

Keynote address: Believe. Engage. Connect.

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Abstract

Consumers are increasingly curious about food and farming today; in recent research by The Center for Food Integrity, 65% of consumers say they want to learn more about farming. Driving factors include heightened concerns about animal care and food safety, ingredients consumers don't understand, interest in the relationship between diet and health, and belief that "Big Food" and "Big Ag" will put profit ahead of public interest. Amy te Plate-Church will share research-based insights on current consumer attitudes and beliefs around animal agriculture, biotechnology, gene editing and other innovations that produce safe, healthy, and affordable food. Importantly, the presenter will provide recommendations about how farmers and the agriculture community can earn trust and maintain the social license for science-based tools and practices in dairy and meat production. Veterinarians have an important role in building consumer trust. They are uniquely considered a trusted messenger, having credibility and trust from the American public. Practitioners serve the critical role as trusted consultants for dairy and beef producers. This session will guide veterinarians to serve as effective spokespersons for animal care and practices used in food animal production, such as judicious use of antibiotics, hormones, animal handling, transport and animal care practices.

Key words: consumer trust, trust model, social license, freedom to operate, animal agriculture, animal care, science communication

The Social License and Freedom to Operate

Every organization and sector, no matter how large or small, operates with some level of social license. Social license is the privilege of operating with minimal formalized restrictions (regulation, legislation, or market-based mandates) based on public trust by doing what's right. An organization or industry is granted social license when members operate in a way that is consistent with the ethics, values, and expectations of their stakeholders, who may include consumers, customers, employees, the local community, policymakers, and the media.

Once lost, either through a single event or a series of events that reduce or eliminate public trust, social license is replaced with social control. Social control is regulation, legislation, litigation, or market action designed to compel an organization to perform to societal expectations. Operating with a social license is flexible and low cost. Operating with a

high degree of social control increases costs and bureaucratic compliance, and reduces operational flexibility (Figure 1).

The social license once enjoyed by farmers and food companies is at risk as a growing group of stakeholders raise questions about whether or not today's food production practices are worthy of public trust. Specific production practices and technologies have already lost – or are in danger of losing – their social license.

The question then becomes, what can be done to maintain public trust, grant social license and protect animal agriculture's freedom to operate?

A New Model for Building Trust

In 2006, Look East commissioned a meta-analysis of all the available research on trust in the food system. Through that analysis, done in partnership with Dr. Stephen Sapp, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, 3 primary elements were identified to drive trust in the food system – Confidence, Competence, and Influential Others (Figure 2).

Confidence is perceived shared values and ethics, a belief that an individual or group will do the right thing. Competence is about skills, ability, and technical capacity. Influential Others include family, friends, and online influencers, as well as respected, credentialed individuals like doctors, scientists, and veterinarians.

In late 2007, The Center for Food Integrity launched a national survey to determine the role of Confidence, Competence, and Influential Others in creating and maintaining trust in food. The study specifically asked consumers to rate their level of confidence, competence, and trust in various groups of influential others in the food system. Questions related to food safety, environmental protection, nutrition, animal well-being, and worker care.

The results of the survey were consistent and conclusive. On every single topic, consumers rated Confidence – or shared values – as 3 to 5 times more important than Competence in determining who they will trust (Figure 3). That research was peer reviewed and published in *The Journal of Rural Sociology*.⁴

These results served as a call to action for those in farming and food. Historically, agriculture and food producers focused communication with assumption that stakeholders will make logical data-based decisions if provided factual information. It has become obvious that it is ineffective to rely solely on science, or to attack the attackers as a means of protecting self-interest. Instead, those who influence social license must understand that while farms have changed and technology use has increased, farmers' commitment to doing



Figure 1. The Social License to Operate.

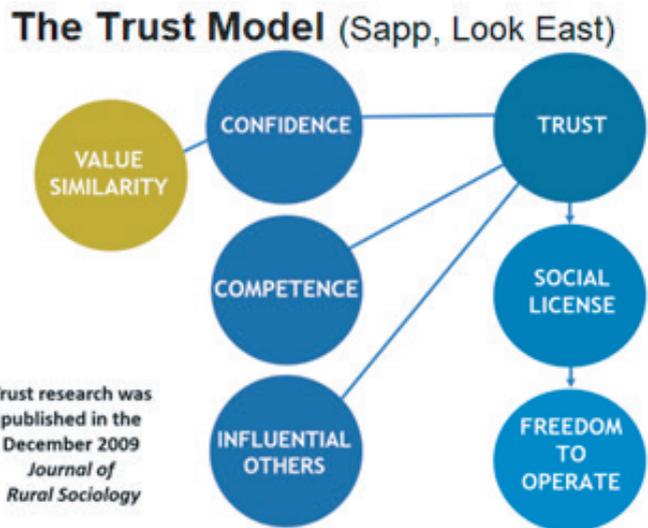


Figure 2. The Trust Model.

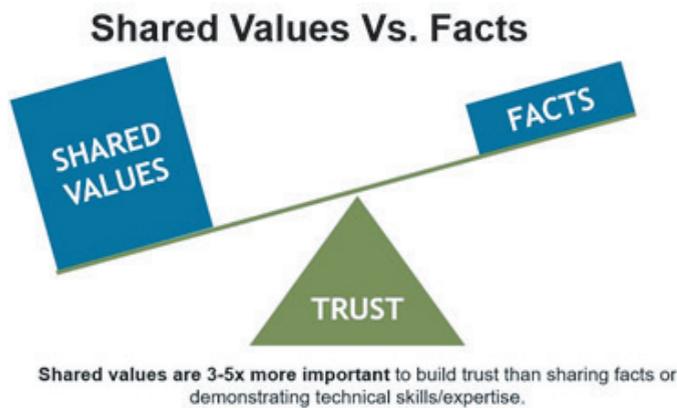


Figure 3. Shared Values vs Facts.

what’s right has never been stronger. Food and agriculture must ensure that business decisions and public conversations are grounded in ethics.

