

Further discussion surrounding consumer education generated the following ideas:

- Work more collaboratively with consumer advocacy groups.
- Proactively address the need to have a plan in place to reassure consumers in the event of another beef safety issue, whether real or perceived.
- Identify spokespeople and information sources that are deemed credible by consumers. Veterinarians, university researchers, as well as farmers and ranchers, were all identified as spokespeople whose messages would resonate with consumers. Retailers and foodservice operators also represent a critical link, as they are the interface between the industry and end users.
- Utilize consumers who demonstrate reasonable behavior and allow food safety risks to be put in perspective to connect with other consumers and communicate food safety messages.

The beef industry works aggressively to promote product benefits related to both nutrition and safety. One summit participant asked if there are opportunities to incorporate the safety attributes of beef into those promotional messages.

Conclusion

The beef industry has learned there is no “silver bullet” when it comes to creating a safe product. Years of industry research and collaboration have proven that a multiple hurdle approach is the best way to create the safest product possible. A similar multiple hurdle approach with collaborative efforts from industry, educators and government may be the best way to inform consumers about beef safety and the industry’s commitment to providing the safest product possible.

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Funded in Part by The Beef Checkoff



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2008 Beef Industry Safety Summit

Consumer Beef Safety Perceptions and Education Summary

Introduction

Understanding consumer perceptions about beef safety is critical to a successful industry. As a result, consumers’ opinions, as well as food safety education and outreach were a focus of discussion during the 2008 Beef Industry Food Safety Summit.

Presentations encompassing consumer knowledge about foot and mouth disease (FMD), government food safety education programs, as well as a consumer panel designed to unearth consumer opinions about beef safety prompted discussions on opportunities and challenges for the beef industry to better incorporate consumers into beef safety solutions.

Consumers and beef safety

A consumer panel gave 2008 Beef Industry Food Safety Summit attendees a snapshot look at public perceptions about beef safety. John Lundeen, executive director of market research for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) moderated the panel and also presented information gathered from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) and retail consumer hot lines. One of the notable findings from both the panel and the consumer hot line information was consumers initially adapt to food safety issues by modifying their behavior. Consumer concerns grow when an issue is local, affects foods they commonly eat or is covered extensively by the media. When a food safety issue falls within those parameters, awareness is heightened to the level that consumers may modify their purchase decisions.



The consumer panel participants at the Summit were described as being “middle of the road.” They were randomly selected to fit age and lifestyle categories, and individuals that were the most or least concerned about food safety were not included.

One of the consumers said during the panel, “I expect the industry to do its best to follow the regulations and have pride in their product.” Prompted by that statement, Lundeen asked summit participants in a follow-up session to suggest ways for the beef industry to better communicate its commitment to food safety, public health and the industry’s improving food safety track record.

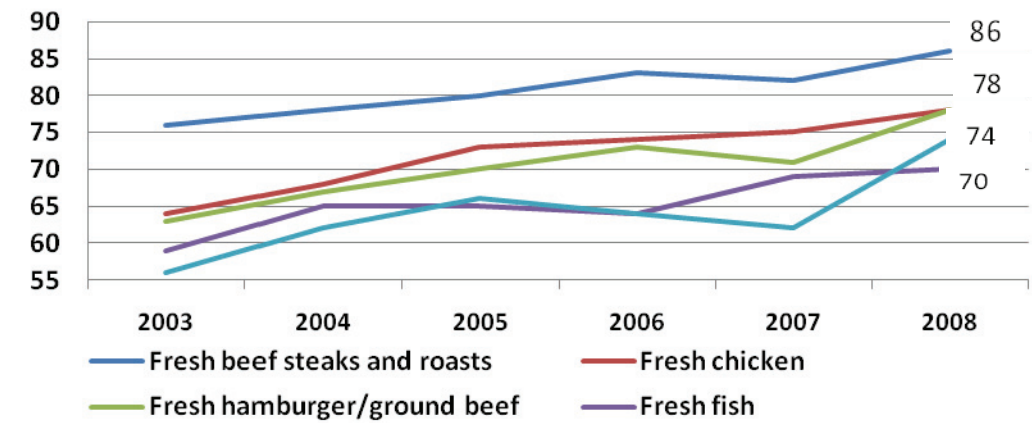
In general, the consumers on the panel conveyed the following themes:

