

## **How to Advertise Grass-fed Beef to Consumers: Comparing Use of Communication Channels Across Regions**

### **Introduction/Need for Research**

Grass-fed beef producers are tasked with marketing their products to consumers through direct sales and retail sales (Curtis et al., 2008). To reach their desired audience, producers' marketing techniques need to precisely target consumers who are faced with information overload in today's market. Research has identified communication tactics that can target U.S. meat and poultry consumers (Cheung et al., 2017; Dahlen et al., 2014; FMI & FMPRE, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; Gwin et al., 2012; Gwin & Lev, 2011). These studies did not consider regional differences in quality cues, beef consumption, meal preparation, and communication channels for marketing and promotion of grass-fed beef. The purpose of the study was to describe what factors influence intention to purchase grass-fed beef in four U.S. regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and the West. This manuscript addresses one research objective in the study: compare communication channels that consumers use to seek information about grass-fed beef across regions. This research aligns with the National Research Agenda priority area one by providing beef producers with information to decide how to market grass-fed beef to consumers (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study developed a conceptual framework based on communication channels, theory of planned behavior, total food quality model, meat consumption, knowledge, and demographics. Consumers used different communication channels to gather information about beef. The internet was the top source for shoppers looking for guidance on meat preparation, with social media being very popular among the younger generations (FMI & FMPRE, 2018). When questioned as to how respondents in Nebraska, Iowa, and Illinois would access information that would tell them the complete story of their grass-fed beef, they would frequently read product labels and grocery signage (Pirog, 2004). To a lesser extent, the respondents would sometimes use mass media, such as radio or television, and websites. According to Gillespie et al. (2016), beef producers advertised their products by word-of-mouth followed by the internet, email, newspapers or magazines, telephone, direct mail, radio and/or TV.

### **Methodology**

The population was individuals 18 years and older and the primary grocery buyer for their household in the United States. The U.S. population as of December 1, 2017, and the number of variables in the instrument, determined the sample size of 484 (Ary et al., 2010). Centiment, a marketing research company, used a nonprobability opt-in sampling technique. Representative balancing ensured opt-in panel respondents reflected the U.S. census on age, ethnicity, gender, and region. This addressed exclusion, selection, and non-participation bias, all limitations of nonprobability sampling (Baker et al., 2013). Centiment administered the researcher-developed questionnaire created through Qualtrics. Participants answered how frequently they used 12 communication channels to obtain information on grass-fed beef, using a 5-point Likert scale (FMI & FMPRE, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016). A panel of experts familiar with meat science, agricultural communications, and economics established face and content validity. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0, reporting the means and standard deviations.

## Results

All regions showed that consumers often used blogs, radio commercials or stories, magazine articles and ads, print publications, and social media to learn about grass-beef (Table 1). Television commercials or stories were often a source of information for consumers in the Midwest ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), South ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), and West ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). Newspaper advertisements or articles were often a source of information for respondents in the Northeast ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), Midwest ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), and South ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). Midwestern respondents were the only ones who often used websites ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) to find grass-fed beef information.

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Using Communication Channels by Region*

| <i>Communication Channel</i>                              | <i>Northeast</i> |           | <i>Midwest</i> |           | <i>South</i> |           | <i>West</i> |           |
|---|------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
|   | <i>M</i>         | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>       | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>     | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i> |
| Blogs   | 3.96             | 1.26      | 3.84           | 1.27      | 3.90         | 1.24      | 3.71        | 1.32      |
| Radio commercials or stories                              | 3.71             | 1.27      | 3.84           | 1.14      | 3.99         | 1.14      | 3.79        | 1.31      |
| Magazine ads or articles                                  | 3.71             | 1.27      | 3.75           | 1.25      | 3.71         | 1.27      | 3.55        | 1.29      |
| Print publications (flyers, newsletters, brochures, etc.) | 3.64             | 1.34      | 3.73           | 1.26      | 3.75         | 1.25      | 3.56        | 1.34      |
| Newspaper ads or articles                                 | 3.63             | 1.32      | 3.73           | 1.18      | 3.73         | 1.24      | 3.46        | 1.32      |
| Social media  | 3.64             | 1.34      | 3.69           | 1.36      | 3.68         | 1.34      | 3.57        | 1.46      |
| TV commercials or stories                                 | 3.42             | 1.26      | 3.54           | 1.21      | 3.55         | 1.21      | 3.51        | 1.33      |
| Websites/internet   | 3.29             | 1.35      | 3.54           | 1.26      | 3.40         | 1.34      | 3.21        | 1.33      |
| Cookbook  | 3.33             | 1.28      | 3.36           | 1.29      | 3.21         | 1.20      | 3.15        | 1.24      |
| Menu or posters at restaurants                            | 2.82             | 1.15      | 3.04           | 1.28      | 2.97         | 1.30      | 2.83        | 1.30      |
| Product signage at grocery                                | 2.57             | 1.15      | 2.78           | 1.27      | 2.60         | 1.21      | 2.59        | 1.25      |
| Product label   | 2.40             | 1.28      | 2.60           | 1.27      | 2.29         | 1.21      | 2.20        | 1.18      |

*Note.* Real limits scale was 1.00-1.49 = never, 1.50-2.49 = rarely, 2.50-3.49 = sometimes, 3.50-4.49 = often, and 4.50-5.00 = always.

## Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Consumers read less traditional print media, watch less traditional television, and listen to less radio programs (Gillespie et al., 2016), so producers have used other low-cost advertising means such as a blog, social media, or website to communicate about grass-fed beef. Yet, this study's participants indicated they often used magazines and radio. Social media platforms, publications, magazine/newspaper articles, and blogs are accessible through the internet too. The use of blogs for grass-fed beef information is not surprising since the internet was a popular communication channel (FMI & FMRPE, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016). Grass-fed beef is a niche product with some regions in the United States lacking established grass-fed beef markets, so it is important for producers to use multiple channels (Gillespie et al., 2016). Qualitative interviews or online focus group research with consumers in different regions could help get a better understanding for how they use the communication channels and the information that would influence their grass-fed beef purchases. Future survey research should examine producers' and agricultural businesses' efforts to determine the effectiveness of their marketing communication.

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