companies are transparent about the food production process. Transparency is one of the most crucial factors in establishing consumer trust, according to 2013 Consumer Trust research conducted by [The Center for Food Integrity](#) [2] (CFI), which identifies seven attributes that together result in trust-building transparency:

1. Motivations – Actions are ethical and consistent with stakeholder interests.
2. Disclosure – All information, both positive and negative, is publicly shared.
3. Stakeholder Participation – Engaging those interested in your activities or impact.
4. Relevance – Sharing information stakeholders deem relevant.
5. Clarity – Sharing information that is easily understood and easily obtained.
6. Credibility – Sharing positive and negative information that supports informed stakeholder decision making and having a history of operating with integrity.
7. Accuracy – Sharing information that is truthful, objective, reliable and complete.

Being open with consumers by providing accurate, easy-to-understand information is a great step toward boosting consumer confidence in the industry, but connecting with consumers on a more personal level is also crucial. The CFI research indicates that confidence, or shared values, is three to five times more important than competence, or skills and expertise, in building consumer trust.

Demonstrating shared values can prove especially difficult for larger food makers. The CFI research finds an inverse relationship between the size of a company and the perception of shared values. The bigger the processor, the less likely the public is to believe the company shares their values. In short, many consumers hold this viewpoint: Big is bad.

Increasing consumer trust is one of the most challenging issues facing the industry today, but it is possible — no matter the size of the company. The FoodThink report outlines the following tips for establishing trust:

- Leverage the USDA and FDA: Because consumers place trust in these agencies, it is important to communicate that they approve of processes and products.
- Utilize social networks: Allow consumers to share their positive (and negative) experiences with products. Information from friends and family is highly trusted, so social media can be an effective tool in strengthening trust.
- Let farmers tell their stories: In recent years, many companies have caught on to the fact that [spotlighting their farming partners](#) [3] allows consumers to better connect with the food production process in a positive and down-to-earth way.
- Partner with trusted retailers: These establishments stand by the products they sell and maintain loyal customer bases.
- Feed customers' minds: Understand that consumers may mistrust the industry, and be proactive, rather than defensive, in sharing information.
- Make knowledge accessible and relevant: Make it simple for consumers to find the information they are looking for, and be sure that information is easy to comprehend.
- Pull back the curtain: Provide the public with opportunities to interact with product where it is made, and be ready to explain in layman's terms how

product is produced.

Taking a proactive approach to boosting trust is vital. By reaching out and addressing public needs and concerns, food companies can look to build effective, long-lasting relationships with consumers.

How does your company deal with consumer trust issues? Sound off in the comments below.

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<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/blogs/2014/02/putting-trust-table-boosting-consumer-confidence-food-industry>

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[1] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2013/03/consumer-trends-americans-lack-trust-food-industry>

[2] <http://www.foodintegrity.org/research>

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/27/business/media/27adco.html?_r=0