



## Majority of Americans are “Meat Eaters” *But, how do we keep meat on the plate?*

### ... Share Our Story

**By Jane Dukes – Merck Animal Health Veterinary & Consumer Affairs**

There’s good news in the latest [The Power of Meat study<sup>1</sup>](#) – the 15<sup>th</sup> annual edition published by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the Foundation for Meat & Poultry Research & Education. More than three out of four U.S. consumers or 81% consider themselves “meat eaters.” More good news: U.S. meat sales are up +1% to \$50.4 billion over 2019 with beef and chicken seeing the strongest gains. We should temper that news with key learnings that point to what we might do to keep meat on the plate in the future and certainly in a post COVID-19 world. The results serve as a reminder that we must keep sharing our story transparently to maintain consumer confidence.

Flexitarians – those who still eat meat and poultry, but less often and in smaller portions, are the next largest lifestyle group, and 12% of consumers put themselves in that category in the Power of Meat study. The 2020 report found only four percent of those surveyed considered themselves vegetarians/vegans and three percent pescatarians (fish only). *The not so great news* – the percentage of consumers who consider themselves “meat eaters” fell 5% over 2019. What’s more, **28% of U.S. consumers surveyed said they actively try to reduce their animal protein consumption and 63% of flexitarians are trying to do the same. What’s the issue? Health.** Consumers report their primary concern surrounds the healthfulness of eating meat. This is followed by concerns about animal welfare, use of antibiotics and hormones in animal agriculture, feeling GUILTY about eating meat along with concerns for the environment. We should note, these concerns are not new. The debate last September questioning dietary guidelines to limit consumption of red and processed meat certainly didn’t help.

While many fear plant-based meat alternatives will replace animal protein, that really isn’t the case. At least not right now. Plant-based meat alternative sales were up 11.8%, however, at \$760M, they are a mere fraction of animal protein sales. The goal of the 2020 Power of Meat study was to gain a better understanding of how meat and poultry fit into a changing food culture while looking at several new areas to gain useful insights, including the motivation behind flexitarian eating, plant-based meat alternatives, consumer views on animal welfare and



the environmental impact of animal agriculture. It is here that we find some key indicators of what we might do to ease concerns (and guilt) and keep meat on the plate in the future.

A study from Signal Theory in April 2019, *Creating Trust in an Era of Skepticism*<sup>2</sup> reported that only 52% of U.S. consumers agreed that, overall, they trusted the food industry to do

the right thing. When it comes to transparency about how food is produced, consumers perceived the agriculture community as slightly more transparent (46%) than food companies (41%). When asked about the trustworthiness of food and grocery *categories*, interestingly, fresh fruit and vegetables topped the list with 49% trusting the category. Meat and seafood fell down the list with only 35% finding the category trustworthy keeping good company with baby food and snack food – also 35%.

---

## Building Trust with Consumers is Key and Information is Power!

Here are five guiding principles to help you share your story no matter what part of the food chain you call home:

1

### Leverage consumers' desire to know more about how food is produced – and make information broadly available.

The Signal Theory trust study also reported that 69% of consumers think it's important to understand how food is produced and friends and family top the list of trustworthy sources of information at 70%. Develop content for your website and social channels that can be downloaded and shared, including infographics. Research sponsored by Merck Animal Health found that infographics could elicit a change in attitudes and perceptions of risk of the technologies and topics covered. Researchers found a stronger improvement in attitudes with infographics that dealt with technologies that had a higher perceived risk like antibiotics, vaccines and hormone use in animal agriculture. You can read more about this research in my colleague, Dr. Jessica Meisinger's [recent article](#).

2

### Share information transparently.

The 2020 Power of Meat Study showed that production claims continue to be a growth driver. Free-from, organic, no antibiotics ever and no added hormones appeal to consumers who are looking for information about their food. On the flip side, the report also shows consumer trust in claims is moderate and understanding of what the claim means was poor. **What can farmers, ranchers and food system leaders do?**

- **Provide easy to understand information about what you do and why/how you do it.** Include information about animal welfare and production best practices and the [significant progress agriculture has made](#) toward sustainable food production and

environmental stewardship. You may not be able to put it on a label, but you can provide this information on your website, in your social media posts and in conversations you might have with a neighbor, in your community or in a supermarket. Agriculture and the entire food supply chain have a great story to tell – so tell it! Here’s a [resource](#) created by our team that may help.

- **Provide results of third-party audits.** While consumers want to trust you, they also like to verify you are doing what you say you do. Sharing your organization’s results of third-party audits showcases where you are doing well and where you have room for improvement. While consumers do not expect perfection, they do want to see that you are doing your best while working to improve. According to The Center for Food Integrity<sup>3</sup>, consumer attitudes about topics such as animal welfare and environmental sustainability are most influenced by third-party audit results.

