SCIENCE and the CONSUMER

Working with Retail Corporations to Develop Policy

Overview

- Understanding the consumer and their perception of risk
- Understanding the relationship between the retailer and consumer
- What is sound science?
- The approach to policy

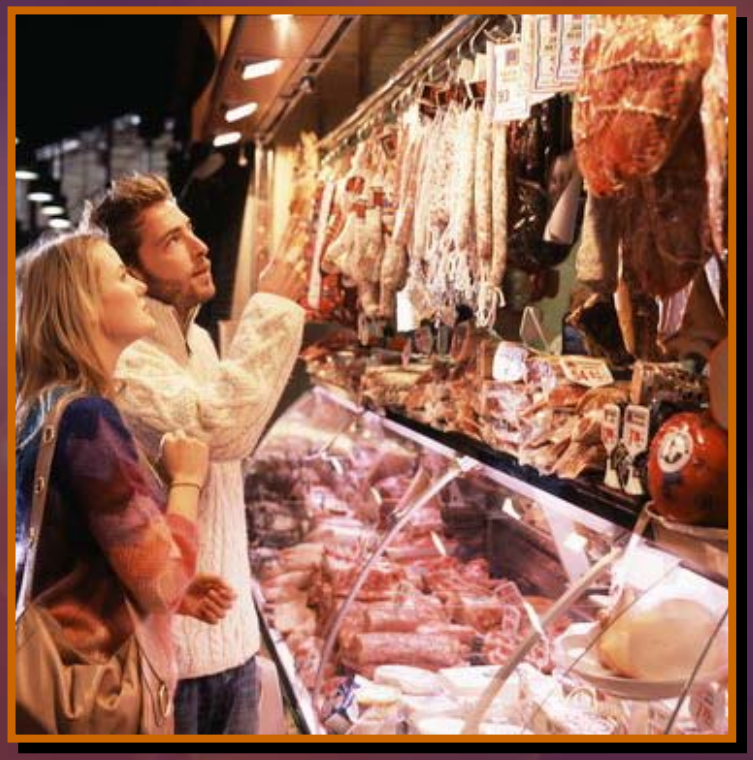
Retail

- Experience with restaurant and pharmaceutical industries
- Brand name on the market
- Not traditional constituent of USDA

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

The Consumer and Risk

- The way the risk is conceived by those who think about it in terms of scientific approaches is very different from the way it is conceived by non-experts (lay public)



From a presentation by Conrad Brunk, PhD, University of Victoria, Canada
TAFS Meeting, Washington, DC. April 2004

The Consumer and Risk

- Experts want to find a scientific solution to define acceptable risk such as a risk assessment computer model

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The Consumer and Risk

- If the science-based tool finds the risk so low as to be “obviously acceptable” the nonexpert may appear to the scientist as being irrational or not appreciating the science

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The Consumer and Risk

- Expert solutions for public risk debates:
  - Improve science education with the assumption that the more the public understands the science the more rational their reaction will be
  - Engage in strategic communication – formulate messages in ways that produce desire response, i.e. Risk acceptance

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The Consumer and Risk

- Where does this expert solution fall short:
- More than scientific assessment
- Complex set of value judgments which are often rooted in social, religious and political culture
- These are usually resistant to strategic communication

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The Consumer and Risk

- The question of safety is fundamentally a question of the acceptability of risks
- It is not determined by analytical methods of science

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Experts' Perception of Safety

- Risk/Cost Analysis – if there is a greater benefit shouldn't the risk be taken
- Risk Comparison – If take risk A which is greater why are you afraid to take risk B
- Risk probability is more important than risk magnitude

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Non-expert Perception of Safety

- **Greater attention given to:**
- **Magnitude than probability – dread factor**
- **Who bears risk vs who benefits**
- **Who makes the choice**

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BSE Risk Profile

- We don’t know for sure how you get the disease
- We can’t test for it
- We can’t vaccinate for it
- You can’t cook it away

BSE Risk Profile

- It could kill your children in late adolescence
- It is a slow and agonizing death
- The consumer is totally dependent upon the industry and government to do the right thing
- Eat beef – its safe!

Retail:
A Brand in the Market

"It takes years to build trust and minutes to lose it"

From Trust or Consequences by Al Golin

Retail:
A Brand in the Market

“In regards to food safety, consumers expect the retailers to have the issue sorted out, and if they find this is not true they are outraged”

Professor David Hughes

“We all want policy based on sound science”

The problem is…

What is Sound Science?

- Sound science can be a moving target
- Most research findings are not definitive especially on emerging issues
- Science evolves
- It depends on who is interpreting the science

What is Sound Science?

- Y "believes the removal of SRM from animal feed is not scientifically or economically justified."

  Comments to CFIA February 2005

- "Scientific and epidemiological findings provide more than ample justification for further actions regarding the feed ban in Canada."

  Comments to CFIA February 2005

What is Sound Science?

- Low level of disease in Canada
- Research has found SRMs to be the tissues with infectivity or closely associated
- Can still be fed to species known to be susceptible
- Epidemiological documentation as to cross contamination and cross feeding
- WHO recommends removal

Retail, Science and Policy

- Policy to prevent rather than react
- Policy tends to take precautions against the worst case scenario instead of counting on the best case
- We don’t look for justifications for the status quo; we take apart the products and processes and continue to make them safer

Retail, Science and Policy

- Many times policy is in advance of, or more than government regulation
- Can make change by specifications

“Fix it before it breaks”

vs

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it”

From Trust or Consequences by Al Golin

Conclusions

- Take actions based on "science" to build and maintain the trust of the consumer
- Equates to protection of the brand
- Anticipate the future – eg. Avian Influenza

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