

# What's on the Consumer's Mind?

A look around the local grocery store might show images of consumers reading meat labels or checking the expiration date on a gallon of milk. Each consumer has a set of values when making food purchases, and the level of importance placed on each value by consumers allows for food producers and distributors to better meet the needs of their end user.

A recent nationwide online survey of U.S. consumers by <http://www.k-state.edu/>Kansas State University found that freshness and safety were the most important values consumers placed on buying popular livestock products—milk, ground beef, beef steak and chicken breast. The findings for livestock-specific products were consistent with <http://ajae.oxfordjournals.org/content/91/1/184.full.pdf?sid=f7adcd3-2bed-4a1f-ab2b-065f52519201>prior research examining consumers' general food values.

Ted Schroeder, professor and livestock economist for K-State Research and Extension, worked with other faculty and graduate students in the Department of Agricultural Economics on this research. Schroeder said as consumers make decisions to purchase food products, they might think about taste, underlying production practices, concerns they have about production, safety, freshness, quality and price, to name a few.

"It's about a host of things that might go through consumers' minds as they purchase a product," he said. "As you compile those into a list, how do they rank? And, do they rank the same for different products?"

**Details of the study**

The prior research by Lusk and Briggeman in 2009 found that safety, nutrition, taste, price and natural were the top five values consumers desired out of the 11 total values assessed for general food products. Schroeder and his graduate students wanted to see if similar results could be found when consumers considered buying specific livestock products.

"We wanted some diversity among those (livestock) products," said Garrett Lister, a K-State graduate student who worked on the study. "We also wanted them to be specific, which is why we kept them in the livestock sector."

The popular products they chose to examine included milk, ground beef, beef steak and chicken breast. The 11 food values they chose to examine included freshness, health, hormone-free/antibiotic-free, animal welfare, taste, price, safety, convenience, nutrition, origin and environmental impact. These are similar to the general food product study, aside from a few modifications that apply to livestock products. Adding freshness was one of those modifications.

"There're more issues with spoilage in some of these livestock products than food in general," Lister said.

A total of 1,950 people responded to the livestock products survey, which was a big jump from the 176 respondents included in the prior general food product survey. This was mainly due to the online nature of the livestock products survey versus the mailed method of the general food products survey, said Marcus Brix, another K-State graduate student who worked on the study.

Safety was the most important value in the general food products study, and it was either first or second most important for milk, ground beef, beef steak and chicken breast. Freshness was the other top value for livestock products. In contrast, the values of environmental impact, animal welfare, origin and convenience were less important for the livestock products, and this was also comparable to the prior research.

Price fell in the middle of the list, Lister said. This was because some consumers valued price as one of their key components in making a decision on what foods to buy, while others felt it was less important.

Brix said economists often presume that price is the most important factor in choice, because price is an important driver of purchase behavior. Researchers tend to assume food is going to be safe when purchased at a retail outlet. However, consumers in general don't necessarily have that presumed trust in food safety.

"A majority of consumers still question some things about their food," Brix said. "If they think that one product is more safe than another at a different price point, they are going to be less responsive to the price and more responsive to the product freshness or safety of said product."

**Needs in the industry**

Consumers want products that deliver a high-quality eating experience, Schroeder said, and this study, as well as prior research, reflects that.

"Freshness, nutritional components and health attributes are desirable, and consumers absolutely demand a product that is

safe," he said. "These are messages we've been saying for a long time, and they've shown up remarkably strong across all four of these particular products."

The social values, including animal welfare, environmental impact and origin, for example, aren't irrelevant, Schroeder said.

Some segments of society hold those as more important than others, but overall they aren't the major drivers that lead the average consumer to purchase a particular product.

Understanding some of these consumer food value preferences helps the food industry know where to focus its marketing and

production energy to ensure that high-quality eating experience.

A research paper explaining all of the findings from the livestock products consumer survey is available at [www.agmanager.info/livestock/marketing/WorkingPapers/WP1\\_FoodValues-LivestockProducts.pdf](http://www.agmanager.info/livestock/marketing/WorkingPapers/WP1_FoodValues-LivestockProducts.pdf).

