

Finding a place for pork in a changing marketplace

A benchmark study suggests industry efforts are changing consumer opinion of the pork industry for the better

A benchmark study suggests knowledge has been — and will likely continue to be — the key to managing the concerns of consumers and facilitating better understanding between pork producers and their urban and rural neighbours.

Although food safety, health and production issues continue to drive consumer opinion of the Canadian pork industry, industry efforts to enhance its transparency appear to be paying off in the court of public opinion, says Susan Jones, vice-president of agribusiness, food and animal health for market research firm Ipsos-Reid.

"Canada's pork industry is viewed overall as trustworthy, well regulated, compliant and solution seeking, with consumers becoming more confident in the industry's ability to produce safe food and meet high standards of animal welfare," says Jones.

"The study also reveals that general attitudes towards food are changing and becoming an important indicator of health among consumers. The pork industry will need to continue to find its niche in that environment."

Changing attitudes towards the pork industry are, in part, the result of industry-wide efforts to engage the general public. Still, Jones says even this progressive approach to communication has failed to spur consumers to seek information on the pork industry and its practices. This means the onus is still on the industry to send the message that pork is a safe, responsibly-produced and nutritious source of meat protein.

One way to help send that message is for the Canadian pork industry to become more unified in efforts to meet consumer demands. "There is a tremendous amount of activity and a wide spectrum of initiatives, but many of them could be more effective if grouped together as part of a consolidated vision."



Susan Jones, vice-president of agribusiness, food and animal health for Ipsos-Reid.

Growing confidence

The Ipsos-Reid survey, conducted in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, measured consumer knowledge of the pork industry as well as public opinions of its food safety, animal welfare and impact on the environment.

Although emphasis was placed on the opinions of non-producers, the 1,600 survey participants represented Canadians from a range of urban, rural and semi-rural communities. Conducting the survey over three "legs" — in 1999, 2002 and 2004 — enabled the researchers to examine trends over time and by region.

"Consumers are feeling more confident in the industry's production practices."

— Susan Jones

The survey revealed that non-farming Canadians are, overall, confident in the integrity of the pork industry. Although positive opinions of the pork industry fell behind those of other agricultural sectors, noticeable growth was observed over the course of the survey, with the percentage of participants holding positive opinions increasing from 49 percent in 1999 to 59 percent in 2004. Here's an overview:

Food safety. This was the pre-eminent concern among participants. At the same time, participants were generally confident in the safety of Canadian pork, with nine out of every 10 respondents rating it as somewhat safe to very safe. "Consumers are feeling more confident in the industry's production practices," says Jones. "They also have tremendous faith in the power of regulatory systems to keep their food safe."

Most participants were satisfied with the safety of pork for the simple reason that they had never gotten sick from it. However, there were concerns based on misperceptions of the use of hormones (which the industry does not use) and antibiotics in

production and the “tweaking” of the food supply with genetically modified products.

Animal welfare. This is an issue which remains a concern among consumers, says Jones. However, 51 percent of the survey participants felt hogs were somewhat to very well treated, with the number rating them as very well treated increasing from 12 to 18 percent between 2002 and 2004.

“They believe the animals are sufficiently provided with food, clean water and shelter because it makes sense from an economic perspective. A farmer isn’t going to make money off a hog if it’s not healthy, well fed and cared for.”

There appeared to be a bias against intensive livestock operations, however. “Participants saw large production units and corporate ownership as a negative trend and associated them with poor treatment of animals.”

Environmental impact. Perhaps the most worrisome trend is public concern over the environmental impact of the hog industry, with 53 percent describing hog farming as environmentally unfriendly. “As a criticism of the industry, environmental impact rose from a distant fourth place in 1999 to the point where it is now the number two issue on the minds of consumers,” says Jones.

Respondents gathered most of their information on the pork industry from the mainstream media. At the same time, public knowledge about the hog farming process is falling and many are simply not interested in learning more.

“In 2002, for example, 23 percent of those who said they knew nothing about the industry said they wanted to learn more. By 2004, only 14 percent wanted to learn more. In the foreseeable future we can expect consumers to know little about the industry and to not seek information proactively.”

The health factor

Consumer attitudes towards food are changing at a rapid pace. As a result, it has become a key indicator of how people view their health. This is partly due to an aging population eating foods believed to enhance health and longevity, says Jones. The high profile of obesity concerns in the media has also driven this perspective.

The pertinent question for the pork industry, then, is where its product fits in this changing marketplace. Despite industry efforts to present pork as a lean source of meat protein, pork is still often viewed as an unhealthy meat, says Jones. If there’s a bright side to this perception, it’s that many consumers are having a hard time determining what “healthy” means — many consumers are frustrated over what they see as fluctuating definitions of what is healthy and what is not.

There are opportunities to be discovered in this shifting marketplace, says Jones. One of these is the convenience food market. “People today are over-busy and forgetting how to cook,

and that has helped drive the convenience market. At the same time, they are critical of manufacturers for, as they see it, not providing healthier convenience food options.”

And then there’s the fact that healthfulness is still not the only thing consumers are looking for in their food — quality, price, flavour, consistency and freshness are also factors consumers value. Says Jones, “If it tastes like sawdust, it won’t matter how healthy it is; people are still not going to eat it.”

Knowing the customer

Pork producers feel they’re very to somewhat knowledgeable about what Canadian consumers want from the food they buy. According to the Canadian Farm Trends survey (2005), 55 percent of the pork producers surveyed said that all or most of their production practices are geared towards meeting consumer demand. Interestingly, producers find information about consumers the same way consumers find information about them: through the mainstream media.