Science and facts remain important. Actually, facts are imperative; however, the way we use them is extremely sensitive with consumers.

New Ways to Engage

A clear theme in research by The Center for Food Integrity is that farmers and production experts can make a difference when they choose to engage by first establishing shared values and then providing factual, technical information that is relevant and meaningful to the audience. After Confidence has been established, individuals are more willing to consider technical information – or Competence – in their decision-making.

When engaging with consumers, the goal should not be to win a scientific or social argument. A more effective approach is to find meaningful ways to find common ground, introduce science, and encourage thoughtful, informed decision making. How the technical and scientific information is introduced is key.

When meeting people with differing opinions or perspectives about food and farming, more meaningful dialogue happens when we work to understand their viewpoint. Three simple steps help find common ground and begin to earn trust.

1. Set aside judgment and truly listen.
2. Acknowledge their viewpoint and ask questions to better understand their “why”.
3. Find common ground to express shared values, along with your experience and facts.

Whether in person, online, with family or perfect strangers, skepticism persists, and perception is the reality through which consumers make decisions. Let’s use concern and skepticism as the fuel for conversation and discovery.

Are Today’s Consumers Denying Science?

Let’s review how consumers interact with today’s food system.

- Never before have consumers wanted to know more about food yet lacked direct access to it. In recent research by The Center for Food Integrity, 65 percent of consumers indicated they want to know more about farming and food processing.
- Never before have consumers had as much contradictory information coming at them yet lacked a simple solution to decipher sound science and facts from rumors, hearsay, and flawed data.
- Never before have we been equipped with more digital apps, sites, and barcode readers, yet lacked the specialized education to interpret why the information being shared is there at all.

Consumers are almost completely disconnected from production of the food they eat, yet they are completely reliant upon the system from which it comes. They have many great questions, some concerns, and some skepticism about how the food system looks, where food is grown, how animals are raised and who is making decisions. But when those in the food system do provide information, sometimes it is perceived as biased – maybe even fake.

Fortified by their own sources of information and their own interpretations of research, doubters are often skeptical about scientific claims. This presents a challenge, and it offers unprecedented opportunity. How can those involved in farming and food have conversations with a consuming public that does not fully understand food production and is wired to doubt science?

Here are some factors we know to be true about people, psychology, and the way people communicate.

Factor 1: A psychological phenomenon we all experience is Cognitive Bias. It allows our preferences, beliefs, and biases to override information or sources that pose a new viewpoint. Often, when we search for information online, we find information that confirms what we already know or believe. We all have inherent biases based on our experiences. If we can assume positive intent, we have an opportunity to be less offended and move conversations forward.

Factor 2: The Dunning-Kruger effect causes people to overestimate their abilities.² The effect was discovered after a series of investigations found that people who scored in the lowest percentiles on tests of grammar, humor and logic also tended to dramatically overestimate their performance. We regularly see this on social media when our acquaintances post links to articles with a soliloquy on why everyone should avoid 1 type of food, or wear patches and drink supplements for more energy, or avoid all foods that contain a specific ingredient – or even too many ingredients.

Factor 3: We can be a very risk-averse society – especially when making decisions for our family. Take vaccines, for example. When fact-based information is provided, the information alone will not inspire confidence in the potential risk or benefits. When making the decision to vaccinate or not, research shows that people consider both information as well as those who are providing the information.¹ If it is perceived there is incorrect information related to risks or benefits, that also helps one choose whether the information and source are trustworthy.³ Most vaccinated diseases are nearly non-existent (save for recent measles outbreaks). When there does not appear to be clear/present risks, it's hard to rationalize introducing what is perceived as unnecessary risk (i.e. injecting a toxin into a child's body) when the benefit is already largely enjoyed by the vast majority of the population.

That brings us back to the original question... is science denial real? I say no. Not only because there are many other factors at play, but also because we know a bit about what it takes to build trust. There's hope to better connect with those questioning the food system.

Transparency is no Longer Optional

Farmers and all in the agriculture community must develop new models for authentic engagement. Growing skepticism about food safety, the size and scale of modern agriculture, and use of technology fuel online communities and non-governmental organizations that are raising issues and making their voices heard with increasing volume and frequency. The question for agriculture and food is no longer "Will you be transparent?" but rather, "How will you protect your social license in an age of radical transparency?"

Conclusion: It is about Trust

As consumers become increasingly distant from farming, as farmers increase use of technology, and as individuals depend on social media and their Influential Others to make decisions, animal agriculture must dramatically improve the commitment to build trust.

Building trust requires an increase in early stakeholder engagement, transparency, professionalism, assessment, and verification at all levels of food production and processing. Farmers must give consumers, food chain customers, policy-makers, and community leaders permission to believe that today's production practices are consistent with their values and expectations. If not, we will continue to see pressure to revoke social license and replace it with greater social control.

This new environment requires a new way of thinking, new ways of engaging and new methods of communicating if the goal is to earn trust, maintain social license, and protect freedom to operate.

Acknowledgements

Contributors include staff at Look East, in particular Charlie Arnot, Roxi Beck, and Terry Fleck. Findings are informed by consumer trust conducted by The Center for Food Integrity, a client of Look East, since 2007 through annual consumer trust surveys of a statistically-significant scale and more recently through the evolving method of digital ethnography. The Trust Model was originally developed by CMA Consulting LLC, a predecessor of Look East.

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