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INSIDE

Am I a Bad Person If I Eat Animal Proteins?

How to encourage consumers to choose a more “alternative proteins” based diet.



Am I a Bad Person If I Eat Animal Proteins?

Facing the Crossroad and Empowering Consumers While Protecting the Planet: Can Consumers Transition to Sustainable Diets Without Coercion?

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Let's face it: alternative proteins struggle to win over consumers. Despite making up only 1-3% of the market, over 50% of households have these products in their fridges, and many continue to buy them. Yet, there's a clear disconnect between consumer preferences, producers' claims, and media narratives. Consumers have not fully embraced alternative proteins.

Mass adoption of alternative proteins is crucial for reducing some of the negative impacts of the global food system, such as high greenhouse gas

(GHG) emissions (15-20% of total GHG emissions) and extensive use of arable land (38-40%). The sustainability of our current food system is in question, but we need more scientific research to understand causalities, correlations, side effects, and feedback loops to develop effective policies. Ongoing debates about climate change are often driven by ideology and fear rather than science.

With the global population growing, currently at 8 billion and projected to peak at 10.5 billion, and an increasing number of people joining the middle class, protein demand will rise. The risk of famine is real, with more mouths to feed and the adverse impacts of the food system. Experiencing famine changes one's perspective on food.

Alternative proteins, in their various forms, represent some of the most effective technologies for reducing environmental costs and making the food system more sustainable. However, consumers are not yet warming to these products due to high barriers.

Over the past 10-15 years, numerous companies and startups have developed alternative protein products and solutions. Despite significant progress, these products have not yet matched traditional proteins in taste, flavor, texture, pleasure, price, and availability.

As the products failed to be convincing, producers, lawmakers, and other stakeholders turned to moral or identity-based approaches to induce consumer switch, often resorting to guilt or food shaming. Politics followed suit, introducing taxes and other measures to achieve parity for the new technology.

A small but vocal group created a sense of fear and aggressive rhetoric about saving the world and future generations. The message was, "You are a bad person if you eat animal proteins!" This quasi-religious, inquisitive, and controlling rhetoric stigmatized anyone who questioned the mantra, turning it into a political agenda. This had two effects: on one hand, consumers tried the new products out of guilt or curiosity, adopting the label "flexitarians" to show support for the new products (and planet) while continuing to eat what they preferred. This is why the initial hype around alternative proteins is fading, with many startups closing and products being removed from retail shelves. Icons of the movement, like Oatly and Beyond Meat, are struggling.

On the other hand, and with a more detrimental and far-reaching effect, when something becomes political and individual behavior is restricted for the perceived benefit of society, it reflects a lack of trust in our ability to solve real-world challenges through innovation and creativity. Morality slows progress. Instead, we should remove the “authority” that dictates our choices and offer a wide range of options for consumers to choose from. It’s about empowering individuals to choose, even if the technology isn’t fully developed yet. We need a “sandbox” mentality with fewer, not more, restrictions—especially moral ones. The focus should be on convincing consumers through the “battle of the better idea and solution,” where marketing and technology play crucial roles.

Emotional Connection to Food

Why is it so difficult to change consumer behavior unless imposed by bans, rules, or incentives? Food is deeply emotional, reflecting identity, status, power, authority, taste, preferences, and relationships. It cannot be changed by imposition. Those who resonate with certain campaigns do so because it aligns with their lifestyle. Food historians can explain the link between food, culture, technology, and society.

Moreover, genes may influence food preferences, with connections between environment, lifestyle, diet, gut biome, and DNA (epigenetics) shaping likes and dislikes. Changing these preferences overnight is impossible.

Alternatives to Pressure and Moral Tactics

If pressure and normative narratives don’t work, can we engage consumers in a more free-choice, humanistic way and create a pull toward alternative proteins rather than a push? Sustainable change relies on liberty and freedom of choice. Regulation and control are not rejected due to political or economic philosophy but due to real-world experience and pragmatism. True breakthroughs come from new designs and perspectives, meeting unmet needs, or solving problems in novel ways.

