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Female shoppers want reassurance, food choices

- Various pressures drive buying decisions.
- Food choice is number-one priority.
- Messaging should focus on end consumer.

By SARAH MUIRHEAD

AS consumers, women represent a \$5 trillion business, and when it comes to food purchases, they make 93% of the decisions on what to buy, according to Mary Lou Quinlan, founder and CEO of Just Ask a Woman, a leading women's marketing company.

At the same time, women face much pressure to do "what's right" for their families in terms of the food they buy and often make such decisions out of fear of the unknown, Quinlan told the 2010 Food System Summit in Chicago, Ill.

Quinlan, whose company has surveyed more than 20,000 women over the last 11 years, said not only are women confused about which food choices are the "right" ones, but they tend to add further pressure by not having the time to figure it out or, for that matter, to prepare meals like their mothers and grandmothers use to. Then, they add to that the pressure of having to make wise economic decisions at the grocery store, she said.

When it comes to beef, Quinlan said research shows that consumers are most concerned with the "science" of beef, specifically what they consider to be the unknown.

When a woman shops, she doesn't want to feel that she is forced to make compromises, particularly when it comes to perceived risks in the food she chooses, said Quinlan. If she is concerned yet doesn't understand such things as growth-enhancing technology or antibiotics, she is not going to feel good about the purchases she makes.

Perhaps the best way for agriculture and food producers to reassure female consumers is by shifting the focus of messaging from an industry perspective to that of the end consumer, or the American mom.

For example, instead of talking about the steer, Quinlan said the quality of the steak should be the focus. Rather than how cheap beef is, the focus should be on the lean, healthy varieties that

are available at the meat case as a result of modern food production.

In particular, Quinlan said, the term "conventional" beef production is scary to female shoppers and suggested that a better term to use is "traditional" beef production.

Above all else, Quinlan said, never remove the freedom of choice for consumers.

"The food table should never be hijacked. Consumers shouldn't be forced to eat less or pay more. Rather, consumers must be made to feel empowered," she said.