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## **A New Path Forward for Food Brands Losing Trust**

**By Charlie Arnot, CEO of The Center for Food Integrity**

A new study underscores the urgency for food companies to keep sustainability front and center if they hope to earn the trust and confidence of the generations driving food trends.

In the first annual list of [The 25 Most Trusted Brands in America](#) from Morning Consult, four legacy brands made the top 10 for Baby Boomers, but few to none made that same list for younger generations. While the familiarity and nostalgia of long-time companies may equate to trust for older consumer segments, those factors don't resonate with younger populations who instead want to know what companies are doing for people, animals and our planet.

Specifically, Hershey, Cheerios, M&Ms and Campbell's Soup made the Baby Boomer Top 10. For Generation X, only two of those legacy brands made the list, only one made the millennial Top 10 and no food brands made the Gen Z Adults list.

In this survey, and others, younger Americans are more interested in a company's ethics.

In the Morning Consult survey having strong ethical or political values, treating employees fairly and producing products in an ethically responsible way are priorities. Research from The [Center for Food Integrity](#) also shows that younger generations feel they know more about food production and they have a greater interest in learning more. In other words, they are active information seekers who are more likely to share information and opinions.

They are influencers whose attitudes are helping to drive unprecedented pressure on the food system to be more sustainable. However, the key for food companies – legacy and otherwise – is not to simply latch on to the latest sustainability trend, but instead assess and make sustainability choices that carefully weigh and transparently communicate the tradeoffs of decisions.

### **Weighing the Tradeoffs**

A variety of groups and other organizations are harnessing the increased interest in sustainability to capture opportunity or promote a specific agenda. As a result, a new and growing challenge is the focus on a single ingredient, process or practice without accounting for the potential impact on the entire food system.

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With so much at stake, the food system must cautiously consider tradeoffs before caving to demands that are deemed sustainable, but may fall short and stifle the technology and innovation that's truly helping produce more food, more sustainably.

Case in point: the push for slower growing broiler chickens, amid concerns about the faster growing birds, may sound good on the surface. However, the National Chicken Council points out that raising slower growing chickens means significantly more time on farm for the birds, a tremendous increase in feed, water, land and fuel consumption, more animal waste and increased prices. If only one-third of broiler chicken producers switch to slower-growing breeds, nearly 1.5 billion more birds would be needed each year to produce the same amount of meat currently produced.

Consumer demand in the U.S. for salmon so far outstrips supply that the U.S. imports almost 90 percent of all Atlantic salmon. In addition, overfishing on a global basis means that a third of commercial fish stocks are being harvested at biologically unsustainable levels. Yet, there are calls to ban genetically engineered salmon that has been deemed safe and can be produced efficiently, year-round and with a low carbon footprint on farms in Indiana.

### **Three Steps to Decision-Making**

As the pressure for sustainability mounts and groups make specific demands, how can the food system navigate the process? What does it take to determine the impacts and choose practices that are truly sustainable and will earn trust for long-term success?

CFI recommends a three-pronged approach to optimizing sustainability that begins with setting priorities based on company values and those of its stakeholders. Defining values provides a framework from which to make all decisions going forward.

Second, conduct a comprehensive assessment of the potential impacts of the recommended changes on the company, its supply chain and consumers. Leave no stone unturned. This is a process that takes time, but the outcome is worth the investment.

The first two steps lay a solid groundwork for the third, which includes effectively communicating your decisions to both the group making the request and the public in a way that's transparent and earns trust. If you've done your research, you can confidently justify any decision that speaks to overarching values like animal well-being, environmental stewardship, food safety or worker safety.

Without a values-based framework from which to make and communicate decisions, the food system is venturing down a dangerous path. Consumers – young and old – will see through any half-hearted efforts. And simply jumping on the latest sustainability trend without careful consideration of the consequences could backfire.

Yes, the pressure is on, but the food system should not be rushed to make commitments before fully understanding the potential impacts. Dedicate the resources necessary to make decisions that result in real sustainability and that you can confidently stand behind for the long-term.

An ethical undergirding will help earn trust with any generation.

If you'd like to learn more about CFI's Optimizing Sustainability approach, please reach out at [learnmore@foodintegrity.org](mailto:learnmore@foodintegrity.org). We'd be happy to have a conversation about how we can help.

*Charlie Arnot is CEO of The Center for Food Integrity, a not-for-profit organization based in Gladstone, Missouri, whose mission is to help the food system earn consumer trust.*

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