

Brand distrust continues to grow

By **KERRY TUCKER** and
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PUBLIC confidence in institutions — business, government, media and others — has severely eroded. And as public trust in institutions has declined, the credibility of activist groups has increased.

Independent experts are looked to for decisions, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey of 1,500 opinion leaders in eight markets across the globe. In this survey, trust ratings for activist groups, called nongovernmental organizations, have increased in the United States from 36% in 2001 to 55% in 2005. NGOs are now the most trusted institution in every market surveyed except China.

Research is pointing to a personal web of trust — neighbors, friends, co-workers and family, as well as selected “narrowcast” media and Web sites — as trouncing established institutions.

The importance of trust

Consumer demand for authenticity and transparency is turning “branding” upside down. In the 2005 Food Foresight trends intelligence report, the erosion of trust is described as an imperative demanding priority status all along the agrifood chain.

Trust and credibility are based on

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three criteria: knowledge and expertise, openness and honesty, and concern and care, according to the Center for Risk Communication. Industry receives its biggest bump when it is perceived to be concerned and caring. Trust and credibility of government entities improves most when they are perceived to have commitment to the public interest. Activist groups get their biggest trust boost when they are perceived to have knowledge and expertise.

In his book, “Trust or Consequences,” Al Golin, founder of Golin/Harris International, advocates investing in the “trust bank,” in which good deed “deposits” made over time can be drawn

upon when companies face problems.

During the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, nearly every fast-food chain was trashed or burned — except McDonald’s. The company’s community investments were so strong that not a single McDonald’s was harmed.

Mutual benefit is both logical and credible and helps to dispel “hidden motive” skepticism.

Within your organization, identify, prioritize and shore up trust-breaking vulnerabilities. Is the probability for problems in each high, medium or low?

Trust and consequences

California and Florida fresh-tomato industries were listening when regulators voiced food-safety vulnerability concerns. They got involved with the Food and Drug Administration and helped initiate supply chain guidelines. Now, they are working with regulatory agencies to adopt Good Agricultural Practices. In California, the industry is sponsoring legislation to mandate GAP guidelines for tomato grower-shippers — a deposit in the “Bank of Trust.”

Whole Foods Market is investing in the Bank of Trust. The company lives its “whole foods, whole people, whole planet” values. Whole Foods was one of the six stores *New York Times* cited for mislabeled farm salmon as wild-caught. Yet there were no cries of malfeasance.

The company was given the equivalent of a “free pass” as consumers accepted explanations of new efforts to ensure accuracy in labeling.

Obtaining authenticity

An authentic branding and planning process should look like this:

■ *Corporate character*: What are our mission and core values?

■ *External climate/trends intelligence*: What assumptions can we make about where the world is headed?

■ *Vision for the future*: How can we frame the centerpiece of our plan for the future?

■ *Brand positioning*: What is our organization/product promise?

■ *Gaps between corporate character, public perceptions, and expectations and brand positioning*: How do we match our brand to our corporate character?

■ *Delivering on the brand promise*: How do we meet expectations?

■ *Investments in the Bank of Trust*: What steps do we take to shore up vulnerabilities and invest strategically in stakeholder relationships?

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