

Brandon Whitt kneels in a strawberry field on his family farm, Batey Farms, near Murfreesboro, Tennessee.



BUILDING TRUST

IN PRODUCTION AGRICULTURE

By Joel Schettler

Producers open the farm gate to help consumers learn about modern farming.

Ask some consumers today about how they want their food produced, and their answers might describe the American farm of 100 years ago.

Farming has certainly changed, but consumer impressions haven't kept pace,

says Charlie Arnot, CEO of The Center for Food Integrity, an organization that works to build trust in today's food system.

"People like farmers," he says, "but they aren't really sure they like modern farming."

Farm and ranch families

comprise just 2 percent of the U.S. population, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation. With that lack of direct connection to rural America — coupled with often-erroneous food marketing information — it's no wonder

there's public confusion about production agriculture.

Now, more than ever, farmers need advocates to help tell their story, which is one about transparency, collaboration and embracing change at an accelerating pace. ➤



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➤ “How do we have the conversation in such a way that we can give consumers insight to make informed choices?” Arnot asks. “We need to be involved in that conversation in a more effective way.”

Need for ‘Agvocacy’

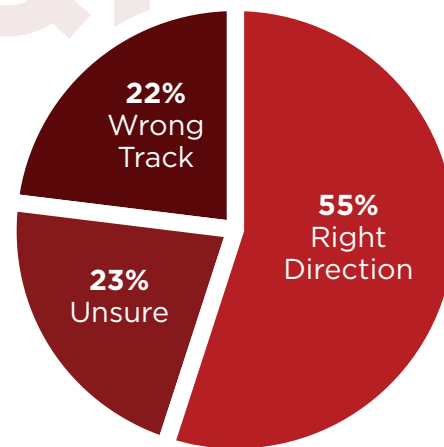
In some consumers’ minds, agriculture is increasingly considered big industry rather than family businesses, says Jamey Grafing, CHS vice president and corporate treasurer. Industrialization is a term that lacks the romantic tie to the earth usually attributed to the small farmer, says Grafing, who grew up on a small farm in northwestern Iowa.

“Industrialization has a negative connotation, especially if you’re talking to someone under 25 years of age,” says Grafing. “Increasingly, there’s a population outside of agriculture that doesn’t understand what it is. There’s growing scrutiny around concepts that are just a factual part of modern agriculture: size, scope, speed and the scale typically required to manage costs in a commodity-based business.”

Nationally, the number of farms fell by 8,000 in 2016. While only 4 percent of all farms had annual gross cash farm incomes of more than \$1 million, they accounted for half of U.S. farm production value in 2015, up from only about a third in 1991, according to USDA.

The trend is at least partly to blame for growing consumer mistrust, according to research conducted by The Center for Food Integrity. “We have measured it with both farms and ag companies,” says Arnot. “And we have tested [consumer trust] with terms such as ‘family,’ ‘commercial,’ ‘local’ and ‘national,’ and essentially you

Is the food system headed in the right direction or down the wrong track?

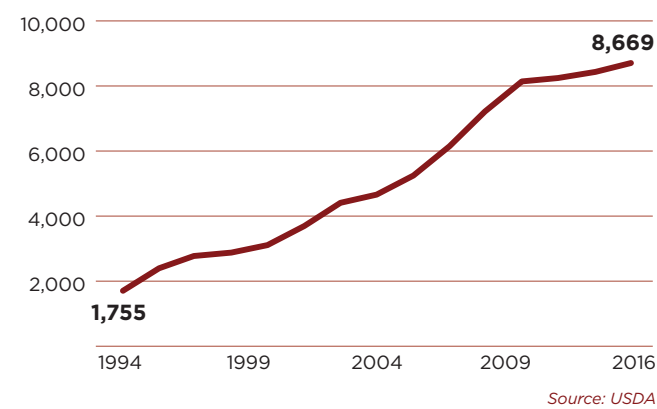


Survey results show a fairly significant upward trend in the percentage of U.S. consumers who believe the food system is heading in the right direction (55 percent) compared to just 20 percent in 2015. But these numbers may not signal growing trust in production agriculture, says Charlie Arnot, CEO with The Center for Food Integrity.

