

Redefining Today's Meat Industry to Build Consumer Trust

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INTRODUCTION

Being “trusted” is a natural human desire. We experience great emotion when someone says they trust us, and it is the foundation for good personal relationships. Being trusted can mean professional success. It can make people buy our products. It can win votes, sell books, and make people pay attention to what we say.

More than 95% of Americans eat meat and poultry products and feed them to their families. These products can nourish and strengthen people, and we most often consume them as part of our daily routines, trusting their safety. But as with any food, when something goes wrong, the consequences can be serious and trust can be threatened. Things gone wrong (as opposed to things gone right) generate media interest, and repeated coverage of problems in any industry can alter the image of an industry. Because food is deeply personal, repeated negative coverage of food issues by media and Internet sources can alter a consumer's view of safety trends, and this can affect trust.

So how is trust defined? Webster's defines it as “reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, and surety of a person or thing; confidence.” Trust is typically established over time and is an amalgamation of positive experiences. In marketing, brand loyalty is built on this type of trust.

Because people eat every day, the food industry—and the meat industry in particular—has the opportunity to deliver multiple positive experiences. The emergence of so many channels of information through the media, through Internet sources, through activist-produced books and movies, and through word of mouth in the social media presents a constant challenge for the industry in maintaining the trust that repeated safe and enjoyable eating experiences should deliver.

Data show that trust is declining throughout American society, and this decline began decades ago. It is instructive to consider historic trends and developments to understand where we are today so that the meat and poultry industries can work to maintain the consumer's trust in an increasingly challenging landscape.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For decades, trust was granted easily to government leaders, to religious leaders, and to the meat industry. Television shows and movies featured trustworthy characters in shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. As television emerged, Walter Cronkite would become “the most trusted man in America.”

But in the 1960s, we saw a major social shift: a desire to question authority (recall the slogan, “Don't trust anyone over 30”). Suddenly, a shadowy figure known as “the man” loomed large in culture and became the mysterious engineer of America's social ills. Skepticism about authority emerged from a new counterculture that began to dominate the airwaves. Protests against war and other issues unfolded on television, which was increasingly penetrating American households. President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated, and American innocence was shattered. These trends carried over into the next decade.

Watergate and President Richard Nixon's impeachment only fueled the downward spiral of trust. In 1971, *All in the Family* became a hit series that confronted deep social issues throughout the 1970s until it finally went off the air in 1979. In the food world, concerns about chemicals in food emerged, and the safety of sodium nitrite in cured meats was called into question—an issue that would not be resolved definitively for another 20 yr, when the National Toxicology Program finished its landmark review in 2000. Controversies related to diethylstilbestrol and residues also emerged during this period.

The General Social Survey (The Greater Good Science Center, 2011), a periodic assessment of Americans' moods and values, shows a 10-point decline from 1976 to 2006 in the number of Americans who believed other people could generally be trusted. Trust in corporations has

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declined from 26 to 17% from the 1970s to the present. This parallels declining trust in the press, organized religion, and banking.

A war was waged on fat in the 1980s as Americans took to the gyms and discovered health food stores, once the venue of a few consumers on the fringe. Suddenly, natural was in and fat was out. Europe banned US beef over concerns about hormone use, and American consumers were left wondering if the Europeans were correct, despite a lack of scientific underpinnings for the ban. Unsettling disasters played out around the world, such as the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal, India; the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster; the Exxon Valdez oil spill; and the Challenger space shuttle explosion.

By the 1990s, one of the most influential series of the decades emerged, called *The X-Files*. With the tagline “Trust No One,” the show was a complex web of conspiracies and misplaced trust. As the show played out, President Clinton admitted that he had engaged in an affair with a White House intern. Congress impeached him, but he never left office. Televangelists were caught in highly publicized scandals, causing many to question who they actually could trust. In the meat industry in the early 1990s, industry members confronted one of the greatest challenges ever: the emergence of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 in beef. In 1994, an outbreak linked to undercooked hamburgers occurred in the Pacific Northwest that killed 3 children and sickened more than 450. At the end of the decade, a major *Listeria* outbreak linked to hot dogs and deli meats rocked the industry. And as Britain struggled with the emergence of a new disease called bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Americans began to ask, “What if it happened here?”

As the millennium arrived, trust continued to erode. The 1990s *The X-Files* may have been a precursor to more recent shows such as *Lost* (2004–2010) that also featured characters who, at times, appeared good and at other times evil, creating a situation in which it was difficult to know who to believe or trust. As Americans tuned into shows such as *Lost*, Enron investors and employees found themselves devastated by corrupt management that caused a bankruptcy. Scandals and cover-ups erupted in the Catholic Church. The Internet came into people’s homes, and the importance of mainstream media began to erode. People had more choices for information.

