

Ethics, Values & Science: Finding the Right Mix for Building Consumer Trust

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A new model for building trust

In 2006, CMA commissioned a meta-analysis of all the available research on the question of trust in the food system. Through that analysis, done in partnership with Dr. Stephen Sapp, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, we were able to determine three primary elements that drive trust in the food system. Those three elements are confidence, competence and influential others (Fig. 1).

Confidence is related to perceived shared values and ethics and a belief that an individual or group will do the right thing. Competence is about skills, ability and technical capacity. Historically this is where we have focused our communication about food, under the assumption that stakeholders will make logical data-based decisions if provided credible information. Influential others includes family and friends as well as respected, credentialed individuals like doctors and veterinarians.

In late 2007, CMA launched a nationwide consumer survey on behalf of The Center for Food Integrity to determine the role that confidence, competence and influential others play in creating and maintaining trust. We specifically asked consumers to rate their level of confidence, competence and trust in various groups of influential others in the food system. We asked 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 issue, confidence, or shared values, was three to five times more important than competence for consumers in determining who they will trust in the food system. That research has been peer reviewed and was published in December, 2009 in *The Journal of Rural Sociology*. (Fig. 2)

These results should serve as a call to action for those in the food system. No longer is it sufficient to rely solely on science or to attack our attackers as a means of protecting self-interest. This new environment requires new ways of engaging and new methods of communicating if we want to build trust, earn and maintain social license and protect our freedom to operate.

Transparency is no longer optional

Today, anyone with a cell phone is an on-the-scene reporter. Research over the past four years clearly indicates that consumers increasingly go online to look for information to answer their questions about food. The power of social media to change the food system became clear in 2012 when concern over Lean Finely Textured Beef (LFTB) by a mommy blogger in Houston created an online firestorm that drove leading branded food companies, restaurants and grocery chains to eliminate a product that was supported by science.

In today's age of unbridled social media food system stakeholders have to develop new models for authentic engagement. Growing skepticism about food safety and the use of technology fuel online communities that are raising issues and making their voices heard with increasing volume and frequency. In this dynamic new environment producers, processors and distributors are inextricably linked to their customers and NGOs interested in food issues. The question for food companies is no longer "*will you be transparent,*" but rather, "*how will you protect your social license in an age of radical transparency?*"

New models for building trust

The food system has an incredible challenge and opportunity ahead. By mid-century we have to more than double food production to meet the needs of more than 9 billion people. We have to produce more food by the end of this century than we've produced in the last 10,000 years combined. To meet that challenge we have to embrace new models of public engagement that build and maintain public trust and our social license to operate.

We need stakeholders who control social license to understand that while our systems have changed and our use of technology has increased, our commitment to doing what's right has never been stronger. We need to be able to verify our claims with objective science and we have to be able to continue to operate profitably if we want to survive. We need to adopt systems and practices that are ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable. (Fig. 3)

It is only by achieving and maintaining this balance that we can create systems that are truly sustainable. Each side of the sustainability triangle has stakeholders focused on maintaining the strength of that side, even at the expense of maintaining balance. There may be times when stakeholders have to look beyond short term self-interest to foster truly sustainable food systems.

If food system practices are not ethically grounded they will not achieve broad-based societal acceptance and support. If they are not scientifically verified there is no way to evaluate and validate the claims of sustainability, and if they are not economically viable they cannot be commercially sustained. For a system to be truly sustainable, it has to be

ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable. This model encourages stakeholders to look for balance in an effort to find true sustainability.

When Science and Consumers Collide

Fortified by their own sources of information and their own interpretations of research, doubters have declared war on scientific consensus. How can the food system connect with consumers who reject science?

CFI's 2014 consumer trust research provides a model for making complex and controversial technical information relevant and meaningful – particularly to moms, millennials and foodies – bringing balance to the conversation, while helping consumers make informed decisions about food and building trust in today's food system.

Technological advances in food and agriculture have provided countless benefits to society, but more must be done. Finding better ways to support the informed public evaluation of technologies and the food production system is a challenge.

The goal should not be to win a scientific or social argument, but to find more meaningful and relevant methods to introduce science in a way that encourages thoughtful consideration and informed decision making. How technical and scientific information is introduced is key to supporting informed decision making.

A clear theme in CFI's 2014 survey results is that food system 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. After Confidence has been established, people are more willing to consider technical information, or Competence, in their decision-making process. The survey results also clarified elements of a message which are most believable when it relates to communicating science. (Fig. 4)

Conclusion – It's about trust

As we increase both the distance most consumers have from farming, food processing and the level of technology we implement in food production we have to dramatically improve our ability and commitment to build trust with our customers and other stakeholders who grant social license. This will require a new way of thinking, a new way of operating and a new way of communicating.

