

Animal Welfare: Consumer Viewpoints

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Introduction

Public opinion and perceptions concerning animal welfare may be influenced by a variety of factors. Culture, economics, religious and philosophical beliefs, scientific knowledge, and aesthetics (visual attractiveness of different animals) can play a role in forming points of view. A basic understanding of how animal welfare concerns arise and are manifested in our society is important when charting courses for future poultry production practices.

Attitudes and Perceptions

People express a range of attitudes towards animals. In the mid-70's, Stephen Kellert (1988) studied public attitudes and knowledge about animals in an effort to assist the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan future conservation and use efforts. Kellert found that farmers differed dramatically from other groups (professionals, clerical, students, craftsman, etc) in their attitudes towards animals. Farmers were highly utilitarian; that is, their interest was primarily in animals as resources. Most white-collar professionals, on the other hand, expressed humanistic (interest in animals as companions), moralistic (interest in animals as moral subjects), naturalistic (interest and concern for wildlife), or ecological (interest and concern for wildlife and ecosystems) attitudes. The four attitudes expressed most often by respondents in general revealed two potential areas of conflict. The first relates to the use of animals: while 35% of respondents had utilitarian attitudes, 37% expressed moralistic attitudes. The second relates to the level of concern for animals expressed: while 23% of respondents had humanistic attitudes, 25% were neutral, meaning that they had little interest in animals. Kellert's survey results thus demonstrated the diversity of societal attitudes towards animals and identified two areas in which society would tend to have conflict: the use and treatment of animals.

Fraser (1998) described the changing public perception of animal agriculture. The traditional view of animal agriculture is one of caring for animals, land, and people; an independent lifestyle; and contributions to good public health. In contrast the new perception is one of animal exploitation, unhealthy products, corporate control, and negative effects on the environment. Fraser likens this to a similar transformation of perceptions of the munitions industry. World War I and II popularized the positive role of the industry through personalities like "Rosie the Riveter" and the success of U.S. and allies fighting a mutually agreed upon evil. A short time later the U.S. engagement of North Vietnam changed the perception of the munitions industry to the "merchants of death and destruction". Perceptions change as society evolves its ethic as to what constitutes right from wrong actions.

Many surveys have been conducted to gauge public/consumer viewpoints on a variety of farm animal issues. The retention of public confidence in farmers and ranchers is important to the animal industries and is often measured in industry-conducted surveys. For example, the Animal Industries Foundation (1993; 1998) asked survey participants questions about confidence in and feelings about farmers and ranchers. Ratings were

developed by using numerical scales when questions involved a consumer's feelings (0= very cold; 100 = very warm) and by using extremes of "very well" to "don't know" when respondents were presented with statements for reaction. The majority of consumers reacted "very well" to a statement that American farmers and ranchers "are an essential part of American life that should be retained" (74% 1993; 80% 1998). Warm feelings were expressed towards farmers and ranchers when listed with other occupational groups (76% 1993; 72% 1998).

More specific questions were asked regarding animal care and eating habits. A majority of respondents agree there is nothing wrong with raising animals for food (66% 1993; 65% 1998) and felt strongly that consumers have a right to choose what they eat (82% 1993; 1998). When respondents were asked whether, based on their knowledge, farmers and ranchers currently treat their animals humanely the majority answered yes (77% 1993; 80% 1998). An important question that could add significant understanding to these survey results is "How do you define a farmer or a rancher"? The answer to this question would shed light on who or what the respondents actually trust.

Some surveys have attempted to measure whether consumers were willing to pay more for humanely raised animal products. The AIF surveys (1993; 1998) indicated that close to half the respondents were willing to pay at least 5 % more (51% 1993; 44% 1998) with a lower percentage agreeing to pay up to 10% more (27% 1993; 20% 1998). A recent poll conducted by Zogby America (2000) included 1,204 U.S. adults from across the country. Respondents indicated (80%) they were willing to pay more for eggs from hens treated more humanely. Careful consideration must be given to the required economic inputs from consumers or retailers to offset costs associated with changes in animal production practice.

A Matter of Semantics

Semantics has been shown to play a role in public perception of special agricultural practices such as tail docking and beak trimming (AIF 1989; 1990). By neutralizing terminology, for example by calling "tail docking" "tail trimming", the public's perception of the practice can be altered.

