



with Millennials

Checkoff-funded study evaluates perceptions and effective methods to better reach millennial consumers.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

What was a “trend” five to 10 years ago has become mainstream today: The majority of consumers want to know where their food comes from and how it was produced or raised.

Rick Husted, vice president of strategic planning and market research with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), a contractor to the National Beef Checkoff Program, acknowledges that consumers have varying degrees of how much information they want about their food — but the common theme is that most consumers want some information.

Husted points out that typically today’s consumers are getting the “answers” to their

35 Keys to Success Consumer Relations

food-related questions online. He notes this may — or may not — be factual information, saying, “Given advancements in the ability to communicate broadly and find information quickly, activists have become much more adept at spreading propaganda that can negatively impact perceptions of agriculture and related production practices.”

He adds, “Out of concern that these perceptions could have a lasting negative impact on consumer confidence, the beef industry needs to consider being more

proactive and transparent when communicating the facts about the beef production process.”

One beef industry segment that millennial consumers (adults ages 18 to 35) especially appear to struggle with understanding — or perceive negatively — is the feedlot/feedyard sector, according to findings of one market research effort funded by the beef checkoff.

Consumers often associate the term “factory farming” with feedlots, Husted says. “This is not a term that the beef industry uses, but it is a term and perception that has been used by detractors to portray the beef industry and agriculture in a negative way.”

Thus, Husted explains, to better

Fig. 1: Which part(s) of the beef production process do you most associate with factory farming? Select all that apply.

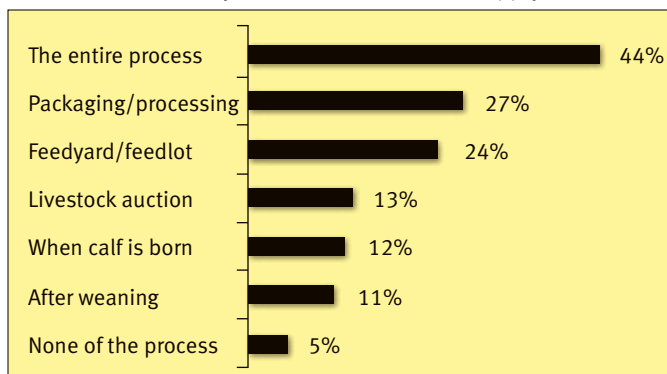


Table 1: How concerned are you about the following items in relation to beef production? Post-stimuli indicate response after watching narrated video.

Very/somewhat concerned about	Pre-stimuli	Post-stimuli	Percentage point improvement
Foodborne illnesses	63%	50%	13
Inhumane treatment	63%	47%	16
Hormone use	60%	45%	15
What cattle are fed	60%	41%	19
GMOs	57%	41%	16
Crowded conditions	53%	42%	11
Antibiotics	51%	41%	10

understand how to address these misunderstandings and negative perceptions of the beef production process and to identify effective means of communicating to millennial consumers, a checkoff-funded research project was conducted to gather insights from millennials. Husted notes that they were the demographic focus for the study because of their importance to the future of beef consumption.

Research findings

The research found that millennials' knowledge of the beef production process and feedyards is very limited. One in four millennials are familiar with the beef production process, and only 17% are familiar with feedyards.

Millennial consumers ranked their top concerns related to the entire beef production process, and these concerns included inhumane/crowded conditions for cattle, foodborne illness, hormone use, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and disease, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Roughly one-third of millennials who were surveyed indicated they are concerned (extremely/very) about factory farming and, when defining it, tend to associate the entire beef production process with factory farming rather than any individual stage or activity (see Fig. 1).

Although the information was not unanimous, Husted points out that this insight could imply that simply addressing a single aspect or two of the beef production process may not fully address millennial misperceptions.

What messages resonate?

After assessing general perceptions about factory farming and the beef production process, the second phase of the research included exposing millennials to information in a variety of formats to determine which, if any, would most positively impact their perceptions and/or concerns about beef production. Formats tested included a narrated video, two articles, a blog and a myth-specific video.

The results to this exposure found that information carrying fact-based messages about the overall production process — packaged in an engaging, visual manner — were most effective at improving millennial perceptions.

Each of these formats helped improve consumer perceptions about concerns specific to the beef production process (e.g., inhumane treatment, hormone use, etc.), and results also showed a considerable increase in positive perceptions of factory farming (i.e., accepting, hopeful, trusting) and a

Millennials' information sources

The beef checkoff-funded research collected data on where millennials are most likely to get information about the beef production process. They reported the following:

- ▶ from Internet search engines (47%),
- ▶ television news channels (39%),
- ▶ online news sources (35%),
- ▶ special TV programs (32%), and
- ▶ food and health blogs (31%).

Regarding credibility, millennials ranked the following as their most credible sources when it comes to receiving information about the beef production process.

- ▶ researcher/academic, such as a Ph.D. (56%),
- ▶ USDA (51%),
- ▶ family farm owner (51%)
- ▶ veterinarian (51%)
- ▶ FDA (50%)
- ▶ human health or medical professional (50%)

considerable decrease in negative perceptions of factory farming (i.e., suspicion, worry and uncertainty).

Husted reports that while all stimuli had a positive impact on millennial perceptions, the most positive outreach tool was the short video that used a narrator and examples to communicate the facts about the entire beef production process, from cow-calf operations through the channels, ultimately reaching the consumer (see Fig. 2).

Regarding the narrated video, millennials who were surveyed shared these comments after viewing the information about the beef industry:

- ▶ The main message to me in the video is that there are regulations in place to prevent mistreatment of animals and the spread of diseases.
- ▶ The beef is carefully cared for and

produced with the consumer in mind.

- ▶ I am somewhat relieved to know that the cows have access to fresh air, clean water and food.

The take-home message from this research is that with factual information, consumer misperceptions can be changed.

"When it comes to addressing these concerns, fact-based stimuli presented in a visually appealing, credible format work best," Husted says. "While other stimuli like articles and blogs are effective, this research found that a narrated video, showing the entire beef production process, resonated most with millennials and most effectively addressed concerns."



Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.