

Consumer Agricultural Education: Starting at the High School Level Health Class

A Senior Project

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By

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Introduction

The purpose of this project is to analyze and understand the communication gap between the farmer and consumer in order to create a dialogue about misconceptions in the media. Often rumors in the media worry or mislead the consumer in his or her buying choices. In order for consumers to understand what they are buying, and critically analyze media information, it is necessary to teach agricultural education at the high school level health class. This project will showcase how to start this education in order to bridge the communication gap starting with five crucial and common food-packaging labels. These labels include USDA organic, GMO, FDA approval, "All natural" and gluten free.

Research and Framework

The shift from many small rural farms to large-scale production facilities, along with people migrating to cities has created a large physical gap between the agricultural industry and its consumers. Today, farms are concentrated in few large-scale, specialized farms in rural areas where less than 25 percent of the U.S. population lives (Dimitri, 2005). This shift is due to technological advances and economical beneficiaries from large-scale production (Dimitri, 2005). Due to this physical gap created over the last several decades, agricultural education is lacking. The result is miscommunication of facts about production, processing and farming practices, and overall fewer people today informed about agriculture altogether. Improving perceptions of modern agriculture starts with proper education and communication to consumers. This is not to say the agriculture industry is perfect, however, with uninformed consumers voting on changes to the industry, it is important the facts are taught to students as future consumers that may impact the industry.

In a country where obesity rates continue to increase, there has been a significant movement towards nutritional awareness. In 1990, the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) required food labeling on most packaged foods (Davis, 2007). Labeling products has since become a huge way to market food items because dietary knowledge largely influences consumers' decisions. It is important consumers have the facts about the labels in which they are basing their buying choices. With conflicting data floating through the media, it is up to the agriculture industry to provide factual, unbiased information to its consumers. It seems there is a need for a food label education campaign. By starting with some of the most common packaging labels, this project will show how to communicate agriculture education starting at the high school level.

Methods

High school level health classes focus on teaching students how to eat properly and lead a healthy lifestyle. As these students develop their health choices, it seems appropriate they understand how to select products in the market that meet their health choices. That is why this is the perfect opportunity to educate the future consumers on products in the grocery store. More specifically, this agricultural education needs to start with basic terminology used in the agriculture industry. The five main terms to demonstrate this are GMO, USDA Organic, FDA Approval, Gluten, and "All Natural". This terminology will be taught with a visual aid poster that defines and summarizes necessary, factual information. The posters can be handed out to each student as an informational tool to reference in the future and displayed on classroom walls.

Piktochart:

The first step in making a teaching aid poster is selecting a user friendly, infographic design website. The author utilized Piktochart.com for this purpose.

Choose a Template:

The second step is to select the best template for this teaching method. There are infographics, presentations, and printables to choose from. The format that works best for a teaching poster display is the templates under the infographics section. The template starts the format and style of the poster display.

Choose a Background:

After selecting an infographic template, begin to design the poster to the exact specifications. A more neutral background or single color is desirable if planning to add pictures or other images.

Add Title:

Title the poster with relevant and concise phrases: "Consumer Agricultural Education"

Font and Sizing:

The title will be font 'League Gothic', size 70. The section title will be the font 'Futura Condensed', size 34. The written text under each section should be size 18, font 'Aaux Next'. These specifications can vary, however different sized text and fonts will help the main titles and sections stand out in a readable font and sizing. Limit multiple fonts to no more than three for visual purposes.

Create Sections:

Divide the poster into five sections for each term: GMO, USDA Organic, FDA Approval, Gluten, and All Natural. As mentioned above the section titles should be font size 34.

Use Reliable Sources:

Use proper USDA and FDA websites to fill in strictly factual definitions of the terminology. Make each section concise and to the point. Only state the most important information to prevent the poster from being too wordy. The size of the writing under each section should be font size 18. Having each section in an easy to read size is an important visual tool to catch the attention of the reader.

Add Pictures:

Finally, add about two to three pictures that specifically relate to the defined terms under the corresponding section. Specifically, the author added an image of the USDA Organic seal under the section about Organic. This picture shows the consumer what the label looks like in stores.

Conclusion

Although these posters teach five terms used in the industry, they are common labels seen in grocery stores and yet frequently misinterpreted. This teaching aid poster is an example of how the agriculture industry can partner with high schools to start teaching an overview of consumer education. By starting conversations at the high school level about terminology used in the industry, consumers will start to ask more questions and critically think about the rumors circulating the media. It is essential for the agriculture industry to bridge the communication gap so the future consumers have appropriate knowledge about what they are buying. Adding posters and information like this project can close the gap between producers and consumers.

Recommendations

For anyone who may be interested in duplicating this project, there are a few recommendations that could make the communication and education more effective. First, in conjunction with the posters, invite guest speakers to the high schools such as farmers, ranchers, and representatives from the USDA or FDA to speak in these health classes. Professionals with real life experience in the agriculture industry would enhance this learning experience even further. Second, create homework assignments that challenge the students to speak with their friends, family and community members regarding the label information seen on the posters.

The goal of this project was to continue expanding communication and education beyond the classroom. The author successfully met all objectives to encourage more dialogue about understanding agricultural practices.

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