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## TRANSPARENCY HELPS FOOD PRODUCERS INCREASE TRUST PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS

*Charlie Arnot, CEO, Center for Food Integrity*

Consumers are, indeed, taking a more assertive role in the food value chain. It’s right to applaud the vibrancy of a market offering consumers a wide variety of market choices despite a general inability to logically evaluate alternatives. But, food companies will give their customers what they want, regardless of the science.

Research by the Center for Food Integrity (CFI) shows consumers hold food companies most responsible for demonstrating transparency. One of the ways is to share a wide variety of information about their food purchases.

CFI’s research proves that as those in the food system increase transparency, they will also increase consumer trust. The link between transparency and trust is real, direct and powerful. But, transparency can be an elusive term, so CFI set out to define it.



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Consumers were asked who they hold most responsible for demonstrating transparency when it comes to food production. Food companies? Farmers? Grocery stores? Restaurants? The research shows that consumers hold food companies most responsible not only for areas we might expect like labor issues, human rights and business ethics, but also for the impact of food on health and the environment, food safety, and even animal well-being, an area one might logically assume people would hold farmers most responsible for.

An online survey of 2,000 people also asked precisely what consumers want and expect food producers to be transparent about – policies, practices, performance or verification. Consumers responded that it's transparency in a company's or organization's practices that count most toward building trust. That's because practices are a demonstration of a company's values in action, and CFI's research shows shared values are the foundation for building trust.

CFI's research identifies the six areas in the food system most important to consumers. They are: impact of food on health; food safety; impact on the environment; human and labor rights, treatment of animals raised for food; and business ethics in food production.

"Impact of food on health" and "food safety" are the most important. For these issues, consumers want information on the product label. This includes all ingredients regardless of quantity, allergens and preservatives, as well as disclosure of any ingredients derived from genetic modification. For other issues, engagement and access to information are key themes.

Consumers want to be able to engage via the company's website and they expect information to be provided in easy-to-understand language. This not only includes communication in areas of health and safety, but also environmental performance, labor and human rights, animal well-being and business ethics. When regulations are violated, corrective actions should be provided on the company website.

Results of third-party audits should be publicly available. Third-party audits of animal well-being and food safety practices are the minimum level of investment for transparency, but because it's somebody from outside an organization reporting on performance, a third-party audit doesn't reflect the organization's values and therefore is not enough.

Storytelling and providing examples of business practices are important. Actually showing and talking about what you do is key to being transparent. Merely making policies available to the public isn't enough. Policy is the way a company or organization articulates motivation. Practice is the way commitment is demonstrated. Practices are a reflection of a company's internal motivation; they are a demonstration of a company's values in action. And, demonstrating shared values is the foundation for building trust.

Food companies that believe these are not their issues do so at their own risk. The survey reflects a new reality in which consumers increasingly expect their favorite brands to assure more than quality and safety. Consumers today expect the supply chain to be transparent about everything from production practices to ingredients.

Equally important, food companies must understand that simply reporting facts and science does not fulfill their definition of transparency. Consumers don't simply want to know whether something "can" be done, but rather whether it "should" be done. Is it the right thing to do?

Large companies and farms producing food today are susceptible to public sentiment that profit is being placed ahead of public interest. Food recalls, incidents of environmental degradation, undercover video investigations, and food fraud are some of the things that provide reinforcement. Additionally, unlike past generations, most consumers have no direct link to agriculture and food production.

As a result, food producers must commit to communicating the ethical foundation of their work. They can no longer assume that the public knows they care about the products they provide; the animals they raise or environmentally-responsible on-farm practices. They must be willing to engage in a dialogue with consumers and to embrace and answer their questions in an honest, open manner.

CFI's research helps the food system better understand what it takes to earn and maintain consumer trust. Increasing transparency and improving their engagement with consumers will help align food system practices with consumer values and expectations, while supporting consumers in making informed decisions. By doing more to transparently communicate about the production practices used to produce food today, food companies and their suppliers can build consumer trust.

There is no longer any question that effectively demonstrating transparency will help food producers increase trust in their processes and products. Some farms and food companies have embraced this reality and are opening doors to an increasingly curious public. The process isn't a simple one, but the reward – earning consumer trust – is worth the effort.

The Center for Food Integrity is a not-for-profit organization that helps today's food system earn consumer trust. Our members and project partners, who represent the diversity of the food system, are committed to providing accurate information and working together to address important issues in food and agriculture. The Center does not lobby or advocate for individual companies or brands. For more information, visit [www.foodintegrity.org](http://www.foodintegrity.org).