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.”

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.

For more information, visit www.bifsco.org www.beefresearch.org or contact National Cattlemen’s Beef Association 9110 East Nichols Avenue, Suite 300 Centennial, CO 80112 303-850-3348

Funded In Part by the Beef Checkoff

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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 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 food preparation and improper holding temperatures.

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.”

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