

Food chain transparency: Past, present, and future

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Food chain transparency is the concept of knowing and having access to product related information (where does it come from, how it is processed and stored, etc.) in a timely manner. While levels of transparency have varied over the years, the key factor to achieving adequate food chain transparency in the years ahead involves the simplification and clarification of existing information for consumers.

John Keogh

Past

In the early days of the food industry, communication about how food is processed was not always clear or forthcoming. The food industry was unregulated, with poorly defined safety requirements, and fraud, illness, and death were commonplace. Thankfully, this reality is no longer the case.

Present

Today, food chain transparency is driven largely by the consumer and the evolving digital paradigm. Many brand owners are printing 2D barcodes on food products allowing consumers to access online sources of information about the product and company by scanning with a smartphone.

Consumers

Consumers are more aware and sensitive than ever before to global issues, particularly the safety, authenticity, ethicality, and sustainability of the foods they purchase and consume. According to EuroMonitor International “consumption in 2015 is increasingly being driven by the heart: consumers are making choices defined by their positive impact on the world and community through cause-linked buying, the thriving “sharing economy” or the “can-do” attitude that Millennials have in common”.¹



To better understand this, Washington based Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) conducted a project entitled “Consumer Information Transparency Initiative”. Early results from this study show that consumers see full disclosure as the clearest indication of transparency, they want both the good and the bad. The act of providing exhaustive information – regardless of what it implies – increases the perception of full transparency, which can lead to enhanced consumer trust. GMA also found that information does not have to be new to provide new value – clarity and accuracy matter too. The information that has been published is often difficult to understand, and there is value, even to these savvy consumers, in providing existing information in more usable ways.

Digital shift

As we become more immersed into the Internet Age, trust is just a click away and can be earned or lost without the consumer purchasing or consuming the product. By necessity, food businesses must use digital tools including social media to communicate ethically and honestly with consumers.

Future

There is a long way to go to truly understand what food chain transparency really means to all stakeholders, and to clearly communicate existing information in more usable ways. However, we do know that food information provided by companies must be honest, ethical, accurate, available, and usable to ensure customer trust and ultimately brand loyalty.

[Biography](#) of John Keogh.

References

1. [EuroMonitor International \(2012\). White Paper: Top 10 Consumer Trends for 2015.](#)