- “If there is a food safety problem, it means someone was negligent.”
- “The media is not balanced in its coverage of food safety issues.”
- “There are things in the production system that are beyond my control.”
- “Regulations and standards are in place for a reason. If one is broken, then it means the product is unsafe.”
- “The USDA seal of inspection ensures there is a system in place to protect consumers.”

Lundeen presented additional consumer checkoff-funded safety tracking research indicating, overall, the beef industry is making progress in communicating to consumers about safety. There is still work to be done, especially in the ground beef category.

Consumer meat thermometer usage was discussed as an example of consumer education needs. For most consumers, using a meat thermometer is not an everyday behavior. Checkoff-funded research has demonstrated that only 17 percent of consumers use a

Yearly average percentage of Americans rating A or B grade on fresh meat: beef steaks /roasts, chicken, hamburger/ground beef, fish and ground pork.

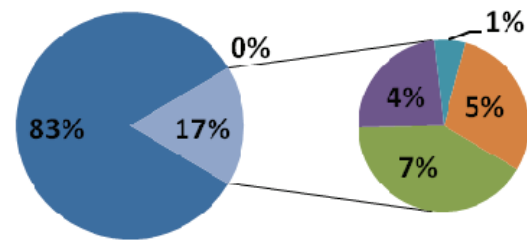


Source: Ipsos Public Affairs, 2007-2008

food preparation and improper holding temperatures.

Thermometer Usage is Minimal for Ground Beef

■ Yes ■ No ■ Most times ■ Occasionally ■ Rarely ■ Every time



Use meat thermometer when cooking ground beef

Rate of thermometer use

October 2007 data

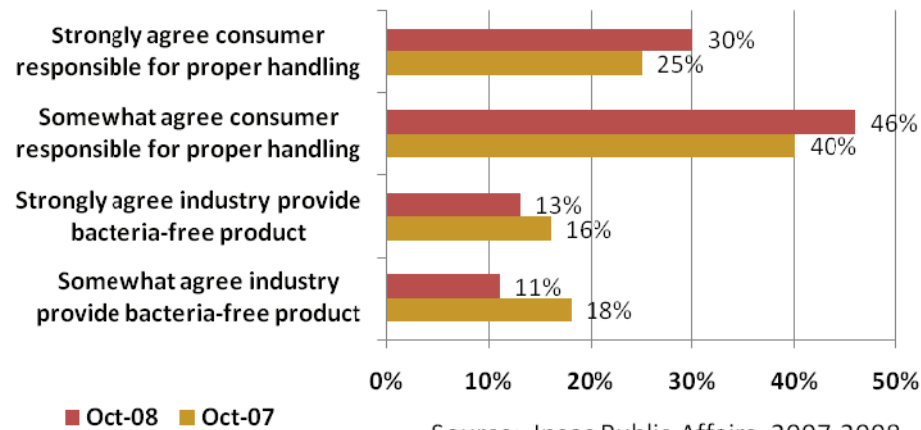
Early government food safety educational programs depended on a variety of services and agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Department of Agriculture, State Cooperative Extension programs and the food industry. Early educational programs had little consistency in approach. Citing an FDA fact sheet from 1982, Bruhn said the instruction to “handle food in a sanitary manner” with no explanation of what the term “sanitary” might entail. The brochure recommended consumers “cook food thoroughly,” but included no recommended temperatures. Early educational pieces typically did not cover pathogens of concern today. Quoting a textbook from 1980, Bruhn noted there was no mention of *E. coli* O157:H7.

thermometer when preparing ground beef.