Here are some strategies the corporate world could use to convince consumers to switch to a more sustainable diet:

- **Deliver on Consumer Needs:** Alternative protein products must match the texture, taste, price, convenience, and availability of existing products. Without meeting these basic criteria, consumers are unlikely to switch, no matter how environmentally friendly the alternative may be. Companies need to invest in R&D to continuously improve their products and ensure they can compete with traditional proteins on all fronts.
- **Differentiate:** Alternative proteins should not merely mimic existing animal proteins but offer superior products. For instance, functional proteins could enhance nutrition or wellness, providing benefits that

conventional proteins do not. This involves identifying unique selling points that resonate with health-conscious consumers or those seeking specific dietary benefits. By leveraging the inherent advantages of alternative proteins, such as customization and added nutritional value, companies can create a compelling proposition that stands out in the market.

- **Low-End Disruption:** Offer cheaper alternatives, even if they do not match the full performance of regular or high-end products. Most alternative protein players aim for price parity with traditional products, but there is significant potential in offering solutions that are substantially cheaper. Hybrid products that blend classic and alternative proteins can provide a cost-effective entry point for consumers, catering to budget-conscious buyers who are willing to compromise slightly on quality for a lower price.
- **Opposite Positioning:** Alternative proteins should aim for personalized food experiences that traditional proteins do not offer. For example, cell-based and 3D printing technologies can create unique taste and texture profiles tailored to individual preferences. This personalized approach can appeal to gourmet food enthusiasts and those seeking bespoke culinary experiences. By highlighting the customization potential of alternative proteins, companies can tap into niche markets and create a strong brand identity.
- **New Category:** Establish new categories, like energy drinks or probiotic dairy drinks. Companies can pioneer new segments within the alternative protein market, such as novel protein sources (e.g., insect-based or algae-based proteins) or innovative product formats (e.g., protein-rich snacks or meal replacements). By being the first to market in these new categories, companies can establish themselves as leaders and set the standards for future competitors.
- **Own a "Nail" in Consumers' Minds:** Create powerful marketing concepts that own a single word or slogan in consumers' minds, reflecting the brand's promise. Marketing is a battle of perceptions, and managing these perceptions effectively is crucial. Most alternative protein producers rely on generic ethical claims that do not resonate deeply with consumers. Instead, they should focus on identifying and articulating unique brand attributes that differentiate them from competitors. For example, Red Bull's "Gives you wings" slogan encapsulates the brand's essence and creates a strong emotional connection with consumers.
- **Next Innovation:** Maintain an exploratory mindset to lead the next wave of innovations. Successful scaling and market introduction are essential, but companies must continue to innovate to stay ahead. Synthetic biology, for instance, offers transformative potential in protein production. By staying at the forefront of technological advancements, companies can continue to improve their products and maintain consumer interest. This proactive approach ensures that alternative protein producers remain relevant and competitive in a rapidly evolving market.

Governmental Role and Market Dynamics

These strategies aim to provoke new thinking and encourage creative, rule-breaking approaches. The traditional protein landscape is well-guarded by laws and governmental activities that hinder the development of new solutions. For example, regulations often dictate what can be labeled as "meat" or "milk" and restrict health claims or technologies that can be applied. These measures serve to preserve the status quo and protect established industries.

Governments should promote more competition, encourage new technologies, and limit the influence of stakeholders preserving the status quo. For instance, adopting "sandbox principles" could provide a regulatory environment where innovative food technologies can be tested and refined without the usual constraints. This approach would enable startups and established companies alike to experiment and innovate, driving progress in the alternative protein sector.

Moreover, public policy should support consumer education and awareness campaigns to inform the public about the benefits of alternative proteins. This could involve collaborations with educational institutions, public health organizations, and media outlets to disseminate information and encourage informed choices.

Progress is about the ability to learn. Morality halts this learning by asserting a fixed moral viewpoint. If "I am a good person," why would I continue exploring? This is why we should remove "morality and political agendas" from the discussion and allow more creativity and innovation to address issues in the food system.

Conclusion

If you are interested in further discussing the marketing of alternative proteins and how to shift consumer diets toward more sustainable patterns, please join us at the upcoming free seminar with stakeholders across the food system. Sign up here, and we will keep you informed about the event details: info@alphornventures.com.

The transition to a more sustainable food system requires a multifaceted approach that addresses consumer needs and preferences while promoting innovative solutions. By leveraging the strategies outlined above, the alternative protein industry can overcome current barriers and drive meaningful change. Sustainable transformation is possible, but it requires a concerted effort from producers, regulators, and consumers alike.

We are just a coffee away from sharing more information and discussing how you can engage with our experienced “executive managers:

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