“Foodies are the group with the strongest level of agreement that the food system is headed in the right direction,” says Arnot. “They have already reconciled these issues and they know where they will buy their food.”

Source: “Inside the Minds of Influencers: The Truth About Trust,” The Center for Food Integrity, 2016

U.S. Farmers Markets



get the same kind of reading. Anything that implies size or scale has the same kind of inverse relationship with the perception of shared values.”

Only about one-third of consumers believe the agriculture community and food companies

are transparent about their practices, according to a 2016 study by Sullivan Higdon & Sink and FoodThink, “Evolving Trust in the Food Industry.”

And nearly two-thirds say they would like to know more about how food is produced.

“There’s a growing number of consumers for whom issues related to social impact — whether it is the environment or workers or animal health and more — are becoming a large part of their purchasing decisions related to food,” says Arnot. “Today, more consumers believe their purchasing decisions have greater impact on society than voting.”

To find the information they’re looking for, many consumers go to online sources that reflect their beliefs. Consumers are relying more on social media and bloggers as trustworthy sources of food information, up 15 percentage points since 2012, according to the FoodThink survey. Trust in food manufacturers also rose 17 percentage points in the same timeframe.

Largely missing from the information equation are producers, says Arnot. “We want them to consider our information as credible and meaningful.”

See Our Passion

Honing a message is what Tennessee hog farmer Brandon Whitt has done leading his farm and his work with AgChat, a nonprofit organization that helps farmers and ranchers craft positive messages on social media.

“Food doesn’t just appear on the grocery store shelf. There’s hard work behind it,” says Whitt. “But we’ve got a lot of big manufacturing companies that like to use buzzwords to sell products. That is misleading customers.”

Food claims can be made for marketing purposes rather than education, says Whitt, and many of them are placed where they don’t belong. “If they put a gluten-free claim on grapes, data shows they will increase sales, let’s say by 3 percent. Unfortunately, that just leads to the ongoing confusion

that consumers have.”

Whitt joined a family business when he married his wife Katherine. Batey Farms near Murfreesboro, Tenn., has been managed by her family since an ancestor received a land grant for his service in the Revolutionary War. The Whitts’ four children represent the eighth generation to live on the land.

With his father-in-law John Batey, Whitt grows row crops and runs a farrow-to-finish operation just outside of Nashville, and does business with Tennessee Farmers Cooperative, a regional cooperative based in La Vergne, Tenn., that includes 54 member cooperatives across the state.

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Rutherford County, one of the country’s fastest-growing communities for more than a decade, has brought the city closer to Batey Farms. Many urbanites get a hands-on experience from the farm’s you-pick strawberry, blackberry and blueberry fields. Whitt considers that business part of his advocacy as well.

“Years ago, we had to make a decision on how we were going to let this growth affect us and how we were going to evolve with the times,” says Whitt. “We’re doing a lot more direct sales to engage and educate our community about where food

comes from.”

Batey Farms’ entire retail business is geared toward engaging the community and creating experiences. A large event space hosts public and private events on the farm throughout the year. Visitors can pick strawberries or take photos in the sunflower field. Philanthropic events raise money for Second Harvest and other charities.

When his father-in-law’s generation grew up in farming, from the ’60s through the ’90s, they were just trying to make a living, says Whitt. “At that point, the foodie movement and folks who wanted to know where their food was coming from just didn’t exist.

“We didn’t have social media; we didn’t have all of these outlets to find bits and pieces of information,” he says. “When we look at where our society is today, having more information is wonderful, but it also can be very damaging.”

Whitt has served on the board of directors for AgChat since 2014. The project’s mission is to focus on social media and other online venues to build communities, he says, and perhaps start offline conversations across the country at a grassroots level.

