



FOOD, PURPOSE AND THE CONSCIOUS CONSUMER

ALLISON+
PARTNERS

While the idea of a socially conscious consumer may seem new, the concept actually originated decades ago. In a 1975 study, author and scholar Fredrick Webster defined a socially conscious consumer as someone “who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change.” The narrative in the ‘80s and ‘90s maintained the idea of the socially and ecologically conscious consumer as an agent of social change – but skepticism remained about whether individual actions could make a genuine difference.

Throughout the 2000s, a clearer picture evolved and the phrase “conscious consumer” became an accepted part of the vernacular. Defined as an agent of change who considers the social, environmental, ecological and political impacts of their actions, many began to wear the term as a badge of honor. As the number of conscious U.S. consumers grew and confidence in the impact of their actions strengthened, more brands and companies rose to the challenge of socially conscious business practices. This is arguably most evident in the food and beverage industry.

Recent global climate events have sparked even more conversations among consumers and inspired them to consider sustainable food practices to decrease the environmental impact of what they eat and drink. So how can companies continue to deliver what conscious consumers demand, particularly when the category is fraught with disparate consumer and brand views about what it means to be purpose-driven, sustainable and transparent?

Allison+Partners set out to explore this topic. Using the Qualtrics Insight Platform*, we conducted a proprietary consumer survey of 1,005 people about food and beverage purchase behavior patterns and belief systems and paired it with conversations with some of the brightest minds in food and beverage communications. Through this report, we’ll share the insights that rose to the top and the implications gleaned for today’s food and beverage marketers.



“Driscoll’s view of food, and our sustainable food systems, necessitates long-term vision. It’s about the best-tasting berry, but it’s also about the farmer, a work force that is treated well, soil, water and how we treat our environment.”

FRANCES DILLARD

Senior Director, Brand and Product Marketing, Driscoll’s.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONSCIOUS CONSUMER



CONFUSION AROUND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

WHILE CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS HAVE INDELIBLY CHANGED THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY LANDSCAPE AND PAVED THE WAY FOR SUSTAINABLE ON-SHELF BRAND BASED ON DEMAND FOR BETTER OPTIONS, MASSIVE CONFUSION ABOUT WHAT BEING SUSTAINABLE TRULY MEANS STILL REIGNS AMONG THIS GROUP.

Our research indicates all respondents, both conscious consumers and those who are not concerned about the future of the environment, need more detailed information about sustainability practices from the food brands they support. Less than half of the survey respondents who say they are concerned about the future of the environment consider themselves to be knowledgeable about brands' sustainable practices. Similarly, 38% of those who reported not being concerned about the future of the environment believe CPG brands have not done their best to provide sustainable options.

What does this mean? While countless brands give consumers what they demand concerning sustainable business practices, the sheer volume of information about these practices and that much of it is conflicting confuses many. And whether they consider themselves to be socially conscious or not, both groups still want to learn about brands' sustainability practices so they can make smart purchasing decisions.

“We all pledge the three ‘R’s’ – reduce, reuse, recycle – but we now need to motivate the rest of the industry to follow suit and educate consumers. This begins with having a common language in the industry, which can be very complicated given the speed and scale at which food and beverage brands innovate.”

AMY LUND

Vice President, Creative and
Marketing Communications, E&J Gallo

THE LEVEL OF CONFUSION PRESENTS BOTH A VAST CHALLENGE AND A VALUABLE OPPORTUNITY FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGE COMMUNICATORS. AS GROCERY AISLES BURST WITH SUSTAINABLE CHOICES, BRANDS MUST CUT THROUGH THE CLUTTER OF “FREE FROM” LABELS, INDUSTRY JARGON, MARKETING PLOYS AND FALSE CLAIMS TO PENETRATE CONSUMERS’ UNDERSTANDING ABOUT HOW TO MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES.

There has been an undeniable sentiment shift with the rise of plant-based dairy and meat alternatives. On both the consumer and brand sides, there is interest and excitement around the positive impact that incorporating more plant-based products into diets has on the environment. Of our survey respondents who are concerned about the future of our environment, 54% say they are open to incorporating plant-based meat and dairy alternatives into their diet. This not only supports the desire for more options across meat-, dairy- and plant-based foods, but it also emphasizes the need for food and beverage communicators to help educate consumers about what products to integrate into their day-to-day food selections.



“What you eat is the most important way to brand yourself in the 21st century. Personal brand designators like what you drive or wear are becoming less relevant compared to what you eat. Whether you identify as paleo, keto, vegan, lacto-ovo vegetarian, flexitarian, gourmet foodie or hard-core carnivore speaks volumes about your values, priorities and aspirations. In particular, more people are reducing meat consumption as a reflection of their environmental values. This is a huge opportunity to accelerate the shift to a sustainable food system.”

