

Millennial Focus Group

This plenary session featured the third time we have begun the Summit with Consumer Focus Group, dealing with food and consumer issues that affect many state policies and the business community.

Ms. Alysson Perry began by asking the audience to be respectful to and welcoming of the panel, putting them at ease to allow them to speak candidly and without self-edit. Alysson then introduced the millennial panel. The criteria for being a panelist are:

- They must be the primary grocery shopper, or share equally in the responsibility
- They cannot live on a farm, or preferably not even a rural area
- They cannot be vegetarian
- They are being compensated
- They are between the ages of 24 and 39
- They may or may not have children at home
- They are all food aware
- They were recruited through an organization called 'Focus Point Global'

The panelists were representative of the average millennial consumer without radical ideas and opinions. They included a community college student, a married teacher and mother of one, a high school math teacher, a transplantation nurse and mother of two, a construction worker father of one, and married mother of two who works in a contemporary art museum.

Topics to be discussed:

- Farmers and Farming
- Food Information Sources
- Environmental Impacts of Food Production and Government Regulations
- GMOs
- Food Purchase Drivers

Farmers

The first question was 'What is your image of today's farmer?' The answers included mom and pop, small family owned multi-generational farmers, disciplined, hardworking.

'How many acres does an average farmer farm?' – The answers ranged from 100 to thousands of acres.

'What percentage of the farms in the U.S. are family farms?' – 35% to 80%. One person said that the 'big players' own a lot more of the market than the large number of smaller farmers.

'How do you define 'family farms' versus 'big players'?' – One answered 10% or 15% are family farms.

'Can you tell by just driving by if a farm is 'family' or 'corporate' owned?' – The proximity of the main residence was the determining factor.

'What is a corporate farm?' - A large scale operation big enough to win government contracts. Another thought it was the structure of the employment arrangement for those that are there on a daily basis. An entity that maximizes profit and does whatever it takes to make a profit.

'When it comes to purchasing food, do you prefer food from a small farm vs. corporate farm?' – Most tried to get whatever they can afford from local, small farms. But affordability drives a lot of choices.

'How do you define 'local'?' – One participant thought that it meant farms from adjoining states as well as their own. Another said within a 4 to 6 hour driving range would be 'local'.

'Is the farm of origin always on the label?' – One participant said it is a newer promotional trend. Produce and non-frozen meat are usually labeled. One panelist noted that bigger corporations did not normally identify the source location of their product.

'What do you think the average income is for a family farm?' – The answers ranged from \$30,000 to \$50,000. They had enough, but there was never excess.

'How much education do you think an average farmer has?' – They answered they thought farmers have more education today than in the past, due to the fact that there are more options these days.

What is the determining factor between 'large' and 'small' farms?' – The answers ranged from number of employees to direct owner involvement.

'What would be your primary focus if you were a farmer?' - Taking pride in the quality of the product. Another answer was honest and transparency. Another was customer interaction, such as at farmers markets.

'Would you trust a farmer to give you objective food system information?' – One participant said he would trust the farmer, but not corporate America.

Food System Information

'Where do you get your food system information?' – Grocery store labeling and signage was the main answer. Searching the internet via Google and trusting whatever was there. Another person noted that there is misinformation out there and consumers don't do their due diligence.

'What information would you like on food labels and where would you like to receive that?' – One responded that he wanted to know what the product contains and where the ingredients come from. Another said she was not concerned about the 'middle of the store' items, such as canned green beans. But the outside of the store – bakery, deli, meat, seafood – is where she looks at the signage for origin. Another wanted to know how fresh the chicken is and what ingredients or chemicals are added. 'Local' could be a corporate farm, but they wanted more information about what the food is and where it comes from.

Environmental Impacts of Food Production and Governmental Regulation

'Do you believe food production impacts the environment?' 'Yes' was the universal answer. Some crops are more environmentally healthy than others. Animals have a greater impact on the environment. Some impacts are less bad and more bad. The waste from farming is bad for the environment. However farming has less of an impact than residential or commercial development on the land.

'Are farmers and ranchers concerned about the environment?' – Yes, small farmers care about the environment. The environment directly impacts a farmer's business. Farmers also have an appreciation for the environment. However commercial farms only care about the bottom line. Small farmers are good caretakers of the land.

'Do you think farming is regulated by the government?' – There are certain standards that farmers need to adhere to, which have increased over the years. Some farmers that can't keep up with the regulations have probably been forced out of the business. They believe farmers are regulated slightly to moderately. The level of regulation compares to gas stations.

'Do elected officials have responsibility for governing food information that's available?' – They have a degree of responsibility to regulate some, but not all, the information that's available. Transparency is important. While there is no way to know everything, information should not be hidden from the consumer.

'How would you define 'sustainable'?' – There is a big push to make things sustainable, but it might be getting out of hand. If food is supposed to go back after a certain length of time, it is the consumer's responsibility to consume it within that time. Don't put too many additives to make it sustainable for longer periods.

'Is sustainability of the food system something you think about?' – Most said no, they didn't think about it.

GMOs

'What is a GMO?' – Most were unsure of the scientific process. While most were uncomfortable with the modifications, some were concerned about consuming GMOs. Some attempts at a definition were completely incorrect (assuming it's an additive to the product).

'How many of you try to buy GMO-free foods?' - Most try to look for the label and buy non-GMO if they can afford it. However, it's not a determining factor when looking for certain products. One person noted that she was not aware of what has been modified and what has not, and the affects the modification might have.

'How long do you think GMOs have been around, in years?' – Some said 25-40. Another said 100s of years.

'How many GMOs are out there?' – One person thought there was at least a GMO for every product, or most products. Other had no idea, but assumes there is some modification with most food.

'What benefit do you derive from buying GMO-free food?' – One person noted that there is a rise in cancers these days. People are more concerned about what modifying food does. It makes her feel better from a health standpoint. Another said there have been a lot of studies that show GMOs are bad. But he went on a natural food diet, and he said he feels better because of it. There are more health benefits. It's more of a quality product without GMO than to modify and get it to the market quicker.

'How much more are you willing to pay for non-GMO food?' – Cost is a big issue, but if it's outrageously more, he wouldn't choose it. If it's 10%, and he gets something he feels better about, he'll buy it.

'What is natural food?' – One of the most natural meats is fish that was caught that day. No preservation, no chemicals. If you can get it from a butcher who just cuts the meat, that's fresh. Proximity to their natural habitat.

If I said 'GMOs offer a solution to hunger in developing countries', would that affect your decision to buy or not to buy? – There comes a time when you have to say, 'Which one was the lesser evil?' He equated this to landfills. They're needed .but not in my back yard. It's a necessary evil for humanitarian reasons.

'What other benefit would have to be derived from GMOs for you to be supportive?' – What bothers him is he doesn't know what it means. Transparency is the focal point. A QR code would be desired.

'Do you believe farm chemicals are overused?' – One person thinks they're used regularly, but he is hesitant of long term effects. He realizes that drought resistance is necessary, but the damage is unknown. Another person would buy a special wash to clean pesticides off fruits and vegetable on the list of produce you should wash. There was a moderate degree of concern about pesticide use. There is information on the internet that would suggest pesticides are overused. Another person thinks injecting chicken with hormones is overused. One person trusts a small, local fruit grower not to use too much pesticides. Monsanto and Round Up is bad and used by big corporate farms. But people are busy and don't have time to read everything about their food. But a label would be helpful.

The allotted time was over and the panelists were thanked for their input.