

When it comes to information on food ...

What Is Credible?

New CFI research shows that truth is relative.

When it comes to the credibility of food news and information, truth is relative, according to new research from The Center for Food Integrity (CFI). The study identified five consumer segments, how each defines truth, and how food news and information move through culture. It provides the food and agriculture industries insights into which segments are driving food trends and how — and where — to connect with them to earn trust.

“In its first-of-its-kind research, we used an innovative approach called digital ethnography to determine what constitutes ‘truth’ and why certain ideas get fleeting mentions while others turn into meaningful food movements,” said Charlie Arnot, CEO of CFI. “Certain consumer segments are creating food culture by influencing the information that’s shared and embraced.”

Through digital ethnography, CFI observed 8,500 consumers online across multiple social channels. Going back two years, the study forensically examined their behaviors, identifying beliefs, values, fears and unspoken motivations when it comes to food information.

“It’s like following digital breadcrumbs that leave a trail showing what consumers actually do, not just what they say they do,” said Arnot. “Results revealed that truth isn’t black and white in the minds of consumers.”

Truth relationships

Credibility of information is tied to each segment’s relationship to truth. It spans a spectrum ranging

from the *Scientific*, who defines truth as objective, evidence-based science, to the *Existentialist*, who defines it as “what feels true.”

The *Scientifics* have difficulty relating to mainstream consumers, so their influence extends only as far as the next segment, the *Philosopher*, who takes the evidence-based science, simplifies it and filters it through an ethical lens.

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— Charlie Arnot

“It’s the ethics, or in other words the values, around the issue that provide meaning to the *Philosopher*, who wants to be on the right side of morality when it comes to people, animals, the planet and more,” said Arnot.

The *Philosopher* has considerable influence on the middle, and largest consumer segment, the *Follower*.

Representing 39% of the population, *Followers* fear making the wrong decision for themselves and their families when it comes to food. They want easy-to-understand, unambiguous answers to their questions and assurances that they’re doing the right thing, which *Philosophers* provide.

More importantly, they value trusted sources to whom they can

relate. That’s where shared values — or the ethics that drive our beliefs, decisions and opinions — are critical, said Arnot.

Shared values key to trust

“Communicating with values that others share, or can relate to, is the key to earning trust, according to our CFI trust model,” he said. “In fact, the model shows that communicating with shared values is three to five times more important to earning trust than simply sharing facts. That’s why the objective information shared by *Scientifics* doesn’t resonate with others.”

“The opportunity for the food industry to earn trust is consistent and long-term values-based engagement with *Philosophers* and *Followers*. A rational argument grounded in ethics is their truth,” said Arnot.

It’s important to them to go beyond the facts and understand how the food industry cares about what they value when it comes to topics like food production, the impact of food on health, animal well-being and care of the environment, said Arnot.

Download a summary of the research at www.foodintegrity.org. To learn more about digital ethnography segmentation and how to apply the research, contact CFI at learnmore@foodintegrity.org. 

Editor’s Note: This article is provided by The Center for Food Integrity.