RACHEL KONRAD

Chief Communications Officer,
Impossible Foods

“The wine industry is a very competitive space. But when we’re able to get consumers on our property, we’re able to show rather than tell our sustainability story to gain lifelong customers. We have a restaurant onsite with an attached culinary garden—this provides an unbeatable customer experience, but it also acts as a powerful platform for us to talk about our sustainable wine making practices.”

JANIENE ULRICH

EVP, Direct to Consumer
Francis Ford Coppola Winery

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGE COMMUNICATORS



PRICE AND TASTE ARE TABLESTAKES BUT PURPOSE, IS WHAT COUNTS

IMPACTS ON PURCHASES

- 70% PRICE
- 63% TASTE
- 51% FAMILY PREFERENCE

Survey respondents said a product's price impacts purchasing decisions the most (70%), followed by taste (63%) and family preferences (51%). In other words, if it doesn't taste good and isn't priced right, a brand's purpose or sustainable business practices are irrelevant – consumers won't buy it.

While this will continue to be the cost of entry, the increasing number of people who identify as conscious consumers will elevate the role of brand purpose as part of this cost. Allison+Partners' research revealed one of the primary motivators for conscious consumers to buy and support a food or drink brand has to do with environmental impact. Sixty-four percent of respondents believe it is extremely or very important to know where their food comes from. And a majority of respondents said they care most about a company's environmental sustainability practices (48%), compared with other purpose-driven initiatives, like ethical business practices (34%), fiscal responsibility (11%) and direct philanthropic giving (7%).

Food and beverage brands that clearly communicate their purpose can build lifelong relationships with consumers by aligning with causes they care about, as long as they do it with transparency and authenticity. For industry communicators, this means the common thread of our language of food must be purpose-driven and deeply rooted in sustainability.

“There are so many choices within the portfolio at Danone North America, which by default means there is no everyday consumer. We have found that the lowest common denominator is purpose. Consumers want to know when they pick up a product that they trust who's making it, what's in it and how it was made. They want to trust that it was made with their values in mind.”

MICHAEL NEUWIRTH

Public Relations & Corporate Communications Expert,
Former Senior Director, External Communications,
Danone North America

IF PURPOSE IS THE NEWEST PILLAR OF FOOD COMMUNICATIONS, TEACHING CONSUMERS ABOUT THE “WHY” BEHIND A BRAND IS THE NEW SALES DRIVER.

Although the food world has become increasingly complicated and confusing for consumers. As our research demonstrates, they harbor a clear desire to learn more about a brand’s sustainable business practices and purpose. Of our survey respondents concerned about the earth’s environment, 59% noted they would switch products if a brand doesn’t demonstrate sustainable practices, and 53% would be willing to spend more on a product that claims to be sustainable

+ UNDERSTAND YOUR PURPOSE

While purpose and sustainability will become more ingrained in the brand-consumer relationship, it’s critical for brands to stay true to who they are. Rather than invent a new narrative or attach to a cause that might not align authentically, brands must uncover who they already are and tell that story in a clear and compelling way.

+ PRIORITIZE, PRIORITIZE, PRIORITIZE

Don’t try to tackle too many issues at once. Start small, work to have significant measurable impact in one area meaningful to your brand and audience, and communicate that impact. A strategic and measured approach with regular communication of key progress milestones will help bring focus and impact to storytelling.

+ CELEBRATE PROGRESS ON THE WAY TO PERFECTION

Many brands shout about their successes. But when it comes to purpose and sustainability, there is value in highlighting challenges and shortcomings, as well as future goals. By doing so, a brand can demonstrate the honesty, integrity and transparency consumers demand while getting multiple opportunities to tell a story along a path to progress.

The stakes are high for food and beverage brands when it comes to acting with purpose and communicating that purpose. From planet to profit, capturing conscious consumers’ loyalty presents the strongest opportunity for success.

“For Zume, our sustainability story began at an evolution level of zero. We started as a consumer brand, focused on robotic pizza delivery. While we received a lot of attention, we knew there was so much more we could do. Now, our focus is on purpose, and we examine the entire food supply chain in order to disrupt it.”

KATIE WARMUTH JAROS

Director, Public Relations, Zume Inc



THE PATH FORWARD FOR FOOD MARKETERS

Allison+Partners, an MDC Partners company, is a global marketing and communications agency driven by a collaborative approach to innovation and creativity. The firm was named PRWeek's "Best Place to Work," for three consecutive years from 2017 to 2019. The Holmes Report's 2018 "Best Agency to Work For," The Holmes Report's 2017 "Digital Agency of the Year," PRWeek's 2015 "Midsize Agency of the Year" and In2 SABRE's 2015 "Most Innovative Agency." Allison+Partners has 30 offices worldwide and is organized around five practices: Consumer Marketing, Corporate, Healthcare, Public Affairs and Technology. All Told, which combines research, content, creative, digital and measurement expertise into one offering, works across these practices to deliver integrated storytelling for clients. For more information, visit www.allisonpr.com.

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