Throughout the decade, the Internet grew and social media took center stage. Suddenly, a new definition of “friend” emerged—it was simply a connection on Facebook, where consumers began to share everything from a picture of a holiday meal to their runny nose in streaming commentary. An idea planted on one’s Facebook page could be forwarded with exponential speed. Rumors and hoaxes became commonplace, and it became increasingly difficult to find “the truth.” In late 2003, the beef industry’s worst nightmare became its reality when the United States diagnosed its first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in a Washington

state cow. Export markets were lost, and throughout the decade, efforts continued to regain them.

By 2009, the US economy was in shambles and investment houses and insurance companies were in the spotlight. Bernard Madoff became the poster child for the financial scandals as famous clients such as Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel announced that his Foundation for Humanity was the victim of Madoff’s Ponzi scheme. In 2010, we learned that former presidential candidate John Edwards had an affair and fathered a child while his wife was battling cancer. He was subsequently indicted for using campaign money to pay his mistress for her silence. A BP oil well in the Gulf of Mexico caused untold damage, and evidence emerged that BP ignored warning signs of a problem.

And most recently, former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger admitted to fathering the child of his household employee, whereas newlywed Congressman Anthony Weiner was caught sending inappropriate photos to women nationwide.

An American citizenry threw its collective hands up in the air asking, “What next? Who can I trust?”

WHERE AMERICANS STAND TODAY

Today, trust stands at one of the lowest points in history. Americans increasingly interact electronically, and even jobs occur “virtually” with the trend toward telecommuting. A 2010 study showed that teens prefer texting to talking (CNet News, 2010). Americans tend to feel less connected to one another, and this can have the effect of eroding trust in others and in corporations. Intense negative online coverage of corporations by a media with documented liberal leanings (NewsBusters, 2008) can also provide a skewed view of the world.

Edelman Public Affairs monitors trust annually through its Annual Trust Barometer (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2011). In 2010, trust across the board—in nongovernmental organizations, government, business, and media—tumbled. Edelman noted that the lack of a full economic recovery, unemployment rates, and the nation’s role in many of the year’s crises, such as the oil spill, product recalls, and the US Securities and Exchange Commission investigation of Goldman Sachs, have chipped away at trust.

But is trust lost forever? Not according to Edelman. In fact, trust in academic experts increased markedly—by 8 points—to 70%, nudged forward as skepticism about government, media, and corporations grew.

However, Edelman argues that as trust has declined overall, “surround sound” is needed to reach audiences though multiple touches: “As in 2009, the majority need to hear something between 3 and 5 times to believe it. But in the US and the UK, approximately one-quarter say they need to hear something 6 or more times to believe it, twice as many as 2 years ago,” according to the report (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2011).

The company also notes that trust can be a “protective agent.” Findings show that 57% will believe negative information about a company they do not trust after hearing information just once or twice. “When a company is trusted, however, only 25% will believe negative news about it after hearing the news once or twice,” the report said. And the converse is true for positive information. Far fewer people believe good news about a distrusted company: “These findings send a strong signal that corporate leaders would be well advised to create a trust foundation so that positive information has an echo chamber in which to resonate.”

The survey also shows that the 2 most important factors in determining a company’s reputation among consumers are high-quality products and services, followed by transparent and honest business practices.

WHAT THESE TRENDS MEAN FOR THE MEAT INDUSTRY AND THE MEAT SCIENCE COMMUNITY

Consumers must eat, and they want to trust those who provide them food. Trust will not be granted easily. It must be earned over time through positive experiences and communications with consumers.

Effective communication involves common ground, sincerity, authority, clarity, good presentation skills, receptiveness, and a good environment for the listener to receive the message. Effective communication is part of the skill of teaching (Boy Scouts of America, 2011). Increasingly, repetition is essential in penetrating the information clutter that has become part of consumers’ daily lives. No one medium can be relied on to carry a message.

In earning trust, the meat industry needs to be clear about its values and transparent in its practices, even offering “virtual tours” of plants to demystify any concerns generated by undercover videos about what goes on

behind the doors of a plant. This information needs to be delivered through multiple channels, including in person.

Although once the norm, personal communications and face-to-face conversations will increasingly be novel, and efforts to connect in personal ways can distinguish the communicator. New materials developed for the American Meat Institute’s MeatUP! Program can help facilitate these personal and interactive communications.

Given the high level of trust assigned to academic experts, the meat science community has the credibility to provide information in a believable and trustworthy way. These communications must be sustained and delivered through multiple channels, such as through social and traditional media, and in direct communications through speeches to community groups, schools, and even in personal conversations, where information can be dispensed in a credible and personal way.

In essence, the members of the meat industry must become evangelists of the message about the nation’s bountiful, affordable, safe, and nutritious meat and poultry supply and about the benefits of handling animals humanely.

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