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Animal Protein Reaches Inflection Point as Threats Emerge

GLADSTONE, Mo. – Wed., Oct. 14, 2020 – For the last half century, U.S. animal agriculture has focused primarily on improving productivity, efficiency and throughput, resulting in increasing supplies of commodities that have helped assure a safe, abundant U.S. food supply and growing export markets. However, a new report from [The Center for Food Integrity](#) (CFI) shows a pivotal shift in cultural and market expectations for animal protein, and four emerging trends where the industry can innovate.

“American consumers have benefitted from the consistent growth in productivity and efficiency, spending less of their disposable income than consumers in any other country on food,” said Charlie Arnot, CFI CEO. “But we’ve reached an inflection point where engaged consumers, investors, policy makers and other key stakeholders have new priorities and are asking whether attributes beyond productivity and efficiency deserve greater focus.”

[CFI 360: The Future of Animal Protein](#) examines emerging data-based trends, four opportunities for innovation and the consequences of maintaining the status quo.

Big Shifts Are Brewing

New trends are accelerating and gaining a foothold, according to members of the [CFI Consumer Trust Insights Council](#), a collaboration of consumer insights experts, social scientists, researchers and food industry consultants who analyze emerging trends and provide strategic guidance.

Among the trends detailed by the council, consumers are looking to the food industry to innovate when it comes to providing affordable, healthful options with an eye toward immunity.

“That’s not surprising, given the current environment,” said Arnot. “What is surprising is consumers are also re-thinking their opposition to ‘processed foods’ and are more open to them *if* there is a nutritional benefit to the processing.”

In addition, the way consumers talk about plant proteins has shifted dramatically. Digital ethnography research that observes consumers’ online interactions shows the dialogue around plant proteins has changed by more than 55 percent in the last few months.

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“This shift has never before seen in more than a decade of tracking,” said Ujwal Arkalgud, council member and CEO of MotivBase, which conducted the research. “It illustrates the volatility of the topic and the extent of confusion in the marketplace as consumers continue to question the processing and ingredient list of plant-based meats.”

Technology is front and center, according to the report. A new generation of consumers embraces technology, expects innovation and demands engagement.

“Niche start-ups are speaking the language of a younger demographic that has grown up with smart devices in their hands and in their kitchens,” said Kevin Ryan, founder of Malachite Strategy and a member of the council. “The generation raised on technology expects innovation and an opportunity to engage to ensure their voices are being heard.”

Four Emerging Innovation Opportunities

The research identifies four major opportunities for the animal protein space as indicated by the maturity of demand in the marketplace. Demand for these categories has now moved into the mainstream.

- 1. Fresh and high quality.** A key opportunity is consumer desire for high quality animal proteins, no matter the cut, because consumers view fresh, high-quality protein as healthier than low-end cuts.
- 2. Stretching meat purchases.** Consumers facing financial uncertainty are seeking ways to make meat last longer for their families, which means saving money and making fewer trips to the store.
- 3. Ethically Raised Animals.** Consumers continue to express concern about supporting industrial scale farms but they don’t want to give up easy, affordable animal proteins – easy meaning easy to access and easy to prepare with a solid nutrition profile.
- 4. Plant-Based Alternatives.** Consumers are conflicted. They aren’t impressed with the taste of many plant-based alternatives, even when they’re looking to reduce meat consumption. They prefer the taste and texture of real animal products, but plant-based alternatives are perceived by some as “better for me and better for the planet.”

“Companies have an opportunity to introduce innovation in these spaces that’s more likely to gain traction quickly,” said Arkalgud.

A Pivotal Moment

Consumers engaging on the topic of animal protein sit squarely in the driver’s seat as the nation continues to adapt to the evolving reality of the pandemic. Already, some innovators are actively working to meet their expectations with products that give consumers permission to enjoy animal protein, said Arnot.

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“Those who follow the lead of consumers, leverage these newly identified opportunities and address the increasing array of complex challenges without sacrificing efficiency will rise to the top as the likely winners,” he said. “And those committed to preserving the status quo will be left behind.”

CFI 360 will examine key issues in food and agriculture each quarter. To access the full CFI 360 report on animal protein, produced in partnership with Phibro Animal Health, and to learn more about the CFI Consumer Trust Insights Council, visit foodintegrity.org.

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