

# Meet the Consumers

A consumer focus group shares its feelings about food and beef with more than 500 cattle producers.

by *Stephanie Veldman*

With heads bowed and eyes looking nervously around, 10 strangers filed toward the front of a large room filled with more than 500 cattle producers and industry personnel. These strangers were part of a consumer focus panel, who shared feelings about food preferences and food safety with attendees during the Consumer Strategies Session at the 2002 Summer Cattle Industry Convention in Reno, Nev., July 17.

It wasn't a scientific sample. The opinions of focus groups aren't necessarily representative of the opinions of consumers in other parts of the United States. Focus groups are designed to take a qualitative approach to research to get more in-depth information, such as the attitudes and opinions of participants, than quantitative research, such as surveys, would receive.

The members of the focus panel were recruited from around the Reno area. The group was only told that the audience was in the food industry.

John Huston, former executive vice-president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Center for Consumer Marketing, moderated. "We are here to listen to consumers express their feelings, their attitudes about food and your product — beef. ... Through a focus group you can start to get attitudes and opinions that are important to product development."

## Shopping for food

Beginning with simple questions, such as how they decide where to shop for food and how often they go shopping, Huston gradually got the panel to open up and begin talking. Because the panel had a diverse background — some were single, some married, ages varied, as did the number of children they had — the stores and the number of times they visited them varied.

"I do a lot of food shopping, because I have to buy such big quantities," says Connie, who is a mother of five. "One time I was buying about 10 boxes of cereal and they asked me if I was buying them for a home, and I said yes — mine!" She adds that she loves shopping at stores such as Costco, because she can buy huge quantities.

Tony, on the other hand, is single and lives alone. He says he usually shops at an Albertson's three to four times a week. "It is a more expensive store, but I go there because it is close."

One thing most of the panelists agreed on is the store must be clean and have a good selection of fresh meat and produce. "I shop at Raley's," Patty says, "and that is the only store I go to." She quit buying meat from a deli nearby because it had flies in the deli.

Patty, who does most of the cooking in her household, has three children and owns a small business with her husband. She says that she also likes to shop at Raley's Supermarkets and Drug Centers because of convenience, selection and familiarity with the store.

## Attitude is everything

Huston asked the group if they were willing to try new products. The group was split in their responses — some of them liked to experiment with new products, but many of them would use only traditional ingredients.

"A lot of it has to do with what you were raised on, and

you get used to that," says Tony, when asked why he wouldn't try new or different products.

"I buy everything new. ... I was raised in the Midwest and grew up on meat, mashed potatoes, noodles, pie and so forth. And I still like those things, but I like to try new things," says Penny, who lives with her husband, and does all of the grocery shopping and cooking. "If I see something new in a magazine that I think sounds interesting, I put that on my list when I go to the store."

Unaided, the panel expressed positive attitudes towards beef while talking about favorite foods they eat during a typical week. When asked what meals were eaten regularly during the week, several panelists named beef.



Ron, who is a tow-truck driver, says steak is easy for him, because his entire family likes it. "We even barbecue in the wintertime."

In fact, when asked how many times a week they grill out, all panelists said between two and three times. Favorite meats that are prepared on the grill ranged from different cuts of steaks and chicken to different types of fish.

## Food safety

While the panel spoke of differences in what they shop for and how they cook, they quickly united when asked if they felt the U.S. food supply was safe. They all responded with "no," but had different reasons.

"There are too many people handling it," says JeanAnn, who has two grown children and a husband who helps her with the shopping.

"They want the animals bigger and heavier so they can make more money on them," Ron says. "They shoot them up with hormones and steroids and things like that to get (the animal) to grow bigger and faster."

However, most of their concern was aimed toward the retail industry, and away from the producers. One panelist said,

“The grocery stores that were on the news were taking stuff that was expired and rubbing the expiration dates off to change them.”

The consumers did take some of the responsibility of delivering safe food to their families, though, by preparing the food at a high enough temperature to kill the bacteria and to cook it thoroughly.

### The take-home message

David Corona, executive vice-president and director of strategy for Burson-Marsteller, says, “From an industry perspective, I think the gauntlet has been thrown. Consumers have said, ‘Give me the confidence to buy your product.’”

Other industry representatives, who participated in a reaction panel after the live focus group, agreed with Corona.

“I believe in a holistic approach. I believe each of us in this room, and each of us at this table, that we need to work together as a team to produce a safe and nutritious product and a great-tasting product for our consumer,” says Donnell Brown of R.A. Brown Ranch, Throckmorton, Texas. “I think one thing we have in our history going for us is a trust of the producer on the farm, and I think we need to sell that sizzle.”

### Different needs, different message

Susan Lambert, executive director of market research for NCBA, has been conducting in-depth market research for beef throughout the United States. She was asked how the results from the focus group compared with her research results.

“I would say that the results of what we heard here today were very consistent with what we have heard in other research over the last several years. One of the themes we heard running through this entire focus group today was consumers’ passion for eating food in general, and their passion for our product,” Lambert says. “But beyond that, we heard consumers that have

different needs and different barriers to consuming far more of our product.

“The bottom line here is that one message, one program doesn’t fit all consumers,” she adds.

Dayle Hayes, registered

dietitian and nutrition consultant for the Council for Women’s Nutrition Solutions, says that the beef industry needs to look at the opportunities and challenges presented by society.

“This is about consumer demand strategies, and we need

the consumers, the ones we saw today, in front of us at all times,” Hayes says. “We need to continue to get the knowledge that drives Americans towards a healthier future.”



► John Huston (far left), moderates a consumer focus panel that shared opinions on food preferences and food safety. The panel expressed positive attitudes towards beef when talking about favorite foods, but expressed concerns over the safety of the U.S. food supply.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NCBA

### Checkoff invests \$2.8 million into grilling program

Members on the consumer panel expressed their desire to grill, and they gave several examples of their favorite meats to put on the grill. Each of the consumers confirmed they grilled at least two to three times per week, according to a news release from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA).

This summer, the beef checkoff funded a \$2.8 million grilling promotion to encourage Americans to buy more beef. The program was an integrated retail marketing effort designed to deliver one clear message: Steak is “The King of the Grill.”

The program attracted participation by 35 state beef councils and some 6,100 retail grocery stores, including Wal-Mart, Kroger, Albertson’s and Safeway. They utilized 3,700 floor graphics, 109,000 cart signs, 800 window posters and millions of brochures and recipes.

“The objective of our summer grilling program was to encourage consumers to choose beef when grilling and to grill it more often,” said Bernie Thon, manager of retail promotions for NCBA.

Studies show that many consumers prepare steaks for summer holidays and special occasions, but they grill steaks less often for everyday family dinners. The beef checkoff-funded program used point-of-sale, radio advertising, public relations and radio promotions in select markets to communicate to consumers that steak makes a terrific everyday grilling option.

In June, 21 television stations participated in a satellite media tour that promoted grilling beef. In July, a radio media tour on grilling aired more than 450 segments, generating more than 16.5 million impressions. Radio advertising has reached 72% of the target nine times. Public relations activities have generated more than 363 million media impressions.



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE VELDMAN

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