

Consumer Egg Awareness

A Senior Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

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Bachelor of Science

By
Hailee French

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Introduction

In 2008, Proposition 2 passed, forcing all egg producers in California to provide more room inside of cages to their laying hens. The Humane Society of the United States [HSUS] initiated this battle and won but, less than a decade later decided that still wasn't enough room for the birds. HSUS is now pushing to have a new measure on the ballot in November 2018 forcing all egg producers in California to produce their eggs cage free.

This project will survey the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo campus to gauge the campus's understanding of egg production in California. Specifically, the project will benefit California egg producers with valuable insight regarding consumer perceptions of animal welfare and cage system preferences. The data gathered can help shape educational outreach plans and objectives within the egg industry to help educate our voters on farm practices we use in the egg industry. The average consumer knows little about the term "cage free" and its industry standard and yet, votes on ballot initiatives forcing poultry producers to conform or risk closing their businesses.

Background

It is much worse for the chicken's health being in a floor house, according to Hsiung in the article "They're being eaten alive!" published in 2016. In this article, Hsiung talks about his own experience touring a cage free egg operation operated by Costco. Cannibalism is nearly increased by 3000% on cage free farms versus conventional housing systems (Hsiung, 2016). Birds become cannibalistic for many different reasons, the main one being crowding issues. Birds don't have the opportunity to crowd each other when they are broken up in smaller segments in cages versus having hundreds on the floor in the house. They also tend to be more disease ridden and 1/3 of the birds placed in cage free housing die prematurely (Hsiung, "They're being eaten alive!", 2016).

Only 31% of grocery shoppers considered themselves informed about the meaning of terms such as cage free and free-range (Contreras, "Commitments to a cage free future pinch egg producers in the present", 2017). This could cause a negative impact for the egg industry if consumers are unaware of what they are actually voting for when this topic does make it on a voting ballot. Out of the 15.5 million egg laying hens in California, most are family owned (McGreevy, "Live in California and buy eggs? If voters approve this in 2018, they'll need to be from cage-free hens", 2017). These small family farms may face some trouble fighting this measure as they did in 2008 because they are not as well funded and as large of an organization as HSUS. They are much more widely dispersed across the state rather than being one large organization known nationally by one, single name. HSUS is a highly funded organization with an annual budget of \$100 million to fight for things such as this ballot measure. The overlying issue with the passing of Proposition 2 and additional measures in the future, is that egg farmers will be out a large sum of money once again, paying to convert to cage free housing systems. This would affect the majority of people in California because egg prices will have to go up to account for the loss the farmers will be facing.

Conceptual Framework

Some large companies such as McDonalds and Subway have planned to go cage free by the year 2025. This will have a political and business sway as to whether or not farmers make the choice to go cage free on their own. The problem with consumers switching over their purchasing of

egg production types are the costs associated with that change. Consumers aren't necessarily willing to pay that premium price right now. Some of the reluctance behind customers making the switch lies with the fact that there is a lot of confusion over the terms used on packaging. If consumers don't have a clear definition of what they are buying, they in turn don't have accurate information to make an informed voting decision. Consumer awareness is key in educating people about what exactly they are purchasing which will in turn allow them to have a more informed voting choice.

Methodology

The author chose to utilize a survey for this project's data collection. Prior to developing the questions, the author spoke with poultry organizations in California to gather their comments and questions about consumer perceptions of the egg industry including the California Poultry Association and the California Egg Board. The author then researched specific types, survey length, and methods of delivery.

The study took place online only, via SurveyMonkey. The Agricultural Education and Communication Department hosted the survey to maintain confidentiality of participant data gathered. The survey was developed to be anonymous meaning no names or domains were recorded from participants.

The survey questions and format were approved by the Internal Review Board at Cal Poly, prior to the survey being made available. A consent form to participate preceded the survey participation limited to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo students, faculty and staff in the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. The project advisor, Ms. Megan Silcott, utilized the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences SYMPA email authorization to send the survey link out via email to all CAFES staff, students and faculty. The survey link was also share on the AGED Department's Facebook page and sent out via email by the AGED Department to its students. The same email was sent to the College of Liberal Arts and Journalism Department. Several Journalism professors, as well as the Journalism Department Head, were given the link to share with their department students, staff and faculty.

Once the survey timeline of two weeks concluded, the author began analyzing responses.

Results

Participation in the College of Liberal Arts was minimal and for the future purposes of this research, should be more widely explored. In total, 571 people participated in responding to the survey questions.

When asked, "Which of the images below best represents "cage free" to you?" only 119 people out of the 571 participants (20.48%) chose the image that accurately depicts the industry standard for cage free eggs. This question was used to target if respondents knew the terminology that was used in the industry from the image depicted. 451 respondents (78.98%) chose an image that depicts free range hens by industry standard rather than cage free which is the question that was asked. Respondents lacked an understanding of the difference between cage free and free range based on their responses to this question.

When asked the question, "What do you perceive as health benefits to eating cage free eggs versus standard eggs?" 12.76% of respondents answered that there was less chance of salmonella, 11.71% answered that there were more vitamins, 6.29% answered that there was less cholesterol, and 7.69% answered that there was less fat. 36.36% answered that they were not sure. Surprisingly 45.98% accurately answered that there are no health benefits to eating cage

free eggs versus standard eggs. With this being less than half of all respondents, these respondents were still not well informed about their own health decisions to buy eggs.

When asked the question, “Do you believe brown eggs or white eggs to be nutritionally better for you?”, 67 respondents (11.71%) answered brown and 88 (15.38%) answered that they didn’t know. I was much more pleased with the data on this question considering 72.73% answered that they were both the same. When asked the question, “What type of chicken housing system do you believe provides the most health benefits for the egg-laying chicken?”, 44.06% answered free range, 16.96% answered cage free. Only 16.43% answered conventional to this question.

When asked, “Would you be willing to pay more for eggs if the state required every producer to be cage free?” 41.96% answered yes, 30.42% answered no and 27.62% were neutral on the question. When asked, “If you were to vote on egg laying chicken housing systems right now, do you think you would be making a well-informed decision?” 52.80% answered yes and 47.20% answered no. When asked, “Are you a proponent or opponent of California egg producers transitioning to 100% cage free egg-laying chicken housing systems?” 27.62% answered that they oppose California requiring cage-free egg-laying chicken housing systems and 47.55% supported with 24.83% having no position.

Conclusions/ Implications/ Recommendations

Most consumers do not have resources readily available to them to help make them knowledgeable on poultry industry practices. Considering most of these respondents were actively involved in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Science and they answered these questions the way they did, it can be concluded that the average consumer with minimal agriculture knowledge doesn’t possess the resources they need to make informed voting decisions on this issue.

HSUS uses its social media as an advantage while the agriculture industry lacks consumer outreach in this area. Consumers don’t know common industry statistics because most industries within agriculture, are not communicating enough to the people with a voting power. The author believes poultry farmers make their living on these hens and the business owners would be in a much worse position overall financially, if they were treating their birds poorly. Average consumers do not see this.

The author recommends the California Egg Board utilize its social media resources as an outreach program to explain the proper industry practices to the average consumer and the benefits these processes entail to the bird itself. The poultry industry needs to go back to the basics of consumer outreach and explain why poultry farmers are farming the way that they do and explaining the health benefits it has to them as consumers and to the animals themselves.

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