

Consumer perceptions of food production

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This week, representatives of Demeter Communications reviewed results of the company's SegmenTrak study, showing consumers feel positively about farmers, but want more information on food and improvements in food safety and animal welfare.

SegmenTrak is a market research tool developed by Demeter Communications designed to benchmark and track “frontline consumer” perceptions of the food production industry. The study explores attitudes, as well as emerging language, giving professionals specifics upon which to build effective communication programs and tools.

Respondents were primarily female (82 percent), with at least one child living at home. Individuals aged from 45 to 55 years made up the majority of respondents (60 percent), followed by consumers aged 35 to 44 years (20 percent).

Among indicator consumers, about 53 percent reported a household income of less than \$55,000, while 32 percent reported earnings from \$55,000 up to \$104,999.

Indicator consumers represent a diverse cross-section of life settings. About 57 percent of respondents live in either large cities, metro areas, or smaller cities, while about 43 percent hail from locations with a lower population concentration.

KEY FINDINGS

Consumers Look to Food Labels for Food Production Information

Indicator consumers, as identified through SegmenTrakT screening, rely most on food labels for “information regarding how food is produced...” Eighty-one percent of consumers called labels “important” or “very important” as a source of information regarding how a particular food is produced. Television fell into second place (60 percent “important/very important”), followed by information found in the grocery store (53 percent “important/very important”). Also evaluated for use were sources including social media, individual farmers, farm organizations, food manufacturing companies and government agencies, among others.

Preferred Source of Food Production Information

If indicator consumer preferences were met, they would continue to rely the most on food labels for information on U.S. food production methods. However, food manufacturers would be relied upon more than currently (up 11 percent for “prefer/very much prefer”), as would farmer organizations (up 9 percent for “prefer/very much prefer”).

Perception of Key Food Production Terms

SegmenTrak's February 2010 wave tested terms commonly used in current public discourse about food production and agriculture. Consumers feel more positively toward “farmers” (57 percent “positive/very positive”) and “family farms” (62 percent positive/very positive) than they do toward “ag industry” (28 percent) or “agribusiness” (19 percent). Additional terms were evaluated, from “local” and “sustainability” to “conventional farming,” “crop protection products,” “farm animal humane care activist” and others.

Consumers Want to Know About Safe Food Measures, Ensuring Animal Care

In an aided question, consumers considered what they would “like to know from farmers about food production that you currently do not know?” The largest segment of indicator consumers agreed they would like to know more about “measures used to produce safe food” (76 percent “agree/strongly agree”), and “ways they ensure animal care” (68 percent “agree/strongly agree”). Respondents agreed they would like to know “measures they take to protect the water” (64 percent) and “how they make farming sustainable” (61 percent).

Consumers Would Ask Farmers

In unaided format, indicator consumers said “the single most important piece of information you would like to have from farmers about how your food is produced.”

The largest segment (22 percent) of questions pertained to chemicals and/or pesticides used during production and/or potentially remaining in consumer end products. A distant second (10 percent), consumers would ask farmers about medications and/or antibiotics used in production and/or potentially remaining in consumer end products.

“How much and in what form do the chemical herbicide and pesticide have residual life in produce?”

“I want to know exactly what chemicals, antibiotics and fertilizers are used, for how long, why, and what the effects are on humans.”

CONCLUSIONS

- Indicator consumers are looking to food labels for more and different types of information, seeking even more facts about product content and the production environment of products. These demands are likely to shape the content and presentation of information electively placed on labels to achieve marketing goals.
- These consumers will consider information on food production provided by food manufacturers and farmer organizations, having identified them as preferred sources. This opens the door for expanded roles for those attuned to consumer concerns.
- Effective educational and marketing materials will reflect language choices based on consumers’ positive view of “farmers” and “family farms,” as opposed to their less accepting view of “agribusiness” and “ag industry.”
- Additional conclusions are available in the full SegmenTrak report.

This study reports the findings of an online study conducted in February 2010 that included 444 respondents between the ages of 23 and 55, drawn from the continental U.S. The male and female respondents represent a diverse cross-section of ethnic backgrounds, income levels and rural versus urban settings. Demeter Communications provides additional information on the study on their [Web site](#).