

Feed Energy Company 2019 Excellence in Ag Scholarship

Madie Wensley, Kansas State University

Life as a food consumer as we know it today once looked a whole lot different. Before the domestication of animals and development of crop farming, people spent the majority of their time hunting, gathering, and fishing. Because food supply was unpredictable, people consumed nutrient dense, sustainable foodstuffs. However, as agriculture production gained traction, people no longer had to spend as much time in search of food. Instead, they could decide what foods they desired to grow in order to meet both their own family and other consumer needs. This eventually led to cities where people could pursue other ways of life outside of farming. Fast forward to present day, farmers and ranchers make up less than 2% of the U.S. population. As society has progressed, more and more people have left agriculture, leading to a growing disconnect between the agricultural community and consumers.

When we consider the food preferences of past, present, and future generations, we see a changing consumer landscape. The boomers, who hold the largest spending power, typically stick to superstores, established brands, and staple food items. In contrast, millennials have grown up in the age of technology, where online shopping has become more popular than ever before. Meal delivery services such as Home Chef and HelloFresh have taken the guess work out of meal planning and weekly grocery store runs, simultaneously allowing consumers to become more adventurous with the food they eat. Additionally, millennials have become more health conscious, consuming more fruits and vegetables and abandoning the packaged, processed, and frozen foods that were once popular in the boomer generation.

In our current generation, Gen Z, we continue to see changing consumer food preferences. Similar to millennials, technology has transformed the relationship this generation has with the food they eat. Considered the “trend-based generation”, Gen Z has been hit with a revolving door of food

'fads'. Vegan, vegetarian, paleo, keto, cage free, non-GMO, you name it, consumers have an abundance of options at their fingertips. Furthermore, their desire to increase accessibility, conserve energy, and decrease frustration has shifted consumer demand to a life of convenience. People are spending less time in the kitchen and more time snacking on the run.

As urbanization continues to increase, we can expect consumer preferences to drive the future of agricultural production. The changes we see in consumerism are endless and accelerated, yet, one thing remains the same. Over the last several years we have seen a growing demand for healthier alternatives. Fresh, locally sourced food has peaked consumer interest in farming. More than ever, people want to know where their food is coming from. However, the current divide between agriculture and consumer has led to a plethora of misinformation. Instead of seeking the guidance of those involved in the farming community, consumers have relied on the internet and self-proclaimed lifestyle coaches to make food-based decisions. Likewise, by 2050 the world population is anticipated to reach nearly 10 billion people. This alone will impact the future of agriculture, forcing producers to change how they operate to meet population demand.

So, what does this mean for farmers? The answer lies in our current generation. Millennials and Gen Z are extremely good at adapting to change in a world that is constantly evolving. They have grown up in a time where technology and innovation are at the forefront of education, learning how to utilize precision farming at a younger age. This foundational background is what's needed to increase land and animal productivity. Furthermore, their connection to past, present, and future generations will allow them to bridge the gap between consumer and producer. This can be achieved through the use of social media, which will become more critical in educating the future than in the past. As part of this generation, we have the opportunity to swing the pendulum back in favor of agriculture, connect the disconnected, and achieve things we have never done before in order to meet changing consumer desires and feed the growing world.