

Communicating to build, maintain consumer trust is smart business

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By **Charlie Arnot**

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

This quote, often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, sums up what The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) learned in what is now a peer-reviewed and published model for building trust in today's food system.

Research sponsored by CFI and conducted in partnership with Iowa State University shows that confidence (shared values) is three to five times more important than competence (skill and expertise) in building consumer trust. Specifically, the study measured what drives consumer trust in the areas of food safety, nutrition, worker care, the humane treatment of farm animals and environmental protection.

In our subsequent qualitative research, we learned that consumers trust farmers because they believe farmers share their values. Unfortunately, because of the change in size and structure and the use of technology in farming today, and the geographic and generational distance between farmers and consumers, they aren't sure today's agriculture still qualifies as farming. We see consumer alienation from agriculture and the food system expressed in increasing concerns about nutrition, food safety, affordability, environmental sustainability, animal welfare and other issues.

Some argue that maintaining public trust is a worthy goal, but not relevant to success in business. This outdated notion fails to recognize the financial benefit of maintaining the trust of stakeholders who can determine the level of social license or social control an organization enjoys. Maintaining the public trust that protects an organization's social license to operate is not an act of altruism, it is enlightened self-interest.

Every organization, no matter how large or small, operates with some level of social license. A social license is the privilege of operating with minimal formalized restrictions (legislation, regulation or market mandates) based on maintaining public trust by doing what's right. Organizations are granted a social license when they operate in a way that is consistent with the ethics, values and expectations of their stakeholders. Stakeholders include customers, employees, the local community, regulators, elected officials and others who have an interest in how the organization impacts them.

Once lost, either through a single event or a series of events that reduce or eliminate stakeholder trust, social license is replaced with social control. Social control is regulation, legislation, litigation or market mandates designed to compel the organization to perform to the expectations of its stakeholders. Operating with a social license is more flexible and can be done at lower cost. Operating with a high degree of social control increases costs, reduces operational flexibility and increases bureaucratic compliance.

Every sector of the food system, whether farmers, manufacturers, branded food companies, grocery stores and restaurants, is under ever-increasing pressure to demonstrate it is operating in a way that is consistent with stakeholder values and expectations. Groups opposed to today's food system are pursuing litigation, pressuring branded food companies, and initiating legislation to change how the system operates.

Historically, when under pressure to change, the industry has responded by attacking the attackers and using science alone to justify current practices. Too frequently the industry confused scientific verification with ethical justification. Not only are these approaches ineffective in building stakeholder trust and support, they increase suspicion and skepticism that the food industry is worthy of public trust.

As consumer values change, the food system needs to evaluate and potentially modify current practices and fundamentally change the way it communicates to maintain consumer trust. Meaningful stakeholder engagement and effective values-based communication with consumers are essential to maintaining the trust that protects social license.

Building a truly sustainable food system requires balance. Maintaining public support requires our practices to be ethically grounded and consistent with the values of our stakeholders. Objective, independent data is essential to evaluate progress and support scientific claims of improvement. Reasonable profitability is essential to assure economic viability. It is only by balancing these sometimes competing interests that we can have a food system that is truly sustainable and supported by our stakeholders and the rational majority of consumers.

Today's new consumer environment requires innovative ways of engaging the public and new methods of communicating if we want to build trust. We need consumers to understand that while our systems have changed and

our use of technology has increased, our commitment to do what's right has never been stronger. Only by demonstrating that our practices and our products are consistent with the values and expectations of the public can we maintain the social license necessary for sustainable success.

Charlie Arnot is the chief executive officer of the Center for Food Integrity, www.foodintegrity.org, a non-profit organization established to build consumer trust and confidence in today's food system.