

# Pink Slime versus Garbage Chic: A Consideration of the Impact of Framing on Consumer Behavior Towards Food Waste

Jack Bobo\* and Sweta Chakraborty\*\*

## Introduction

With the global population growing from seven to nine billion people by 2050, avoiding food waste would appear to be an easy way of feeding more people using resources already at hand. The relentless pursuit of efficiency by food manufacturers, which have greatly reduced food waste from all steps of food processing, has not always been appreciated by consumers and, in some cases, has been stigmatized by them. By reframing the conversation on food waste from one of quality or health to the frame of sustainability, public attitudes towards food scraps can be modified. This paper examines two case studies in which the public frame for the conversation determined public attitudes towards the effort to reduce food waste. These studies are discussed within the context of risk perception literature to better comprehend public perceptions, and how such perceptions might be successfully reframed to address food waste and sustainability.

## Food Waste Overview

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, “roughly one-third of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted globally, which amounts to about 1.3 billion tons per year.”<sup>1</sup> With global population surpassing seven billion—on its way to nine

billion plus by 2050—everyone needs to use the resources available more efficiently. That includes avoiding food waste as much as possible.

Food waste occurs at many points along the supply chain. It can occur during harvest, storage or transportation before reaching the grocery store. It also occurs at the grocery store and after the food reaches the consumer. The latter occurs mostly in the developed world when consumers throw away food that has expired even when it is perfectly safe to eat. This would never occur in the developing world where food is far too precious.

Consumers in many developing countries spend nearly 50% of their income on food while consumers in the United States spend less than 10% of their income on food.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly then, food waste generally occurs pre-consumer in the developing world and post-consumer in the developed world.

## Case Studies: Pink Slime versus Garbage Chic

### Pink Slime

Public concern over food waste was nowhere in evidence in March 2012 when Bettina Siegel, a mother in Houston, Texas raised concerns over the quality of meat served to schoolchildren. She highlighted the use of “lean finely textured beef” (LFTB)—a type of ground beef made from trimmings—in school lunches.<sup>3</sup> She started an online petition in which she referred to the LFTB as “pink slime”. Siegel promoted the petition through her “Lunch Tray” blog seeking to have LFTB banned from school lunches. Social media helped to amplify public opposition to LFTB in 2012 based on unease over the use of pink slime in food rather than on the safety of the product.<sup>4</sup> Siegel’s local campaign went viral and picked up more than 225,000 signatures in three weeks.

The narrative that emerged, and drew outrage among the public, was one of low quality food being served to vulnerable children. The “frames” that defined the conversation were quality and health. With-

\* Chief Communications Officer at Intrexon Corporation.

\*\* Associate Director at the Institute on Science for Global Policy.

1 FAO. (2011). “Global food losses and food waste – Extent, causes and prevention.” Rome, p. 5. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/mb060e/mb060e.pdf> accessed August 25, 2015.

2 Gates Foundation. (2012). Available at: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/who-we-are/resources-and-media/annual-letters-list/annual-letter-2012> accessed August 25, 2015.

3 Bobo J and Chakraborty S. (2015) Pink Slime, Raw Milk and the Tweetification of Risk. *EJRR*. 1: 141-144.

4 “Questions and Answers about Ammonium Hydroxide Use in Food Production.” (Dec. 29, 2009). *International Food Information Council*. (updated Nov. 7, 2014) available at: [http://www.foodinsight.org/Questions\\_and\\_Answers\\_about\\_Ammonium\\_Hydroxide\\_Use\\_in\\_Food\\_Production](http://www.foodinsight.org/Questions_and_Answers_about_Ammonium_Hydroxide_Use_in_Food_Production) accessed January 11, 2015.

in a month, many companies announced that they would no longer use the filler product in their foods.<sup>5</sup>

## Garbage Chic

The pink slime narrative contrasts starkly with the narrative that followed from a recent initiative in a high-end New York restaurant. In March 2015 Dan Barber, co-owner and executive chef of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, started the pop-up restaurant “wastED” inside Blue Hill’s Manhattan, New York location that exclusively cooked with “food waste,” which is to say food that would normally end up in the dumpster rather than on a dinner plate.<sup>6</sup> Barber’s effort was lauded in articles across the internet for raising the profile and the bar on food waste.<sup>7</sup>