“You can’t change someone’s mind on social media,” Whitt says. “We obviously have to have a presence online, but we are not going to change people’s minds on how their food is grown and what’s on their label without having a real conversation face-to-face, where people can read our emotions, see our passion and see the finished product firsthand.”

A Positive Message

During one memorable Wisconsin State Fair exchange,

“FOOD DOESN’T JUST APPEAR ON THE GROCERY STORE SHELF. THERE’S HARD WORK BEHIND IT.”



Brandon Whitt joins his wife Katherine Batey Whitt and their daughter Adelaide on the front porch of their retail cabin at Batey Farms.

potato and vegetable farmer Jeremie Pavelski looked on as his father tried for more than an hour to win over a fairgoer who was convinced farms had nothing to do with food. “This is all manufactured,” Pavelski remembers her saying.

Not all consumers are as misinformed about where food comes from, of course, but Pavelski says the story reminds him that many people build their beliefs upon misconceptions. The event demonstrated that education is an important part of agriculture advocacy.

The Pavelski family began operating what would become Heartland Farms when Polish immigrant August Pavelski ➤



Heartland Farms opened this state-of-the-art Farm Operations Technology and Training Center to educate the public about agriculture.

➤ settled in the area in 1873. Today the operation includes 24,000 acres of potatoes and other vegetables near Hancock, Wis.

The fifth generation on the farm, Pavelski, 35, has worked to advocate for production farming practices with local and state legislatures and through groups such as the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association, the National Potato Council and chambers of commerce.

But the most important advocacy work is done in person with a tour of the farm, says Pavelski. “Any group that wants to come out here, we take them around and show them how things are done, what actually goes on and the steps involved. We also show them the technologies we utilize today, which are substantially different than in the past.”

Advocacy means explaining

how larger operations can quickly adapt to change and take advantage of economies of scale to bring positive change to the food system, says Pavelski, which is often ignored in discussions about production agriculture.

“From my standpoint, I always try to be a leader who brings people together,” says Pavelski. “The reality often is that we really aren’t that far apart. We just don’t know how to communicate with each other.”

In spring 2016, Heartland Farms opened a state-of-the-art facility called the Farm Operations Technology and Training Center. Powered by solar energy, the facility includes a technology center, farm offices, and a meeting and event facility that can hold more than 100 people. The newly formed Pavelski Family Foundation uses the facility to host tours for groups, from fourth-grade students to local, state and national politicians, in its mission to educate the public about what the next generation of agriculture will look like.

Sustainability is just one positive message Pavelski highlights to visitors at the technology center. Modern agriculture is quickly adopting new technology that bolsters the bottom line and is better for the environment, he says. Visitors tour the operations room, which is equipped with 22 monitors

tracking operations across the farm. They are able to see how the farm tracks rainfall and crop inputs from soil moisture probes, and understand how water usage from conventional pivots differs from variable-rate irrigation systems.

“Once you show technology with a visual perspective,” he says, “it really seems to click.”

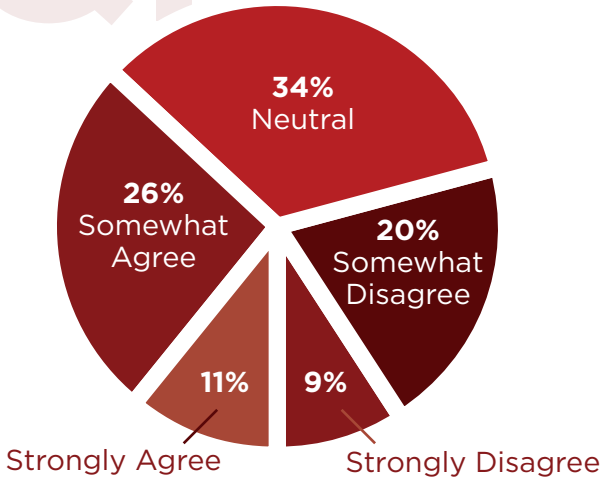
Tomorrow’s Talent

Advocating for the industry is not only about educating consumers; it also includes promoting the next generation of agriculture leaders, says Grafiing. For more than three years, Grafiing has served with leaders from other agriculture businesses on the national board of directors of Agriculture Future of America (AFA).

