Who Has the Final Say? Consumers' Trusted Sources for Beef Nutrition Information

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Introduction

Despite consumers' distrust in information shared by the agricultural industry, they are continuing to demand more details about the production, handling, and care of their food (Settle et al., 2023). When people search for such information, they tend to choose sources they are familiar with, even if those sources are not certified experts (Settle et al., 2023; Kahan, 2012). The familiar sources exist inside the consumers' social circle, and their beliefs will follow the status quo of the group (Kahan, 2012). To properly educate and inform consumers, their trusted sources must be established. This is especially important for the beef industry, because its nutritious protein source is constantly being challenged. For example, a Harvard Medical Publishing suggested a diet consisting of red meat was "a cause for concern" and it should be replaced with plant proteins to increase cardiovascular health (Restivo, 2023, para. 23). Consumers are trusting sources such as these for all beef nutrition information. The beef industry needs to be utilizing sources consumers trust to write its own narrative about the benefits of beef. Therefore, it is imperative to examine consumers' trusted sources.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that directed this study was drawn from the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM; Petty et al., 2009) and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) definition of trust. The ELM has two routes to persuasion, which each can influence changes in attitude and behavior (Petty et al., 2009; Settle et al., 2023). One of the routes, the peripheral route, occurs when an individual's ability or motivation to process information related to the topic is low and persuasion can occur with simple cues that influence attitude (Petty et al., 2009). "This processing route heavily relies on the peripheral cues, such as source credibility and expertise, to inform changes in attitude" (Settle et al., 2023, p. 3). Source credibility greatly impacts the persuasiveness of information and ultimately attitudes. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) define trust as: "one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open" (p. 556). Peripheral cues and trust both influence attitudes and are needed to effect real change in individuals.

Methodology

This web-based questionnaire used a quantitative survey instrument to discover beef consumers trust toward information sources. Using Qualtrics Market Research, the survey was distributed to adults, 18 years or older, in the U.S. who consumed beef and were actively on social media. A non-probability opt-in sample set quotas to ensure the sample was representative of the U.S. population based on U.S. Census data (Lamm & Lamm, 2019). We collected 1,010 usable responses. Trust was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly distrust*, 5 = *trust completely*) to 16 different sources. Participants were asked "To what extent do you trust or distrust the following sources of information about beef nutrition?" Descriptive statics were conducted in SPSS to establish mean, median, and standard deviation. Reliability and validity were established by an expert panel review and 0.80 or higher was achieved on all reliability tests. The data in this manuscript were part of a larger study and were analyzed separately.

Findings

Analysis revealed top five sources that consumers trust for beef nutrition information. It is assumed the Likert-type scales are interval. Respondents trust doctors and physicians the most (M = 4.04, SD = 0.83), nutrition researchers second (M = 3.84, SD = 0.83), registered dietitians third (M = 3.76, SD = 0.88), chefs fourth (M = 3.75, SD = 0.86), and family and friends fifth (M = 3.71, SD = 0.87). Analysis also revealed five sources consumers trust the least. Social media influencers (M = 2.63, SD = 1.14), extension agents (M = 3.06, SD = 0.88), and government recommendations (M = 3.08, SD = 1.14) are a part of the bottom five sources respectively. Celebrities are the least trusted (M = 2.52, SD = 1.09) for beef nutrition information.

Conclusions

The findings revealed the top five trusted sources are doctors and physicians, nutrition researchers, registered dietitians, chefs, and family and friends. When receiving beef nutrition information, consumers prefer to have it delivered through one of those sources. They trust those sources to deliver accurate, honest information. Consumers trust healthcare professionals to give them truthful information about food and how it will affect their bodies. Chefs also have an area of expertise in regard to food, while family and friends are a familiar source. These results are similar to a study conducted by Purvis et al. (2021), who found that individuals trust information from healthcare providers and medical scientists. The results reveal that messages made about beef nutrition information should be delivered by or linked to one of the top five sources. When receiving the information in such a manner, consumers will automatically process it as trustworthy because it will come from a source, they already believe is trustworthy.

Implications & Recommendations

The results from this analysis have practical implications and reveal other areas in need of exploration. Similarly to Settle et al. (2023), celebrities and influencers were the least trusted, and should not be the focus of any messages. Because consumers prefer medical professionals to deliver beef nutrition information, education and communication efforts need to be distributed by one of these sources. In the classroom, future agricultural teachers and communicators need to be equipped to work with and incorporate medical professionals into their messages and lessons. Doctors and physicians, nutrition researchers, and registered dietitians sources need to be regularly integrated into messages made by practitioners, and educators need to bring these sources into the classroom, so students understand how these professionals communicate with the public.

Further research should be conducted to learn more about the types of information consumers prefer when receiving beef nutrition information. Discovering this information could help practitioners develop messages with specific details about beef products. It could also help meat scientists know what lab results priorities for consumers are, and therefore, need to be the focus of their efforts. A deeper understanding of consumers' specific credible sources is needed so messages can be targeted to specific demographic groups.

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