

Consumers aware of factory farming; term creates negative impression

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Summary

An independent, national, random sample survey of U.S. adults funded by the beef checkoff and managed by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association found that a slight majority (57%) of American consumers have heard the term "factory farming" used to describe the way livestock are raised. For those who have heard the term, it creates a negative picture of animal agriculture.

Background

Activists who attack animal agriculture use the term factory farming to denigrate large-scale agricultural enterprises and the use of technology in livestock production. Indeed, activists are working hard to make factory farming a buzzword that connotes inhumane treatment of animals, use of dangerous chemicals and antibiotics that negatively affect human health and production of unnatural, unsafe food. An activist-produced animated cartoon attacking factory farming (called *The Meatrix* – see www.themeatrix.com) has become one of the most-viewed items on the Internet with a currently estimated 6 million viewings.

The activists use factory farming because it offers them an opportunity to create a picture of livestock production in the consumer's mind where the image is a little fuzzy, or absent altogether. For example, the consumer typically sees beef production at its opposite ends – cows and calves grazing peacefully in a field and then at the meat case or on a restaurant menu. In between there is more or less a blank spot. The activists work hard to fill this blank spot with unpleasant and unsettling pictures about conventional beef production and factory farming is the banner under which they operate.

Factory farming is an issue the beef industry must address by telling the positive, factual story of beef production. But how much traction has the activists' factory farming campaign achieved and how has it affected consumer perceptions? A consumer survey conducted at the end of September explored this.

The survey asked an initial question about meat consumption, which was used to screen out non-beef eaters. A total of 94 percent of the randomly selected respondents were beef eaters, 96 percent ate chicken, 85 percent were

pork eaters and 33 percent ate lamb. Only 2 percent of the sample ate no meat and were classified as vegetarians.

In the survey, 57 percent of respondents said they had heard the term factory farming used to describe the way livestock are raised. Groups more likely to have heard the term included men (64%) those with incomes greater than \$50,000 (64%), consumers in the Northeast (64%) and those with college degrees (68%). The following results relate to the respondents who had heard the term factory farming applied to livestock production. The margin of error for this group's responses is plus/minus 4.5 percent.

Certain animals come to mind

When asked what types of animals they associate the term factory farming with, 74 percent of respondents mentioned chicken. Fifty-one percent of respondents mentioned cattle with 35 percent mentioning beef cattle, 4 percent mentioning dairy cattle and 12 percent mentioning both. Because only 57 percent overall were familiar with factory farming, the group associating factory farming with cattle represents only 29 percent of the total sample. Following cattle were hogs (28%) and veal (6%). Less than 5 percent of respondents mentioned turkey, fish or sheep.

Groups more likely to mention cattle in connection with factory farming included younger consumers in the 18-34 age range (64%), consumers living in the Northeast (55%) and those with some college education (59%).

Factory farming means confinement

When asked what the term factory farming brought to mind, confinement topped the list with 32 percent of respondents mentioning something about animals being raised in pens, crates or cages. Animal health, including mentions of use of chemicals/steroids, health and disease concerns and cleanliness, was second with 26 percent of consumers mentioning these issues. A total of 21 percent of respondents mentioned issues related to animal treatment including inhumane treatment, abuse and animals being treated like machines on an assembly line.

Fifteen percent of consumers mentioned efficiency in connection with factory farming and made statements relating to economics and mass production. Perhaps surprising was the fact that only 8 percent of mentions about factory farming related to scale of operation (producing large numbers of animals) and ownership by big corporations.

Beef comes from factory farms

A total of 54 percent of consumers responding to the survey said they believe the beef they buy at the supermarket comes from animals raised in a factory farm setting while 17 percent said they weren't sure. Groups more likely to say the beef they buy comes from factory farmed animals include younger people age 18-34 (65%), families with children (60%) and non-whites (64%).

Of those consumers who think their beef comes from factory farms, 40 percent said they were concerned about the safety of beef. Groups with greater than average concerns were those in the Northeast (48%) and the South (45%), non-whites (55%) and those with high school or less education (46%).

Of the 29 percent of respondents who said they did not think their beef came from animals in a factory farm setting, the largest portion (21%) said they felt this way because they were familiar with agriculture. People 55 years and older (35%), retired people (35%) and those from the Mid-west (34%) were more likely to say their supermarket beef did not come from a factory farm.

Analysis

Trends analysis indicates that public trust in traditional institutions – business, government, media, even science – has severely eroded over the past couple of decades. As public trust in institutions has declined, the credibility of activist stakeholder groups has increased, filling much of the gap.

This erosion of trust also applies to institutions that produce food. For agriculture, the result of this erosion of trust is a desire by consumers to know where their food comes from. The symptoms are evident in increasing consumer interest in food that is organic, natural, sustainably produced, locally produced. This helps explain the growth

of specialty products that appeal to the consumers' desire for information that provides reassurance food is safe, healthful and produced in an environmentally friendly way. Since factory farming is positioned as antithetical to the things that reassure consumers about their food, this also provides insight into the effectiveness of the activists' campaign.

To deal with the erosion of trust, the beef industry is working to establish systems to ensure food safety and consistent quality from farm to fork. But, in addition, the industry needs to find ways to reach consumers directly and create conversations about beef, to find ways to tell the story of beef production in a positive, compelling and reassuring way.

Key Points

- A slight majority (57%) of consumers have heard the term factory farming associated with livestock production, and the term creates a negative picture of animal agriculture among those who have heard it.
- The largest group of consumers (74%) associate chicken production with factory farming but cattle production is second, mentioned by 51 percent of consumers familiar with the term.
- More than half (54%) of consumers familiar with the term factory farming believe the beef they purchase at the supermarket comes from animals raised in a factory farm setting.
- Forty percent of the consumers who think their supermarket beef comes from a factory farm are concerned about the safety of beef.