The animal industries have made efforts to remove callous or harsh terminology and replace it with less emotive or provocative terms. An example is the reduced use of the term "debeaking" in favor of the more accurate term, "beak-trimming". However, it can be difficult to discover the source of (or potential for) public concern if objective explanations of a practice are not provided to survey respondents. Industry could be misled into believing that a practice is perceived as acceptable, only to come under siege when the public is exposed to the realities of the practice. Neutralized terminology is appropriate when accompanied with honest descriptions and explanations of the actual practice and the reason it is performed.

Some surveys and polls have attempted to measure public reaction to actual production practices using descriptions. A national poll conducted by Caravan Opinion Research Corporation (1995) tends to support the view that social concern about production practices is growing even in a climate of expressed public support for farmers and ranchers. When respondents were queried about specific intensive production practices some of those practices were met with strong disapproval. Ninety-two percent

of respondents, for example, strongly disapproved of the housing system for veal calves, a similar number disapproved of confinement systems for pigs, (91%), and 90% strongly disapproved of keeping hens in cages that did not provide enough space for the hens to stretch their wings. The Zogby America (2000) poll asked a similar question about laying hens and 86.2% of the respondents felt it was unacceptable to house hens in "wire cages" so small and crowded that hens can not stretch their wings. In addition, a question regarding food withdrawal for inducing molt met with 75.4% disapproval. Measuring and understanding the public/consumer concerns and reactions to production practice is important. Industry should strive to carefully consider factors that cause acceptance or rejection of a production practice to help resolve issues of animal welfare.

Do Animals Have Rights?

Surveys and polls have indicated that Americans believe that animals may have rights (Groller 1990) that need to be protected, and that the public has heightened awareness of the animal rights movement (AIF, 1990; NCA 1989). Although most people believe that it is still acceptable to use animals as food resources (85%, Groller 1990; 70%, AMA 1989), they are beginning to disapprove of other uses (fur - 63%, Groller, 1990; 79%, AMA, 1989: cosmetic research/testing - 58%, Groller, 1990; 75 %, AMA 1989). The AIF (1990; 1993; 1998) and AMA (1989) surveys indicated that the respondents did not believe animals have the same rights as humans or that the promotion of their welfare deserved equal consideration. However, respondents very strongly felt that animals deserved equal consideration in matters of pain and suffering (70%, AIF 1990). Weber et al. (1995) summarized public attitudes toward biotechnology based on a study conducted by Hoban and Kendall in 1993, and Mench (1999) reviewed public attitudes towards genetic engineering of farm animals based on polls and focus groups in both the US and Europe. It is clear that the public takes issue with some applications of technology to animals. The following statements are revealing:

- Humans were created to rule over nature (50% disagree).
- Plants and animals exist primarily to be used by humans (55% disagree).
- Animals have rights that people should not violate (82% agree).

Animal "rights" can mean different things to different people. In the above surveys, respondents tended to identify protection from pain, abuse, and cruelty as important issues as far as the rights of animals were concerned. They also perceived some activities (e.g., the use of animals for fur) as unnecessary or morally unacceptable. The respondents were not opposed to the use of animals for activities deemed as justifiable and essential which reflects a welfare orientation. It is important for industry to properly identify what consumers mean when they indicate that animals have rights.

Conclusion

The results of survey instruments and public polling activities should be evaluated carefully. Surveys and polls can provide both accurate and inaccurate pictures of public opinion. Measuring factors like public egg consumption patterns, consumer opinion,

effectiveness of public relations techniques, etc., can only offer limited assistance in addressing specific concerns about the welfare of egg-laying hens. Long-term solutions to welfare issues will require not only an understanding of societal perceptions and expectations with regard to animal treatment, quality control and production, but also the scientific development and measurement of indices of hen well-being (see review Craig and Swanson, 1993). In the end, the poultry industry must take responsibility for hen welfare concerns when consumers seem apathetic. To perceive that no response equates to no responsibility would be a dangerous position. Consumers indicated in a variety of surveys that they retain confidence in farmers and ranchers to make responsible decisions concerning the welfare of their animals. They also regard the humane treatment of farm animals as important. Therefore, it is the industry's responsibility to consumers to make carefully researched and considered decisions predicated on the improvement and maintenance of the welfare of laying hens living in intensive production conditions.

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