Building trust requires an increase in early stakeholder engagement, transparency, professionalism, assessment and verification at all levels of the production and processing system. (Fig. 5) We have to give customers, policy makers, community leaders and consumers permission to believe that today's food system is consistent with their values and expectations. If we fail we will continue to see pressure to revoke our social license to operate and replace it with greater social control.

To be successful we have to build and communicate an ethical foundation for our activity and engage in value based communication if we want to build the trust that protects our freedom to operate. We need to demonstrate our commitment to practices that are ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable.

To download the 2014 CFI Consumer Trust Research report or learn more log on to www.foodintegrity.org or email CFI at learnmore@foodintegrity.org.

Fig. 1

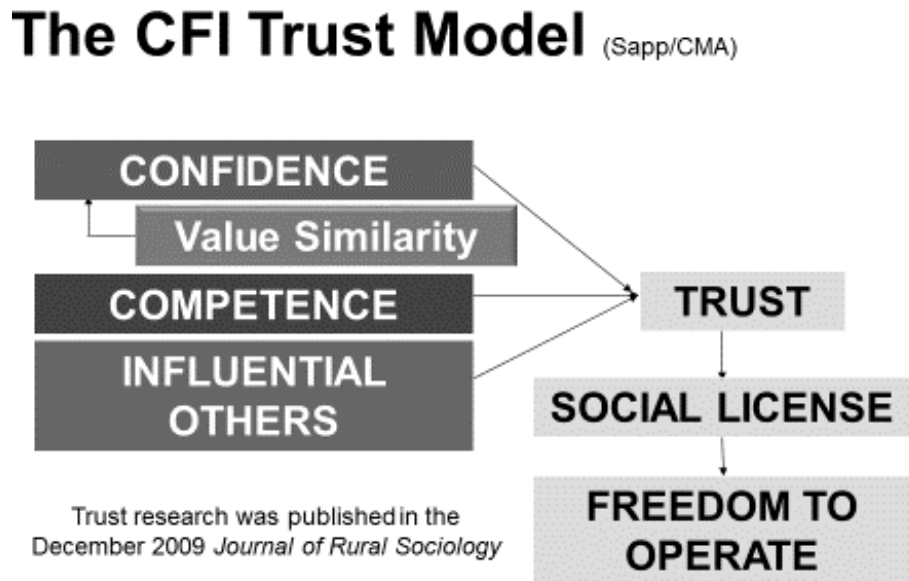


Fig. 2

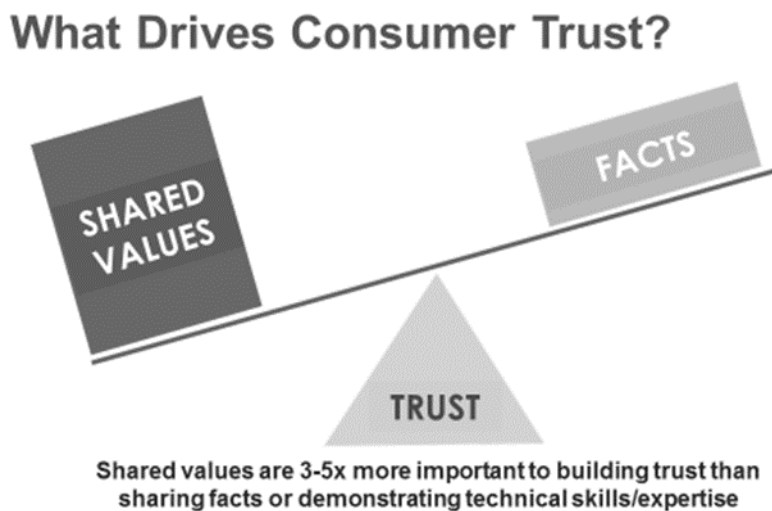


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Most Impactful Elements for Believability

| Fundamental Message Elements | |
|------------------------------|---|
| ✓ | Accurate Presentation of Risks: Present known risks since known risks “trump” unknown risks by accurately communicating safety facts |
| ✓ | Openness/Transparency: Acknowledge both sides of the story, provide level of depth so it does not look like “holding back,” avoid oversimplification |
| ✓ | Unifying Message: Singular, compelling message that touches the deeper drivers of human behavior - values |

| Outrage Factors | |
|-----------------|--|
| ✓ | Control: Government agencies address risks competently |
| ✓ | Process: Company/Organization/Agency is listening, engaging and providing information |

Source 2014 CFI Research

Fig. 5

Consumers Primarily Hold Food Companies Responsible for Transparency



Source: 2014 CFI Research