



MICHIGAN SOYBEAN
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Research Identifies How to Connect with Information-Seeking Consumers

Where consumers go on-line and what they are looking for can help design strategy and content to build trust in today's food system

A growing number of consumers continue to move online to find answers to their questions about the food system. How the information is presented and where they find it dictates whether it's going to be relevant and useful in terms of affecting their opinions according to new research conducted by The Center for Food Integrity (CFI).

A 2010 CFI study revealed a watershed shift in where people go for information on food issues. The survey showed so-called Early Adopters, the segment of the population most capable of affecting overall societal attitude and opinion, are getting their food information online or from family and friends – not local television as shown in previous studies.

A follow-up study this year, which was partially sponsored by the Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee, yielded more specific information on where these consumers go on-line and better defines how they are using the internet to access information about food.

“This allows CFI and our members to develop strategies to figure out where we can connect with them and what messaging we can use to impact what they believe about today's food system,” said Charlie Arnot, CFI's chief executive officer.

Early Adopters are frequent users of the internet and they go there in a variety of ways – desk top and laptop computers most frequently according to the study. Tablet computer technology currently represents a small but growing segment.

People using smartphones to access information from the internet, while currently a smaller subset, is a segment that bears watching, according to an analysis of the data, because they are younger, heavier internet users, and they more often participate in on-line activities.

“If you want to reach and engage younger consumers who are heavy internet users through videos and other things, you have to make sure what you're producing can be easily accessed on smartphones,” said Arnot. “For example, lengthy videos or large PowerPoint presentations won't work.”

The study reveals that when Early Adopters research food topics they want information from credentialed experts and they want to be shown the process.

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“They want transparency,” said Arnot. “They want to see it for themselves. What consumers tend to see on-line are videos from activists and others. Offering on-line video tours of modern food system processes can provide the opportunity to be much more transparent.”

Nutrition and food safety are the topics Early Adopters most often research when looking for food system information, according to the data. Issues such as humane treatment of farm animals and environmental sustainability in farming were at the bottom of the list of concerns.

Only half of the survey participants said they believe they had access to all the information they need in order to make good decisions about food.

“If you want to make a connection with this important segment of the population you must find a way to talk about how today’s industry helps produce nutritious, safe food,” said Arnot. “Then you can weave in messages about social responsibility and other issues.”

The survey shows information on the internet has a strong impact in shaping opinions. Just under half (46%) believed the information found on-line strongly helped shape their opinions on food safety. Four out of ten respondents (41%) said they believed that information they found on the web strongly helped shape their opinions about the nutrition of food. Approximately one out of three (35%) believed information from the internet strongly helped shape their opinions about the humane treatment of farm animals and environmental sustainability in farming.

Study participants felt “results of university research” was a highly useful type of web content across all categories. On food safety and nutrition issues, people value the opinions of doctors and dietitians. With regard to animal welfare issues, opinions of veterinarians and on-farm video tours showing how animals are cared for were perceived to be useful.

The study yielded a variety of interesting tidbits concerning Early Adopters and their web habits:

- A majority, 75%, said they accessed the internet several times daily.
- Nearly half the survey participants said they frequently visit Facebook and 30 percent named YouTube as a frequent destination. Nearly two-thirds said they never use Twitter.
- The two most popular search engines are Google at 60% and Internet Explorer at 39%.

Specific keyword searches most often involved “food safety/e-coli/salmonella”, “name of specific food/product/brand and nutrition/calories”, and “carbs/fats/ingredients.” A variety of web sites were used to explore food topics with Google at the top of the list.

“There may be opportunity to close the information gap with Early Adopters by fine-tuning search engine optimization strategies,” said Arnot.

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The Center for Food Integrity is a not-for-profit organization established to build consumer trust and confidence in today’s food system. Their members, who represent every segment of the food system, are committed to providing accurate information and addressing important issues among all food system stakeholders. The Center does not lobby or advocate for individual food companies or brands. For more information, visit www.foodintegrity.org.