A sacred trust

In many cases, the pork industry is already on the right track where it comes to addressing consumer needs, says Jones, and particularly in the fields of safety and quality assurance. “Safety is a sacred trust. The industry has to be congratulated for maintaining that and enabling people to say ‘I’ve never had a problem with pork and never gotten sick from it.’

“That, along with maintaining a dialogue with the media and the general public, is key to getting pork ‘on the list’ in today’s marketplace.”

Surveys key to sustainability

The Ipsos-Reid and University of Guelph surveys are examples of Alberta Pork efforts to enhance the social sustainability of the pork industry, says Jurgen Preugschas, chairman of Alberta Pork.

“The primary goal of Alberta Pork is to position the Alberta pork industry as vital, sustainable and valued in the agri-food business and society in general. Because of this, we frequently commission surveys to help gauge the relationship of the pork industry to society. It helps us to properly address issues and concerns in a proactive manner.”

For more information on the pork industry, visit Alberta Pork’s industry services Web site at www.albertapork.com or its consumer site at www.albertapork.ca.

Perception vs. reality in the pork industry

The results of a survey on rural residents' opinions of their pork producing neighbours may be surprising to some

Separating the perception of the pork industry from its reality is a key to better relationships with the communities where pork producers live and work, says an associate professor from the University of Guelph in Ontario.

Wayne Caldwell was at the forefront of a research project in Ontario which studied the perceptions of neighbouring residents on several sizeable livestock operations. Describing the results as “a good news story,” Caldwell says one key finding was that neighbours were more likely to change their negative opinions of the industry after being exposed to hog production in their communities.

“Producers often think their neighbours feel more negatively about their operations than they really do. They’ll often hear some negative feedback from one or two people and conclude that everyone else feels the same way, even though that is often not the case.”

However, he warns that this positive feedback is not an invitation for pork producers to rest on their laurels when it comes to communication with their neighbours. Rather, it highlights the need for producers to equip their communities with accurate information in a neighbourly, non-confrontational manner. And with urbanization and greater specialization of agricultural practices threatening to divide rural communities, there is more need than ever for this kind of ambassadorship.

“There is a general perception out there, for example, that ‘big is bad’ when it comes to size of a hog operation,” says Caldwell. “This is not necessarily so, but we have to deal with such perceptions because these issues can become very intense and controversial unless proactive action is taken. Fear can arise due to lack of knowledge.”

Potential conflict

The potential for conflict between producers and their neighbours should not be underestimated, says Caldwell.



Wayne Caldwell, associate professor, School of Environmental Design & Rural Development, University of Guelph

“Producers often think their neighbours feel more negatively about their operations than they really do.”

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However, a little communication can go a long ways towards resolving conflict when it happens.

Caldwell cites an example of an Ontario producer who raised concern among his neighbours after spreading manure on a hot long weekend day. The situation was tempered somewhat when it was discovered that he was a recent immigrant who didn’t understand the significance of the holiday. The matter was resolved as a result of these efforts to communicate.

“If you deal with matters in a friendly way with minimal conflict, you will probably have better neighbour relations.”

Exposure drives understanding

The pork industry has long been a focal point for conflict over a myriad of environmental ills. The need to address the roots of those concerns is crucial, says Caldwell, and that need was the driving force behind the University of Guelph survey.

Over five years, 180 respondents in direct proximity to 50 confined feeding operations (CFOs) provided input on how these farms affected their day-to-day lives and how they felt these operations brought value to their communities. The survey also captured the perspectives of the CFO operators.

In most of the survey categories, negative comments about a given CFO decreased upon the unit becoming operational. Building location, for example, tended to become less of an issue, with negative feedback dropping from 17 percent to nine percent. Appearance concerns dropped by approximately the same percentage. Negative opinions over odour, pests and weeds, farming practices and water quality all saw moderate drops, while dust and dirt concerns increased marginally.

The survey also gauged how the presence of a CFO affected lifestyle. Close to 60 percent said they had not made any changes in their day-to-day practices as a result of the presence of a CFO. However, close to 40 percent said they kept their windows closed and about 25 percent said they had stopped hanging laundry out to dry.

Although this consensus may not be as negative as some in the pork industry may have expected, Caldwell urges producers to not be complacent. "If you have nearly 40 percent of your neighbours saying they're keeping their windows closed, that should be treated as a real point of view," he says.

An open door policy

Although some of the CFO operators surveyed expressed frustration over neighbour demands, the survey indicates that the CFO operators are adopting production practices in the interest of better community relations, with manure handling and application, at 30 percent of those surveyed, being by far the practice most respondents said they had changed for this reason.

Consensus among those surveyed suggests that CFO operators are striving towards an "open door" policy of communication with communities, facilitated with invitations to visit the farm, open houses and prior warning of farm practices. Some operators, however, said that informing neighbours of their practices or expansion tended to worsen situations. Others said their efforts to engage their communities in discussions about their operations met with disinterest.

Disputes were not the exclusive domain of producers versus non-producers, however. The move away from mixed farms in the greater agricultural community has splintered rural areas to some extent, resulting in inter-agriculture conflicts. Another emerging trend is conflict between generations of producers. "There are issues raised by farm residents who are jealous of us who are older and follow a more traditional way," said one respondent.

Proactive action recommended

Several lessons were learned from both the neighbour and operator sides of the CFO equation, says Caldwell. Key among them is the need for operators to tackle perception head-on before it becomes reality.

This "proactive action" can take several forms, with perhaps the most effective option being a good neighbour policy, says Caldwell. One sign of this policy includes holding public consultations to inform neighbours of new developments or existing activities. Another is good planning around where building sites are located, which can go a long way towards preventing conflict.

"Ultimately, a good neighbour policy will almost certainly lead to better relationships with neighbours."



Caldwell recommends that producers alert their neighbours before they apply manure in order to sustain and improve community relationships.



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