



Trust is a question of values

(TRUST)

Consumer trust in the food supply chain in Europe has become increasingly important over the past decade. Major food scares have had far-reaching socio-economic consequences for Europe's citizens and its food production systems. How the notions of trust (and mistrust) in information sources and risk management along the food chain are formed and spread through society are key to understanding how people react during a food safety crisis. The findings of the TRUST project have thrown more light on the consumer-confidence factor and will provide valuable input into new, more effective communication strategies to deal with crises.

Risk and trust

The food scares that have afflicted the European market in recent years (BSE, dioxin in feed, etc.) have had far-reaching consequences for its citizens, food-production systems and the role the EU has to play in ensuring our food is safe to eat. Consumer confidence has been eroded and had an impact on spending patterns. Such changes in consumer purchasing habits have economic consequences, but that added ingredient of distrust is generated.



Distrust has an economic cost and also a socio-political impact.

The TRUST project brought together a multidisciplinary research team to assess citizens' attitudes to food risk and behaviour during a food crisis across five European countries - France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and the UK.

Perceptions of risk

The project focused on evaluation strategies used by consumers to assess the reliability of risk messages, the way they processed risk information with regard to different food hazards, and the cultural gaps between professional risk managers and the general public. It examined the interplay of the various psychological, sociological, demographic, and economic factors at individual, market and social levels. The idea was to gain a better understanding of consumer demands, attitudes and perceptions.

The project had a special reference to trust and risk perception in the food chain with the aim of developing better strategies to communicate more effectively on consumer issues surrounding food risk.

Attitudes win over analysis

One of the findings from the study is that people often use a 'rule of thumb' to make judgements and choices rather than taking an analytical approach in a food crisis. For example, if a person has already eaten the "crisis" food item, he or she is likely to consider it safe to continue. Generally speaking, attitudes strongly affect people's food choices with concepts such as "It tastes good" appearing more relevant than rational or instrumental considerations like "it is convenient". Trust in risk managers do affect risk perception and it is more related to shared values than to competence or telling the true behaviour..



Consumer science

Food safety is generally considered to be 'extremely important' by European citizens with the French showing most ambivalence towards food safety and Italians appearing the most concerned. TV advertising is the least trusted source of information across all countries on average, followed by political groups, processors, the government and magazines. The most trusted information sources across all the countries surveyed are doctors and other health authorities, national food safety authorities, university scientists and consumer organisations. In contrast, the average degree of trust towards food chain actors shows differences across the continent.

Three different groups of consumers were identified: "Non-trusters", especially in independent sources, "Mixed trusters", characterised by distrust in food chain actors and trust in independent sources, and "Trusters" who are especially confident in all sources of information.

Better communication strategies

The insight gained from the TRUST project can help implement a comprehensive food-risk communication strategy for use in future food scare scenarios that will reassure the public whilst ensuring the consumer's safety. Risk managers need to cultivate a trust relationship with citizens in advance of any crisis and provide clear and accessible information using the most trusted sources and the most trusted media during the crisis. Using the leverage of diffuse networks (relatives, friends) that play a crucial role in the social amplification of risk is also important. After a food scare, the communications strategy must act to recover and maintain a trusting relationship.

Communication during a food scare must be credible, in context, provide practical information, be sure to make reference to source material, provide information how the crisis is being managed and describe how further information will be delivered. The TRUST project is complemented by the TRUSTINFOOD project (see separate project sheet).

More information

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