Christine Bruhn, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California, Davis gave a presentation to Safety Summit attendees that highlighted how changes in food production and distribution have changed the way consumers respond to safety issues. Additionally, Bruhn’s presentation examined the evolution of government food safety education programs.

According to Bruhn, consumer reactions to foodborne disease outbreaks have changed over the years. Initially, outbreaks were an acute situation and prompted a local investigation. Typically, only a limited number of people were exposed and the outbreak was often caused by an error in

Percentage of consumers that feel the beef industry should provide a product free of bacteria and foodborne pathogens versus those consumers that feel that proper handling and cooking by end users is the key to safely enjoying foods and avoiding foodborne illness.



Source: Ipsos Public Affairs, 2007-2008

Consumer food safety education took a more collaborative turn when the Partnership for Food Safety Education was founded in 1997. This not-for-profit organization of government agencies, food industry representatives, nutrition and food safety professional organizations, as well as consumer groups established a mission to educate consumers using four simple practices to protect themselves from bacteria (BAC) and reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

The 1993 *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak associated with hamburgers from a fast food establishment and subsequent actions by the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) created the need to reach out more aggressively to consumers about food safety education. When FSIS declared *E. coli* O157:H7 an adulterant and required safe food handling labels on raw meat and poultry, it became clear that consumers needed more detailed food safety communications.

“At this point, we have a new scenario for foodborne disease outbreaks,” said Bruhn. “Outbreaks now involve low level or intermittent pathogen contamination versus the large number of microorganisms that were associated with historic outbreaks.” In present-day outbreaks, according to Bruhn, the source of contamination is not often easily identified and outbreak investigations are complex and typically involve multiple locations throughout the country.

“Food safety education cannot be an isolated task,” said Bruhn. “What is said by consumers about their behavior and what they retain from educational programs are all affected by issues that arise.”

huge economic repercussions. Media coverage of the issue could be extensive as demonstrated when outbreaks occurred in the United Kingdom.

According to checkoff-funded research, most consumers incorrectly believe FMD affects humans (72 percent) and that they can contract it from infected meat (69 percent). Consumers also confuse FMD with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), which does have food safety implications. An FMD outbreak would likely create supply issues due to the necessity to control livestock movement, and according to checkoff research, many consumers would associate a shortage of beef in grocery stores with a safety recall.

These data demonstrate the need for a comprehensive communications strategy that could be implemented immediately to preserve consumer confidence in the event of a domestic FMD outbreak. Consumer research revealed veterinarians are perceived to be one of the most credible sources of information. The current checkoff-funded communication strategy, developed in cooperation with other livestock groups, is based on the consumer research and integrated with state and federal animal health communications programs.

The presentations about consumer opinions of beef safety issues prompted discussions among the Summit participants on ways to more effectively integrate consumer education with the industry’s safety initiatives. Being proactive and having communication messages in place is critical, as was demonstrated by the FMD presentation as well as the industry’s past experiences

with BSE. Having a consistent, uniform, science-based message from all segments of the industry that a problem has been identified and is being addressed helps to preserve consumer confidence.

The general media’s tendency to focus on negative issues was described as one of the largest challenges to effective communications with consumers about beef

“People cannot get foot-and-mouth disease – it only affects animals.”



“Foot-and-mouth disease can affect humans who eat meat from infected animals.”



One such issue that may adversely affect consumer confidence, even though it is not a food safety issue, is a domestic outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD). Based on consumer research funded by the Beef Checkoff, most consumers do not realize that FMD is strictly a zoonotic disease.

Since FMD is so contagious among cloven-hoofed livestock, an outbreak in the United States could have

safety. One participant cited the *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak associated with spinach (September 2006) and the favorable coverage that the beef industry received regarding its efforts to address safety issues. “It took another industry’s crisis before our strides to improve beef safety were positively portrayed by the media,” noted the participant.