

Protecting Our Freedom to Operate

Using value-based communication to build and maintain consumer trust.

Story & photo by **Meghan Richey**

There are definite benefits to agriculture's switch from an agrarian model to an industrial model, such as greater productivity and food safety assurances. But, the public is less comfortable with it. They have less confidence in the current model of agriculture, and we're losing our consumers' trust," says Charlie Arnot, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Center for Food Integrity and president of CMA Consulting. "Without their trust, agriculture's social license and freedom to operate is at risk."

When industries are allowed to operate under social license they have fewer formal restrictions, legislation and regulations,

explains Arnot, who spoke at the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) annual meeting in April. The public trusts that industry's activities are consistent with social expectations and the values of the community and other stakeholders. Industry engagement is proactive by way of self-policing, education, best management practices (BMPs) and certification.

"Social license is a flexible, lower-cost approach characterized by high trust and autonomy. By contrast, social control is a rigid, bureaucratic, higher-cost approach characterized by lower trust and prohibition," he explains. Social control occurs when the public perceives the actions of industry to have greater social cost than social benefit. As a result, industry is controlled by more regulations, legislation and litigation, and industry engagement is reactive.

The tipping point between social license and social control can be a single triggering event or cumulative effects of numerous events. Arnot says that agriculture is walking a dangerous line and may soon experience even greater social control.

"We have to give customers, policy makers, community leaders and consumers 'permission to believe' that contemporary animal agriculture is consistent with their values and expectations," he says. Earning and maintaining consumer trust is vital to this. But who do consumers trust? And what effect does their trust have?

Who do they trust?

A 2007 survey of nearly 3,100 opinion leaders in 18 countries, called the Edelman Trust Barometer, sought to answer those questions.

The eighth annual survey underscored the importance of consumer trust in the marketplace, finding that 84% of consumers have refused to buy products or services from a company that did not have their trust. The survey also showed that consumers have more trust in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) than in business, media and government. And although NGOs were the most trusted institution, at 57%, consumers put the most trust in themselves and those individuals they perceive to be like them.

Survey respondents in developed countries said that when forming an opinion of a company they perceived information to be most credible from "someone like me." For several years the barometer has shown that consumers are placing increasing confidence in people like themselves, from

22% of Americans in 2003 to 68% in 2006.

The trend of self trust has now spread worldwide, with 68% of respondents in developed countries in 2007 indicating they also put the most trust in people like themselves.

"This presents a challenge for agriculture because our consumers hold us responsible for a number of issues but then trust themselves more than us to attend to those issues," Arnot says.

To reinforce this he cites results from a recent

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survey of 2,000 consumers nationwide who have the primary responsibility for purchasing food for preparation within their household. The survey, commissioned by the Center for Food Integrity, showed that consumers hold farmers and food companies most responsible for food safety, yet they say they have significantly higher trust in themselves than they do in producers and food companies.

Consumers hold federal regulatory agencies and farmers most responsible for ensuring environmental protection, the survey shows; however, they say they trust themselves significantly more than any other group when it comes to protecting the environment.

Consumers assign farmers and advocacy groups with significantly more responsibility



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for the humane treatment of farm animals than any other groups. But again, the survey shows consumers say they trust people like themselves significantly more than any other group. They have only a moderate level of trust that the treatment of animals on U.S. farms is consistent with their values and ethics. Additionally, only 18% of consumers strongly agree with the statement “U.S. meat is derived from humanely treated animals.”

Arnot also says that only 54% of consumers strongly agree that they trust food produced in the U.S. more than they trust food produced in foreign countries. Only 33% strongly agree that U.S. food is amongst the safest in the world, and only 25% strongly agree that they are as confident today in the safety of the food they eat as they were one year ago.

Values in a science-based culture

Arnot says a key factor in understanding why consumers don't trust us is that we don't speak the same language, so to speak.

“Even though we care and are committed to doing the right thing, we still struggle in building trust,” Arnot says. “The problem is that consumers ask farmers questions based on values, and farmers answer those questions with science and economics. We need to answer with values that match our consumers' moral motivations.”

There are five global values that transcend geography and cultural differences, he explains. These global values are compassion, responsibility, respect, fairness and truth. Additionally, Americans have seven identified primary values, including: personal liberty, responsibility to care for family, responsibility to care for self, work, spirituality, honesty/integrity and fairness/equality.

“When consumers speak, it's important for agriculture to note the values that they are conveying. For them to trust us, they must see that we also have those same values,” Arnot says, noting that agriculture could learn a lot from psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who developed a theory involving six progressing stages of moral reasoning. From punishment in Stage 1 to universal ethical principles in Stage 6, Kohlberg's theory explains the values that motivate us to behave ethically. (See sidebar, “Kohlberg's moral hierarchy.”)

“When consumers ask agriculture

the question, ‘Will you be responsible in protecting the environment?’ they're operating at Stage 6 and are motivated by the universal ethical principle of responsibility,” Arnot says. “Agriculture's typical response to that question is, ‘It's in our economic best interest to protect the environment,’ or ‘Science says it's best that we do.’ Consumers ask a Stage 6 question and we answer with Stage 2 moral reasoning, focusing on our own self-interests.

“No wonder consumers don't trust us. Our messages don't align with the values and stage of moral reasoning conveyed in their questions,” Arnot explains.

The better way to answer that question and others like it, he says, is to align our answers' moral motivation with their questions. For example, he suggests saying something like, “Yes, we're responsible. Agriculture has an ethical obligation to protect the environment,” which conveys the global value of responsibility.

“Consumers' confidence in you is more important in determining their trust than their perception of your competence,” he says. “Data and dollars don't win them over; values do.”

Balancing for success

“Sustainable agricultural production must balance three factors to be successful: profit, science and principles,” Arnot says. “Our actions must be economically viable, scientifically verified and ethically grounded.”

Factors that determine our economic viability include return on investment (ROI), cost control, productivity and efficiency. For our activities to be scientifically verified they must be data-driven, repeatable, measurable and specific. And the five global values of compassion, responsibility, respect, fairness and truth will be used to evaluate if agriculture's actions are ethically grounded.

“We have to build and communicate an ethical foundation for our activities and engage in value-based communication,” Arnot says, “if we want to build the trust with consumers that protects our freedom to operate.”



Kohlberg's moral hierarchy

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg developed six progressive stages of values, divided into three levels, to explain motivation for moral behavior. Trust is strengthened when parties see that they both have the same values.

Consumers typically communicate with agriculture using Stage 6 values, but agriculture replies with Stage 2 values of dollars and data. Charlie Arnot, chief executive officer (CEO) of The Center for Food Integrity says it's time for agriculture to understand psychology and use correctly aligned value-based communication.

Level 1: Pre-conventional

Stage 1. Obedience and punishment orientation. Actions are perceived as morally wrong if the person who commits them gets punished. The worse the punishment, the more “bad” the act is perceived to be.

Stage 2. Self-interest orientation. Stage 2 is characterized by the “what's in it for me” position, with moral behavior defined by what is in one's own best interest.

Level 2: Conventional

Stage 3. Interpersonal accord and conformity. Individuals are receptive of approval or disapproval from other people. They try to be a “good boy” or “good girl” to live up to these expectations, having learned that there is inherent value in doing so.

Stage 4. Authority and social-order orientation. It is important to obey laws and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society.

Level 3: Post-conventional

Stage 5. Social contract orientation. Social contracts replace the idea of laws and emphasize the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Stage 6. Universal ethical principles. Moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. One acts because it is right, not because it is instrumental, expected, legal or previously agreed upon.