

Challenges in meat industry - impact on animal science research

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Introduction The meat industry in the UK faces a number of challenges centring on ongoing supply, cost of production and acceptability of product. Any successful business must focus itself on the end consumer and perhaps the biggest challenge facing farming, processing and research in the UK is to ensure that what we do moves from being production focused to become consumer focused. This single change has many implications for animal science in the UK and further afield.

Key Questions: When producing or researching for a market a number of key questions must be asked. These are;

- 1) What does the consumer want?
- 2) What will the customer want?
- 3) Does my current product meet expectations?
- 4) Could my product be changed to better meet customer expectations?
- 5) What would I need to change to do this?
- 6) How do I effect these changes and what would be the overall implications?
- 7) How do I verifying the change for the consumer?

Considering the questions Each of the above questions carries research implications. Question 1 involves simple analytical procedures to judge customer perception of what they currently receive. This should generate a list of likes and dislikes. The second question builds on the first and uses subjective judgement to assess what the customer is likely to require in the future. This type of survey will involve demographic, financial, social and technical considerations and will result in a series of predictions which should be used to guide (rather than slavishly dictate) the direction in which the producer must go. The list of likes, dislikes and expectations can then be used to focus future development, improving the good characteristics and eliminating the bad. In general, the elimination of the poor characteristics is the most cost effective of the two options, but both are necessary.

The possibility of alteration of the product is one of the most technical of the questions for consideration because it implies a solid understanding of the characteristics of the product and the factors which influence them to begin with. If the influencing factors are not fully understood, this then gives a base at which the next phase of research should commence. If changes are to be made, then a sound basic understanding of the components which may be changed is essential.

What does the consumer want? Each and every one of us is a consumer and we tend to have a natural understanding of what is expected once we think about it. We want a product we can trust, one we enjoy, one which is consistent in eating quality, healthy, lasts for an adequate length of time and has a good appearance. Above all else, it must offer value for money. A product which is consistently good will gain a loyal following and generate strong sales. One which is variable in taste, tenderness or appearance is immediately at a disadvantage.

What is required from animal scientists? Research must focus on a number of clear areas

- 1) Developing the production process to improve efficiency or welfare
- 2) Development in understanding of the key factors influencing eating quality and healthiness
- 3) Development of the product to improve eating quality and healthiness
- 4) Development of longer life products
- 5) Online verification of product integrity

Summary Research should only take place when at least one of the following questions can be answered positively.

- 1) Can we produce this product more efficiently?
- 2) Can we improve the method of production?
- 3) Can we improve the product itself?

Conclusions Research must aim to provide solutions to problems. These problems can be wide ranging, from consumer concerns through to high costs of production, but all is ultimately linked back to the overall saleability of product. We must never forget that ultimately, the consumer must be the focus of all work that we do because it is only through satisfying the consumer that Agriculture plc can truly develop and maintain a sustainable business model.