3

### **Connect with your supply chain partners and prioritize animal welfare as a topic of discussion.**

Animal welfare is universally important according to the Power of Meat 2020 and guess what? Consumers – two-thirds of them – expect grocery stores to provide transparency around where and how food animals are raised. That’s not all – according to the report, 55% of consumers also feel that *food brands* should provide this information. You may be scratching your head and wondering how to do this if you are food system leader – and not a farmer. There’s more. Forty-two percent of consumers are unsure about whether the meat or poultry they purchase comes from humanely treated animals and unfortunately, only 39% believe animal care for U.S. raised livestock is good. This is down 12% from the last Power of Meat Report. We know this isn’t the case, and it’s time to step up our game. We are doing the right things in animal agriculture – now we just need to talk to consumers about what we’re doing.

4

### **Focus on shared values especially when you’re sharing information.**

Consumers want real facts from real people, including farmers. We know from previous research, 64% of consumers believe farmers and ranchers are trustworthy sources of information<sup>2</sup>. They want to know you share their values, and in fact, The Power of Meat 2020 reports that 47% of those surveyed said they are more likely to purchase from brands holding views they agree with. Further, according to a report in March 2019, by [Nielsen](#)<sup>4</sup>, the consumer research organization, the U.S. consumer packaged goods (CPG) and food/grocery landscape is changing, and U.S. shoppers are increasingly adopting a “healthy for me, healthy for we” attitude as they shop, aligning their beliefs with the products they purchase while reading labels and educating themselves about products that are best for them and the environment.

Consumers are several generations removed from the farm and hungry for information.  
**[According to the Power of Meat:](#)**

**58% want to hear about nutrition**

**57% want to know about food safety practices**

**46% want to learn about animal care practices**

**40% want to know about the brand’s environmental impact**

The list isn’t long, and it provides clear direction on topics you can and should communicate about.

## 5

## Meet consumers where they are (online, in the grocery store, in your community, etc.) to provide information and answer questions.

Consumers are bombarded with information in mainstream and social media and often don't know where to turn for the answers. A December 2019 ethnographic study by [The Center for Food Integrity](#) found that several significant shifts have taken place in online conversations consumers are having about animal protein consumption. Main themes of conversation include environmentalism – how animal agriculture affects the use and preservation of natural resources, and provision – how eating animal proteins affects my family and loved ones physically, emotionally, and financially. Another example of “good for me, good for we.” Scientific debate in September 2019, questioning dietary guidelines to limit consumption of red and processed meat may have triggered consumers' growing interest in this topic. At the end of the day, whether you call the farm or the grocery store home, you can be a reputable source of information. Revisit the steps above and start communicating.

---

Like many food system organizations, our team also appreciates the affect COVID-19 is having not only on current eating patterns, but on the food supply chain from farm to retail. Consumers have been unable to get to the grocery store and when they finally get there don't always find what they're looking for – like toilet paper for example, but also eggs, milk and meat. Farmers have faced the challenge of getting goods to market through supply chain hurdles. It's going to take time to work this out, and while we don't have a crystal ball to see what a post-COVID 19 world looks like, there are three areas we feel are worth thinking about:

- **How are we, as food system leaders, engaging in conversations** to ensure our practices align with consumer expectations and how can we better demonstrate where existing practices align with consumer values?
- **What changes are we willing to make to engage with a growing number of consumers whose eating habits and needs are changing** – more flexitarians, a desire to know more about how their food is grown and raised and for a connection to the farmers and ranchers who do it?
- **How do we – farmers, ranchers and food system leaders work together to provide information** consumers need to feel good about the food they're putting on their dinner tables as their desire for transparent information grows?

To further assist you in sharing your story, our team has put together a library of one-page fact sheets on important topics in animal agriculture. You can access these resources and more on the [Veterinary & Consumer Affairs](#) web site.

<sup>1</sup> The Power of Meat 2020, an In-Depth Look at Meat and Poultry Through the Shopper's Eyes, Published by Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the Foundation for Meat & Poultry Research & Education.

<sup>2</sup> Signal Theory. FoodThink. Trust in Food. Creating Trust in an Era of Skepticism. <https://www.signaltheory.com/foodthink/whitepaper/trust-in-food-creating-trust-in-an-era-of-skepticism/>. Accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> A Clear View of Transparency, published by The Center for Food Integrity in 2015, <https://foodintegrity.org/clear-view-transparency-builds-consumer-trust/>

<sup>4</sup>What Food-Related Causes Do U.S. Consumers Care About Today? <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/what-food-related-causes-do-us-consumers-care-about-today/>. Accessed 5-27-20