

Shared Values Must Come Before Science in Winning Consumer Trust On Today's Farming Practices



Charlie Arnot, CEO, Center for Food Integrity / February 17, 2017

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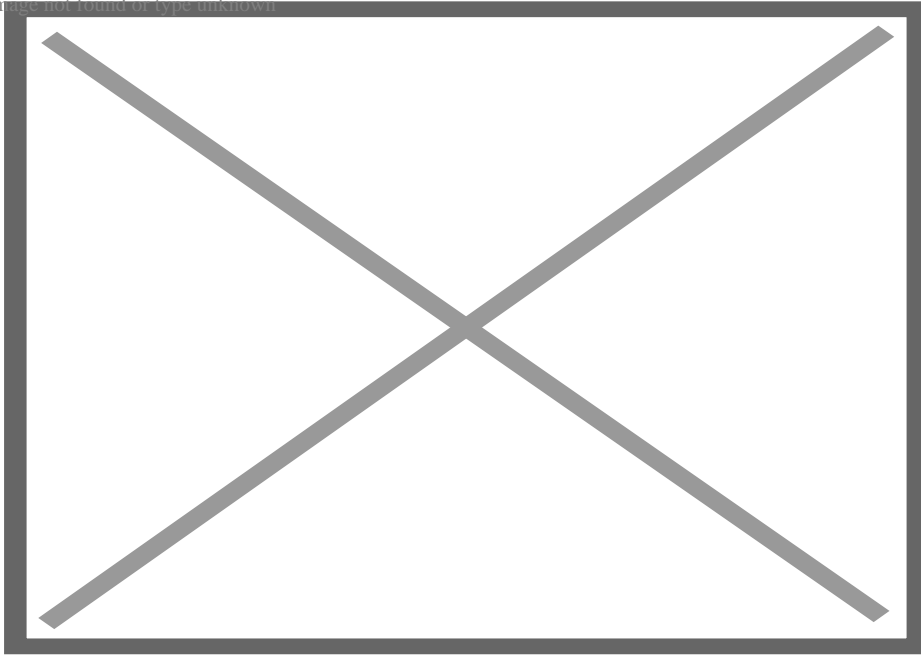
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Since 2007, the Center for Food Integrity has asked consumers to rate a wide range of statements on the food system. The results show people tend to think organic food is healthier, food today isn't as safe as it was when they were kids, and large farming operations can't be trusted.

Asked to rate agreement on the statement, "Food grown organically is more healthful than conventionally-grown food," half the respondents in CFI's latest study strongly agreed. Around half the respondents gave only middling support to the statement, "Today's food supply is safer than it was when I was growing up." Around half agreed strongly that "Large farms are likely to put their interests ahead of my interests."

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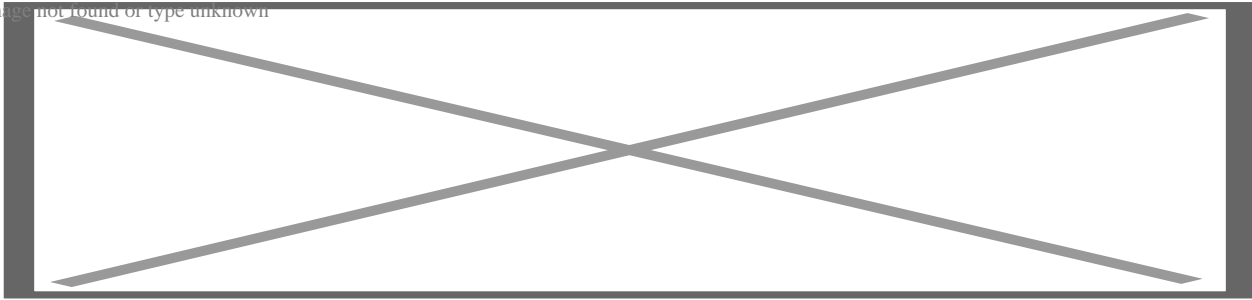
It's easy for many consumers to support smaller farming operations that are perceived to be producing food the old fashioned way. This perspective highlights the challenge that the conversation about food is not just about better technology, but finding better ways to support the informed public evaluation of those technologies and our food production system.

What people really want when it comes to food is pretty simple. CFI's studies over the years consistently show consumers top concern as it relates to what they eat is, "Keeping healthy food affordable."

How can food producers do a better job engaging in a way that helps people understand that what today's farmers are doing is more consistent with what they want them to be doing than they might realize? Rather than responding with science, it's important to listen to consumer concerns, acknowledge those concerns and then help people understand what's being done to address them.

Science isn't enough. Science tells us if we can do something while society tells us if we should. Understanding the difference is critical. Scientific verification cannot be substituted for ethical justification. Farmers need to be able to help people understand that they value what is important to them, and then the opportunity to introduce science comes into play.

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How technical and scientific information is introduced is key to supporting informed decision making by today's consumers. CFI's consumer research clearly shows that once a values-based connection has been made, permission is granted to introduce technical information. Simply having science on your side is clearly not enough to encourage and support informed decision making. Being right is not enough to assure information is considered in the social decision-making process.

Consumer skepticism about food production is understandable. The consolidation, integration and application of technology that make food safer, more available and more affordable than ever before also prompt concerns about whether science benefits society. In building consumer trust, the goal should not be to win a scientific or social argument, but to find more meaningful and relevant methods to introduce science in a way that encourages thoughtful consideration and informed decision making.

As the distance most consumers have from food production continues to increase along with the level of technology we implement, agriculture must dramatically improve its ability and commitment to build trust with consumers and other stakeholders.

Agriculture needs to find messages that deliver direct benefits to consumers or society in order to build support for today's farming practices. Farm groups need to show that the way today's food is grown is consistent with the values of American consumers.

Building trust requires an increase in early stakeholder engagement, transparency, professionalism, assessment and verification at all levels of agricultural production. People must be given permission to believe that today's food system is consistent with their values and expectations. Failure means we will continue to see erosion in consumer trust and increased restrictions on the farming practices needed to operate efficiently and profitably.

CFI's research provides a model for introducing and discussing complex controversial issues – a model that can be applied when communicating and engaging with consumers to build trust around topics that are critical to the food system's ability to meet growing demand for food while preserving and protecting our natural resources.



Charlie Arnot is the CEO of the Center for Food Integrity. The Center for Food

Integrity is a not-for-profit organization that helps today's food system earn consumer trust. Our members and project partners, who represent the diversity of the food system, are committed to providing accurate information and working together to address important issues in food and agriculture. The Center does not lobby or advocate for individual companies or brands. For more information, visit www.foodintegrity.org.

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