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Opinion (/News/Opinion)

Personal values are driving food decisions

By **Tim York** (/users/timyork) June 26, 2017 | 10:00 am EDT



Tim York's Centerplate

A small but growing number of consumers, especially the millennial crowd, are redefining food and health to match personal values and their worldview on social and environmental issues.

Is foodservice ready for this?

Younger segments are knowledgeable and passionate about social and environmental issues, according to reports from The Hartman Group. Millennials consider broader issues such as growing and production practices when deciding what to eat. They also factor in environmental and social justice issues into their purchase decisions. They want to support companies that share their values and concerns, but they struggle with additional costs.

That being said, Hartman reports a "transformation" underway in the packaged food and beverage marketplace where middle class consumers are trading up to new premium products that reflect higher quality sourcing and

production.

Values-driven consumers tend to cherry pick the issues they care about and link them with nutritional value as criteria for healthy or unhealthy food choices. For some, it's sustainability concerns. For others, it's how the supply chain treats its workers and/or livestock.

Still others choose foods from a variety of "free from" or "clean" foods. Pesticides, preservatives and chemical inputs are a no-no in this context. We've even picked up signs of consumers intimating they are making buying decisions based on whether or not companies align with liberal or conservative perspectives.

In the case of food, values often trump science on key issues.

Opinion data show that consumers don't believe scientists truly understand the risks associated with the likes of GMOs, climate change, the genetic profiling of disease or how to weigh in with research to ensure public safety. And if they don't believe science, whom do they believe?

Various studies show Americans tend to self-select information sources, and people tend to gravitate toward information sources that support their viewpoint. What's more, many consumers rely on stories shared within their own self-selected digital "bubbles." And social media increasingly drives those bubbles. This was especially true in the last presidential election, when "fake news" was the subject of much discussion and brands felt the brunt of consumers' values-based decisions.

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Kellogg's, after pulling ads from the alt-right site Breitbart, took criticism from consumers whose values were put on the defensive. The hashtag #DumpKelloggs began trending. On the foodservice front, Starbucks' stand for refugees following the recent immigration ban led some to #BoycottStarbucks. McDonald's took heat after a tweet went up criticizing the President. The tweet was removed and the company said the origins of the tweet were unclear, but not before criticism.

On one hand there's the traditional criteria for making healthful food selections — taste, convenience, nutrition and price. Foodservice and produce grower-shippers are used to those motivations.

On the other hand are consumers adding social issues to the mix — food safety, the safety of GMOs, local and organic foods, not to mention water availability and climate change. It's important to note how quickly the growing list of consumer concerns has grown and how quickly they may recede in the face of new data and concerns.

My guess is the produce sector and foodservice have not thought a lot about values-driven customer decisions.

All of this can be downright confusing and at times seemingly contradictory, according to a recent Food Foresight trends report.

For example, when comparing the nutrient content and bioavailability of agricultural crops of equal nutritional value, some would suggest that if the water needed to produce the products differ, the crop requiring less water may be a "better" food choice. While on the surface such arguments seem reasonable, it can quickly become complicated. How, for example, is the nutritional value of a similar food viewed if it has been genetically modified to need even less water?

If you're getting questions from customers now, you best start preparing thoughtful answers or risk them taking a walk to competitive venues.

As consumer interest in food and value-based decisions continue to take center stage, companies will be challenged and evaluated on our ability to match products to customer values. Operating from a level of "radical" transparency will be advantageous to serving this constituency.

Your reputation will ride on how well you respond strategically to value-driven customers and the inquiries that are sure to come your way.

Tim York is CEO of Salinas, Calif.-based Markon Cooperative. Centerplate is a monthly column on "what's now and next" for foodservice and the implications for produce. E-mail him at timy@markon.com (<mailto:timy@markon.com>).

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