



Trends to watch?

If the experts prove correct, here's how developing consumer eating habits could impact our markets

We could be looking at a small, upward blip in fluid milk and cream sales in 2012. At least we will if one expert's consumer trend prediction proves correct during the coming year.

As each new year dawns, a slew of experts unveil their annual forecasts for next 12 months. Sometimes they're amusing, often they're deadly serious and occasionally they're spot on.

I pay attention to these analyses as part of my job. During three-plus decades of reporting on this industry, I've noticed a growing trend among dairy farmers. You've developed an ever-increasing appetite for information and understanding about what's happening with your product beyond the farmgate. Gleaned from various trade sources and publications, let's look at how a few consumer trend predictions could impact our markets:

Farmers as food celebrities: More than a few predictions suggest the farm-to-fork phenomenon will only intensify as consumers develop a deeper interest in the origins of their food. We've already seen farmers—including some dairy producers—become integral to marketing campaigns. The Farmers Dairy promotion that put photos of the Nova Scotia co-operative's members on milk cartons a few years ago comes immediately to mind. The Canadian Quality Milk and traceability programs, along with innovative social media use, could play a role in forging closer bonds between farmers and consumers.

Health and wellness: As baby boomers continue to age, their demand for foods and beverages with extra nutritional benefits will keep growing. Enhanced yogurts, cheeses and fluid milks have already positioned dairy products to take advantage of this trend.

Ethnic foods: More consumers have developed a taste for ethnic, or at least ethnic-inspired, cuisines. They've sampled them on vacation or at a fun new restaurant. Now they want to make these dishes at home. Add that to a growing ethnic population, and the need to explore and cater to ethnic markets becomes apparent.

Natural and green: You can't get much more natural than milk and dairy products. Natural, the new normal and not the exception for many consumers, is a plus for milk. Another consumer segment simply expects food producers to act responsibly by shrinking their carbon footprint.

Homemade dairy products: A hot trend among foodies could cause the small upward blip in fluid milk and cream sales. They are going to start making their own yogurts, fresh cheeses and fancy butters at home from fresh milk and cream. If this trend pans out, they will also buy less yogurt, fresh cheese and butter at the supermarket. How this might net out for your overall farmgate sales, I'm not sure.

However, it's just a tiny niche market at best.

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