

What's Your Beef? Time To Tell Our Story!

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In the United States today, 98% of US Consumers are generations removed from production agriculture. Additionally, their understanding or perception of animals, is generally from their pets or visiting the local zoo. As Producers, we don't always understand what these consumers are thinking about when seeing production agriculture. Yet there is always a lot of emotions and passion involved in hearing the discussions around food production and agriculture. All of us know the things around our lives that we are involved with every day, but those things outside our lives can be shades of gray which can be confusing. So, how do we bring the degrees of separation from consumers to today's agriculture and food production together? We all must be involved in these conversations.

For years, consumers buying beef at the meat counter had it pretty simple. You purchased the cuts or products you wanted for your family. Soon, USDA added a Quality Grading system and we started look for Select, Choice or Prime when making those choices. Plus most of the time we purchased what our family liked for meals. Today consumers have more choices at the meat counter and on grocery shelves than ever before. Beef is labeled: Natural, Organic, Grass-Fed, Grain-Fed, Antibiotic Free, No Add Hormones, Humanely Raised, and the list goes on. These labels become confusing with promotions, advertisements, news articles, social media and online resources. Everyone is trying to grow their market share of consumer dollars. The information about these labels have a tendency of being biased to the sponsoring organization, which only adds to the confusion and effects the consumer's confidence in their food supply.

Nebraska Extension pulls together a team of over 65 specialist, educators and assistants from Nutrition Education, Agriculture and Youth Development to focus on programming around this issue of consumer confidence in the food supply. At first the team wanted to determine some benchmarks for Nebraska Consumers by being part of a statewide household survey conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research titled "2016 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS)". Consumers where asked about what influenced food choices, food safety concerns, and where do they find information on foods. There were 1200 surveys completed which was a response rate over 25%. This data had no significant difference in responses based on population regions of Nebraska.

In the rural state of Nebraska similar to the states that host the Range Beef Cow Symposium (RBCS), the top three influencers for food purchases based on answers very important or important are Taste (95%), Price (84%) and Nutritional Value (83%). We might thing that these influencers might change in national research, yet the International Food Information Council Foundation (IFICF) in an annual survey mirrors the data with

Taste, Price and Healthfulness. When NASIS asked about food safety concerns based on answers of very concerned or concerned, Foodborne Illness (79%), Chemicals in Food (76%), Carcinogens (74%) and Pesticides (71%) and the IFICF data names the same top four only. Further analysis of the data about food safety concerns would indicate with an even distribution of responses across the level of concerns that consumers may have confusion about these areas of concerns due to lack of information they know about the topic or issue.

So where do consumers get information about food? The Nebraska data shows the consumers acquiring their food information from food labels and websites. Friends and Family are listed third for food information. Though 8% of consumers say they get food information from social media and blog, might be confusing because they may associate these with websites. Farmers and Ranchers also are not the top go to point for information on foods they produce, which can be linked to the lack of transparency throughout the food system. The IFICF survey asked this question with different options and the top five food information resources are Health Professionals, Friends/Family, Websites and Registered Dietitians. The national survey also showed 38% of Millennials site their top food resource is friends and family. This information gives us some direction of where to start the conversations.

We as cattle producers are most comfortable in the surrounds of our operations. Some may say their comfort zone is in the saddle checking cows in the middle their summer pasture. Others may say in the feedlot feeding or processing cattle. These are the things that tie to our emotions and create the passions within. That is why talking to other about what we do and why, takes us outside that comfort of our everyday lives. And when the conversation challenges what we do, we get defensive because it is about our livelihood, family, home and the things we are most passionate about.

Let's think about it in a way that we are more familiar with. All of us in the cattle community have seen Dr. Temple Grandin's diagram of "The Cattle Flight Zone". We use it every day when handling cattle, as things move into that flight zone what happens? Well, cattle will move away to where they are comfortable or turn to fight and move us out of that flight zone. We also use the balance point to direct which way to go. These animals are also more comfortable with what they can see and with things they are familiar with.

As a producer, we can easily discuss things like animal care, health, nutrition, range management, natural resources, land management, production practices, stewardship, stockmanship and husbandry. These are the things that keep our operation sustainable for us and the next generation. These are the topics we are passionate about and we see in front of us every day. Yet, we have that blind spot of those things that grab us and quickly put us on the fight. Those topics might be animal rights, PETA, HSUS, Non-Hormone, Antibiotic Resistance, Antibiotic Free, Organic, or Natural. Because of the strong commitment we have to our operations these topic might make us defensive because they go against us or seem to be targeting our way of life in some fashion.

Somehow, we must learn the balance point of how to be in that non-defensive conversation with our consumers.

Steps to telling OUR Beef Story:

- 11) Know The Facts and Science of Cattle and Beef
- 12) Don't Bury Them in the Science
- 13) Find Common Ground or Interest
- 14) Build Trust By Having Open Discussions
- 15) Tell YOUR Beef Story

It is time for us to tell OUR Beef Story to consumers. As we continue in our everyday lives there is always an opportunity to have a conversation with those that are not involved in food production to feed the world population. To accomplish that goal of feeding the world it will take each and every one of us to produce that food supply. We must challenge ourselves to tell the stories of passion and commitment to the beef community to produce safe, wholesome, sustainable beef for families around the world and ours! If each of us have two consumer conversations about beef each month and each of them tell two more consumers each month, you will have reach over 6,100 in a year. The average attendance of the RBCS is 800, if each of us takes on this challenge we can each 4.9 Million a year or 9.8 Million before the 2019 RBCS.

References & Resources:

2016 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey: Food Report

- food.unl.edu/ag-and-food/NASIS_2016_Food_Report.pdf

2017 Food and Health Survey: "A Healthy Perspective: Understanding American Food Values"

- foodinsight.org/2017-food-and-health-survey

NCBA Masters of Beef Advocacy

- beef.org/mastersofbeefadvocacy.aspx

Beef Councils

- Cattlemen's Beef Promotion Board - beefboard.org/
- Nebraska Beef Council - nebeef.org/
- Wyoming Beef Council - wybeef.com/
- South Dakota Beef Council - sdb beef.org/
- Colorado Beef Council - cobeeff.com/

University Extension

- Nebraska - extension.unl.edu/
- Wyoming - uwyo.edu/uwe/
- South Dakota - sdstate.edu/sdsu-extension
- Colorado - extension.colostate.edu/

National BQA

- www.bqa.org

Nebraska Extension Sites

- Nebraska BQA - bqa.unl.edu
- Nebraska Beef Cattle Page - beef.unl.edu
- Nebraska Extension Foods Page - food.unl.edu

Books By Michele Payn, Cause Matters - causematters.com/

- “No More Food Fights!”
- “Food Truths: From Farm to Table”