

Confidence in Ag Improving

New surveys suggest consumers feeling more comfortable, confident with food production.

by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

Efforts to reach consumers with accurate information about American agriculture appear to be working, according to results from two surveys conducted in the later months of 2014.

The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) conducted its annual Consumer Trust Research among 2,005 consumers for the eighth consecutive year, and CEO Charlie Arnot reports that the 2014 results revealed positive trends when it comes to attitudes about the food system compared to 2013.

“We’ve seen improvement in the number of people thinking food production is moving in the right direction,” says Arnot.

Specifically, when asked if the food system was headed in the right direction, 42% of respondents said yes. That’s up 8% from 2013.

By segment, the study showed:

- ▶ Only 33% of women believe the food system is on the wrong track, compared with 42% from last year.
- ▶ Nearly half of men, 48%, believe the food system is headed in the right direction. That’s up from 39% last year.
- ▶ In 2013, 43% of early adopters believed the food system was headed down the wrong track. That dropped to 36% in the 2014 survey, with 40% indicating it’s headed in the right direction.
- ▶ For the first time, the CFI survey asked the same question of moms, millennials and foodies. Nearly half of the foodies believe the food system is headed in the right direction, followed by millennials and then moms.

Arnot explains that an additional aspect of the survey includes asking consumers to rate their level of concern about 18 different “life issues” on a scale of 0 to 10. The issues include such broad topics as the rising cost of healthcare, U.S. unemployment, the affordability of healthy food, personal financial situation, and having enough food to feed people in and outside the United States.

The 2014 responses indicated the following top five concerns: rising cost of healthcare (72%), rising cost of food (72%), U.S. economy (70%), keeping healthy food



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affordable (70%) and rising energy costs (66%).

“Concerns for costs and safety are usually the top issues on consumers’ minds,” Arnot notes. He also points out that in 2014 the lowest ranked concern among U.S. consumers responding to the survey was “having enough food to feed people outside the U.S.” (33%).

To this he says, “Sharing messages about having abundant agriculture to feed the world is not going to be as compelling of a talking point. Instead, U.S. consumers want to hear what agriculture is doing to keep healthy food affordable.”

He continues, “The good news is we can talk about how we utilize technology and systems to do that. That’s the point we should be emphasizing.”

Another interesting aspect of this year’s survey asked consumers where they get information, as well as who they trust as information sources.

Regarding where consumers go for information, Arnot says, “It’s no longer TV.” This is the first year the CFI survey results showed online websites as the top source for information across

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information across consumer sectors, including moms, early adopters, and millennials. Interestingly, moms’ second-highest-ranked source for information is family.

Additionally, who do consumers trust as information sources? Arnot says this revealed some

of the best news for farmers and ranchers. In the ranking, farmers and ranchers were at the top of the list as a credible source, along with university scientists; whereas, Dr. Oz was ranked at the bottom. “People trust you more than they trust Dr. Oz! People need to hear your voice; you are a trusted voice on ag and food issues,” Arnot emphasizes for farmers and ranchers.

That said, he cautioned that sharing messages with consumers takes time.



“Those in ag are accustomed to fixing everything in the next cycle of production,” he explained. “With the public, building trust needs a longer horizon and must be done over time.”

Iowa survey goes further

An annual survey of more than 350 food-minded Iowans indicates similar trends in improved consumer awareness and understanding about how their food is grown.

More importantly, it reveals that farmers and foodservice partners who have formed the Iowa Food & Family Project (Iowa FFP) are “moving the needle” of consumer trust and confidence in a real and positive way, says Aaron Putze, who is coordinator for Iowa FFP.

The Consumer Pulse survey, conducted by Campaign HQ of Brooklyn, Iowa, polled 353 health-conscious Iowans who are mostly female, highly educated and affluent and make the majority of their household’s food purchases. Respondents were queried on a variety of food topics, their familiarity with the Iowa FFP, and how that familiarity changes their perceptions about today’s farms and food system.

It found that 95% of respondents said they are “very” and “somewhat” knowledgeable about how the food they purchase is produced, up 6 percentage points from last year and 9 points from 2012. The survey also found 81% of people have a positive impression about farming.

Fifteen percent of respondents said farmers “do things right regardless of financial benefit,” up 6 percentage points from last year.

In addition, 31% of those surveyed were familiar with the Iowa FFP, up 6 points from a year ago.

Their awareness of Iowa FFP matters, says Putze. When compared to the overall sample, those familiar with Iowa FFP were:

- ▶ 13% more likely to say they have a positive image of farming;
- ▶ 10% more confident that farmers care for the well-being of their livestock;
- ▶ 9% more confident that farmers protect the environment; and
- ▶ 9% more trusting that farmers balance doing what’s right with financial considerations.

“What these numbers tell us is that we’re influencing the food influencers,” Putze says. “Those involved in the Iowa FFP have a passion for helping Iowans be healthier, happier and more informed about the food they love and the farmers who grow it.

“Our work is groundbreaking, and the

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results are real, positive and measurable,” he adds.

Additionally, the survey results showed:

- ▶ 71% said farmers were doing a good job caring for the well-being of livestock and poultry (up 11% over the previous year). Only 6% of respondents held a negative opinion of farming or were indifferent.
- ▶ There was an 11% increase in the respondents who believe that farmers are doing a good job of caring for their livestock.
- ▶ There was a 5% increase in peoples’ trust that farmers are doing a good job in caring for air, soil and water quality.
- ▶ 61% of those surveyed believe growers “balance doing what’s right” with profit.

- ▶ 14% think farmers are “driven solely by profit,” down four points from last year.

The Iowa Food and Family Project was launched in 2011 to facilitate greater confidence among food-minded Iowans about how food is grown and acquaint them with the farmers who grow it. It involves nearly 40 commodity and foodservice partners, including the Iowa Beef Industry Association.

Also of note from the survey, food labeled “local” was viewed most positively,

at 62%, compared to hormone-free (48%), antibiotic-free (43%), natural (27%), organic (25%) and non-GMO (22%). Those who believe food labeled organic is better than non-organic food declined 11% over the previous year. The survey also indicated consumers were less concerned with quality of food (over the previous year), but more concerned with price (up 7%).



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.*

For more information

- ▶ To read the full report from the Center for Food Integrity’s 2014 research, visit www.foodintegrity.org/research/2014-research.
- ▶ To view results from the 2014 Iowa Consumer Pulse Poll, visit <http://iowafoodandfamily.com/pdf/IowaFFP2014ConsumerPulseSurveyResults.pdf>.