

Inside the Consumer's Mind

What do consumers know about the beef industry? Recent studies reveal some startling information.

Story by
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Imagine for a moment that you were using the following sentence to describe what you do on your ranch:

"We produce cattle efficiently using innovative modern technology."

If you shared that sentiment with a fellow cattle producer, they'd likely respect your mission.

But try that same sentence on a consumer in a New York City grocery store, and chances are a vision of industrialization will come to their mind.

That's what Tracey Erickson, vice president of marketing for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), has learned from research with consumer focus groups.

"We [the cattle industry] know technology and efficiency are a good thing," Erickson says, but she explains that those terms have a negative connotation with consumers when used to talk about how their food was raised.

In recognizing that most consumers today are two or three

generations removed from the farm — and may not even know someone who lives on a farm — you can begin to understand why some of the beef industry's everyday terminology is foreign to them.

For example, another word that sounds industrial to consumers: producer. Instead, Erickson says consumers tend to relate more favorably to the terms rancher or cattleman.

More misconceptions

When it comes to understanding cattle breeds and Choice vs. Select quality grades, consumer confusion abounds, as well.

In a focus group that asked consumers to define Angus and USDA grades, Erickson shares that comments such as these were received:

"Select is a better portion, a better cut."

"Choice is a cut of beef. I'm not certain if Angus is a brand name, or is it a type of meat?"

"I'm not sure if it's a breed, a cut, or the way it is fed."

In consumers' defense, Erickson says, "They are not stupid. They just don't know our industry."

Realizing this, Erickson says there is an important need for the beef industry to engage with consumers, provide information about beef and use terminology that consumers understand and relate to positively.

Information invaluable

Erickson reports that when consumers are provided information about the beef industry, such as breeds and quality grades, their ability to answer questions about beef and make informed decisions with confidence is improved.

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) is working to communicate with consumers in a number of ways. Erickson says the message is simple: "CAB wants to communicate that we are a high-quality product that consumers can believe in and be excited about consuming."

She adds, "We are using cattlemen to tell the story." By featuring Angus cattlemen and women, CAB is striving to put a face on "real ranchers" for consumers.

This effort entails table-top tents in restaurants featuring photos and information about Angus ranchers as well as a consumer-focused website, www.certifiedangusbeef.com, featuring photos and short summaries profiling Angus ranchers across the country. (The website offers cooking lessons, beef cuts information, and online CAB ordering options, too.)

Three chefs on the CAB staff also travel the country and share the CAB message with consumers by cooking and offering samples of CAB at large events.

Erickson says Angus ranchers can reach out to consumers by hosting groups — from moms to chefs to political leaders — on their ranch.

"Many have never seen an animal up close, or met a cowboy ... and when they do have that opportunity, it is something they will remember forever," she explains.

Erickson encourages cattlemen to become ambassadors for the industry. She suggests watching the movie Food Inc. — "so you know what we are up against." The movie features many of the existing consumer perceptions about how food is raised.

The Masters of Beef Advocacy program offered through the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and a "Brand Ambassador" video tutorial now available on the CAB website are designed to help producers with consumer education efforts, too.

Women important

CAB's Tracey Erickson points out that women are an especially important target audience for the beef industry. She shares recent statistics revealing that despite the fact more than 60% of women work outside the home, they also do:

- 79% of meal planning,
- 76% of meal shopping,
- 77% of meal preparing, and
- 71% of meal cleanup.

"These programs help give cattlemen the tools to communicate in terms consumers understand," says Erickson.

She concludes, "The gap between consumers and ranchers is getting wider. It's a long road and we have to be engaged with consumers to help them understand our industry."

Looking ahead

What will consumers want and how will they view beef in the future?

Erickson anticipates that words like *sustainability* and *humane* will continue to be important to consumers. Both words repeatedly emerged in focus groups when consumers were asked what they cared about.

Health and fitness are also going to be on consumers' minds. Chef John Doherty, former executive chef of the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel in New York City, says, "The future is about eating responsibly." As examples, he says trends toward controlling portion size and eating several small meals a day instead of one big meal will emerge.

Doherty acknowledges that beef still has some negative connotations because of fat, but he says the message to consumers needs to be "Everything in moderation is healthy."

And he is confident beef will still be well-loved — and consumed — around the globe. "It's the world's favorite food. It is the tastiest meat protein that's out there."

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