“Advocacy is certainly a key element, and it’s important for CHS,” Grafiing says. “At AFA, there’s an embedded element of advocacy in developing future leaders and in everything we do. Beyond that, we would like to bring diversity to agriculture. So when we are going to an institution like Tuskegee University to talk about careers in agriculture, that’s also advocating for an industry that means so much to me and my peers at AFA.”

“The truly unique aspect of the cooperative is, if we do our

The agriculture community is transparent about how food is produced.



While only 37 percent of consumers somewhat agree or strongly agree the agriculture community is transparent, the response is a significant increase from 2012, when only 22 percent responded that way.

Source: “Evolving Trust in the Food Industry,” Sullivan Higdon & Sink, FoodThink, 2016

jobs well, the value created goes right back to rural America.”

The ability to communicate with, and develop and build relationships with younger

people is critical, says Pavelski.

“Advocacy is about attracting talent into agriculture. It’s very important. Times have changed, and we need all types of people,

from boots on the ground to operators to engineers. It’s important to get a good message out there for all of us.”

Reaching the next generation often means taking the message to students in classrooms — and any other audience that wants to learn directly from farmers. Through its support of Minnesota Farm Bureau’s community outreach program, Farming Today, CHS and other organizations have helped farmers speak out for agriculture. Since 2011, the program has put young farmers in front of civic and professional organizations and in school classrooms to tell their stories.

Glen Groth, 34, owns and manages his family farm near Houston, Minn., where he grows corn and soybeans on 1,000 acres and milks 65 dairy cows. Groth serves as his county Farm Bureau president and is an active member of his local FFA alumni chapter.

Getting up in front of a crowd

to speak was something he thought he could do, he says. He’s been with the program since its inception, speaking to students and civic organizations.

Groth encourages others to speak, too, if they feel comfortable doing so. Most of the time, he says, people just want to know what his day is like.

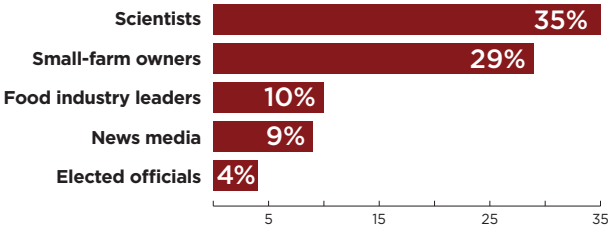
“They want to learn about farming, but they also want to learn about you,” he says. Groth offers advice to would-be advocates.

“You don’t want to make someone feel bad about not knowing something,” he says. “You have to understand where they are coming from. Also, you have to be willing to say that you don’t know something. You don’t want to be caught saying something that isn’t true; your level of trustworthiness would just go away.” ■

SEE MORE — Watch a video at bit.ly/2pr3VKJ

Who is trusted to give full, accurate information?

(reported by percentage of U.S. adults)

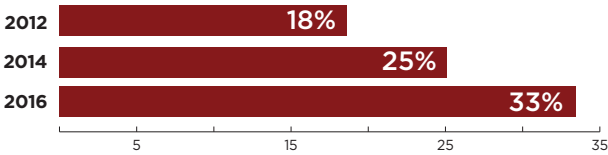


Among consumers, those with more science knowledge tend to see scientists working on genetically modified (GM) foods in a more positive light. About half (51 percent) of those with significant science knowledge trust scientists to give full and accurate information about the health effects of GM foods, compared with 18 percent of those with little science knowledge.

Source: Pew Research Center, June 2016

Trustworthiness of blogs and social media

(percent who answer very trustworthy or somewhat trustworthy)



Blogs are becoming more trusted, mainstream and legitimate sources of information about food production processes and practices, according to the 2016 “Evolving Trust in the Food Industry” report by Sullivan Higdon & Sink and FoodThink.



Fourth-grade students visit Heartland Farms near Hancock, Wis., to learn about modern agricultural practices.