# Wheat specialist Jim Shroyer to retire

For more than 30 years, the face of wheat in Kansas has been Jim Shroyer, K-State Research and Extension crop production specialist. He has informed and entertained his "family" of producers in the state at wheat tours, field days, and meetings since he started at K-State in 1980. Shroyer will retire on July 3, 2014.

To Shroyer, being the extension wheat specialist in Kansas has been more than just a job. It's been a professional and personal relationship with thousands of producers and co-workers in the agricultural industry and the university.

His co-workers, such as Tom Maxwell, K-State Central Kansas Extension district agent, agree with the value of the long-term relationships that have developed between Shroyer and other extension specialists and their audience.

"Shroyer's expertise and humor have been a long-standing hit with our farmers in this area, and he will be missed," Maxwell said. "Everybody across the board knows who Jim Shroyer is."

The personal nature of extension is the core of its strength and its greatest asset, Shroyer said.

"Extension work involves a large human investment in the people of the state. It's a people business," he said. "That's one of the things I'll miss the most about this job - the bonding I've had with stakeholders and the county agents."

There have been many good memories over the years, he said.

"Being out in wheat fields with farmers - that's just heaven. It is always hard for me to believe they actually pay me for the pleasure of this work," Shroyer said. "My absolute favorite thing is doing the wheat tours. That's when I get to see the wheat as it's approaching the finish line and discuss the growing season with farmers. I learn more from talking with farmers at the wheat tours than they learn from me."

"I've also enjoyed, and still enjoy, playing Sherlock Holmes and trying to figure out the cause of problems farmers are seeing in their wheat fields. This is always a team effort with others at K-State," he added.

Nothing is possible without a good team of fellow professionals at K-State over the years, he said.

"We have a really great network of county extension agents in Kansas, maybe the best in the entire country. And you can't ask for better university faculty to work with than what I've been lucky enough to have at K-State."

Shroyer has been the extension specialist for more crops than just wheat during his tenure at K-State. He has also worked extensively with corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and grain sorghum. Some of his significant contributions, in conjunction with others, have been:

- \* Introducing no-till alfalfa;
- \* Pioneering work in the system of planting short-season corn early in the season;
- \* Developing and testing of wheat blends as a viable practice;
- \* Developing management practices for planting wheat after row crops;
- \* Developing pre-plant wheat schools in the summer;
- \* The "Diagnosing Wheat Production Problems" publication;
- \* The Adopt-a-Wheat-Field website;
- \* Promoting and strengthening the system of wheat tours at the county level;
- \* Initiating the annual Kid's Field Day at the Agronomy North Farm; and
- \* Teaching the Agronomy 360 course on crop production.

His position as extension crop production specialist is important to the agricultural community in Kansas, said Gary Pierzynski, head of K-State's Department of Agronomy. "That position is on hold at the present time, however, pending state budget deliberations," he added.

Those who would like to submit a note to Shroyer can send it to: Brittany Green, Administrative Specialist, Re: Jim Shroyer Retirement, Department of Agronomy, 2004 Throckmorton Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan KS 66506.

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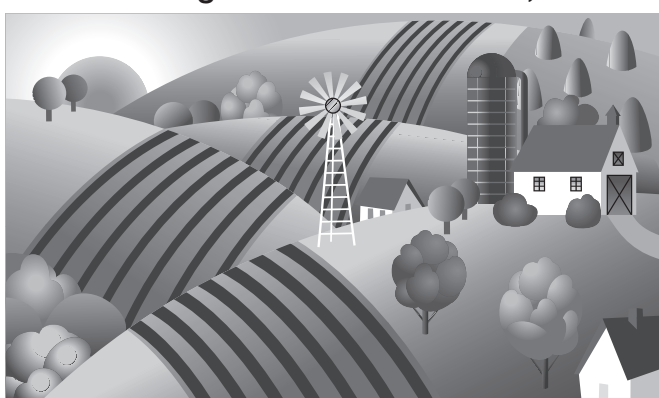


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