

Project Snapshot: Safety Team/Market Research Group
Date: July, 2008

A Review of Three Research Projects Related to Safety.



Safety Summit Consumer Panel

Participants at the 2008 Annual Beef Industry Safety Summit, sponsored by the Beef Industry Food Safety Council (BIFSCO) in March 2008, heard firsthand how beef-eating consumers perceive food safety issues associated with beef. One of the notable findings from the panel was consumers initially adapt to food safety issues by modifying their purchasing or cooking behaviors instead of ceasing to eat the product (e.g. seek out higher quality stores). 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 takes on these characteristics, awareness is heightened to the level that consumers may modify their purchase decisions.

Generally, the panelists agreed that the public expects a high level of food safety and believes it's made possible by a well regulated system in place to protect the American food supply. When the media report the system is flawed or broken, food safety concerns inevitably follow. This explains why the February 2008 video showing downer cattle created a food safety issue in the consumer's mind, even though food safety was not jeopardized.

Subsequent to the Safety Summit, two checkoff-funded research projects have been conducted to better understand consumer attitudes about safety and the factors influencing thermometer use.



Ground Beef Thermometer Usage Study

Objective

Because consumers expect their food to be safe, many do not see a need to take additional precautions in the kitchen. Previous checkoff-funded research indicated consumers are not mindful about using thermometers when cooking ground beef. Some report being aware of the need to cook ground beef sufficiently for safety reasons, and, as a result, they often overcook their burgers. Since the safety issue alone does not motivate thermometer use, it may be necessary to link thermometer use with other successful cooking tips to generate increased interest. This study looked deeper into consumer attitudes and everyday practices when cooking ground beef patties at home and tested consumer reactions to the *Safe and Savory at 160°* message being used as part of consumer beef safety communications.



Methodology

This research included a series of 16 ethnographic interviews and 4 “mini” focus groups of five to six consumers per group. Interview participants were asked to prepare ground beef patties at home at least once or twice in the prior week, and were given an instant-read thermometer and a temperature sensor to try at home after the interviews.



Major Insight

Cooking to 160° is a relevant, credible message. The safety message has more impact when a food safety incident is prominent in the news. The savory message is most likely to motivate behavioral change because of the appeal of consistent, juicy, flavorful results. Consumers are more likely to be receptive to the message when it's linked to occasions for entertaining friends or cooking for children.

Key Learnings

- While consumers have heard about recalls associated with ground beef, a greater concern about chicken exists. While many have adopted food safety habits when preparing chicken, they do not see as great a need when preparing ground beef. However, consumers are slowly embracing new habits. For example, many are using separate plates for raw versus cooked products.
- Thermometer usage in the home tends to be limited to cooking turkeys and roasts. Many consumers, and particularly men, pride themselves on their ability to grill a great burger and often consider a thermometer as an unnecessary crutch. At the same time, consumers not using thermometers harbor a bit of guilt and denial, knowing they cannot be sure they've safely cooked their burgers.
- To ensure sufficient doneness, consumers look for clear juices, the absence of a pink center, and firmness, using a variety of invasive techniques, such as cutting open the patty, which likely compromise the overall eating experience.
- When severe outbreaks of illness occur, consumers are quick to modify behaviors to keep safe. If an outbreak persists, behavior change is likely.
- Credible sources of information about home health and food safety come from a wide variety of sources, notably, cooking shows and celebrity chefs.



Safety Messaging Study

Objective

This study was designed to gauge effectiveness of messaging related to the *Safe and Savory at 160°* campaign, and to determine which components of that message had the highest impact (quality cooking versus safety, presence of guests versus cooking for kids, and messages with positive tone versus negative tone).

Methodology

Data for this research were collected from an online panel of more than 500,000 panelists from which a thousand respondents were selected for this survey. The participants in this study were balanced to approximate the demographic characteristics of the most current U.S. census update.

Major Insight

No single message was found that would single-handedly prompt thermometer usage. But respondents that were exposed to a bank of messages did express interest in using a thermometer.

Key Learning

- With ongoing, frequent exposure to a message promoting the use of thermometers, behavior could be changed.