The response to the Barber project contrasted starkly with the narrative of pink slime in 2012. The journalist, Nara Shin, identified the difference in her article *Fine Dining with Food Scraps*, “WastED is a fine dining experience where taste buds are rewarded with every dish and culinary creativity is showcased. [Barber’s] tasking guests with being part of a cultural shift by reframing their own perceptions of waste.”<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this reframing, Barber’s project, not only drew attention to the possibilities for avoiding food waste it elevated the conversation by turning food scraps (e.g., skate wing skeletons, whitefish heads, cucumber butts and ugly sweet potatoes) into food delicacies.

## Selective Perception

How do we begin to address the polarized consumer perceptions regarding food waste? Consumers generally do not read nutritional information<sup>9</sup> and do not get involved in complex decision-making, which characterize the trade-offs between two goals—such as reducing food waste and spending time when making food choices. Rather, they base their choice on biases and heuristics, which inform the preconceived notions that influence human perceptions; these perceptions fall in line with varying expectations and hopes.<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate, we can cite the seminal study by Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), which identified the “hostile media effect” where the same news coverage was seen as biased in favor of the other side depend-

ing on where viewers stood on the news being reported.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon has been replicated in many studies since, and it is safe to say that partisans view media coverage of controversial events as unfairly biased and hostile to the position that they are advocating. This bias is particularly poignant in situations where two sides are committed to prior positions (e.g., genetically modified foods, climate change, food waste).

It is necessary for communicators to have a keen understanding of biases, such as the *hostile media effect*, before disseminating information regarding the benefits of food waste. Those against the consumption of normally discarded foods have the potential to see any reporting on the matter as skewed and therefore can dismiss any new information. This inability to process information not in line with preexisting beliefs, or *cognitive dissonance*, requires attention to understanding existing attitudes before any incongruous information can be disseminated. However, when new information comes from a trusted and convincing source, the incongruity between strongly held prior ideas and the new information might cause consumers to adopt systematic choice processes—or change their minds.<sup>12</sup> It is important

- 5 Schlachter, B. (April 14, 2012). “A Texas mom’s fight against ‘pink slime.’” *Star-Telegram*. Available at: <http://www.star-telegram.com/living/family/moms/article3831060.html> accessed January 11, 2015.
- 6 “With Dan Barber’s Dumpster Dive Experiment, Table Scraps Get Celebrity Chef Treatment.” (April 1, 2015). *Fast Company*. Available at: <http://webnesday.com/with-dan-barbers-dumpster-dive-experiment-table-scraps-get-celebrity-chef-treatment/> accessed August 25, 2015.
- 7 Spiegel, A. (Mar. 27, 2015). “Blue Hill’s ‘WastED’ Pop-Up Restaurant Shows How Appetizing Food Waste Can Be.” *Huffington Post*. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/27/blue-hill-wasted-pop-up\\_n\\_6949058.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/27/blue-hill-wasted-pop-up_n_6949058.html) accessed August 25, 2015.
- 8 Shin, Nara. (Mar. 18, 2015). “Fine dining with food scraps at wastED.” *Cool Hunting*. Available at: <http://www.coolhunting.com/food-drink/fine-dining-with-food-scraps-wasted-nyc-blue-hill-dan-barber> accessed August 25, 2015.
- 9 Kiesel, K., McCluskey, J.J., & Villas-Boas, S.B. (2011). “Nutritional labeling and consumer choices.” *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 3, 17.1-17.18.
- 10 Thaler, R.H., & Sunstein, C.R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 11 Vallone, R.P., Ross, L., and Lepper, M.R. (1985). “The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, 577-585.
- 12 Lynch, Jr., J.G., & Srull, T.K. (1982). “Memory and attentional factors in consumer choice: Concepts and research methods.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(1), 18-37.

to note that if consumers do not hold strong prior ideas about food waste, even weak information may either change their minds or cause them to ignore incongruent information.

We know from empirical research that the framing of statements as positive or negative (e.g., pink slime and garbage chic respectively) about the qualities of products affects perception and judgments, particularly in situations where health or environmental risks are unknown.<sup>13</sup> Positive framing of products tend to increase the level of support of the products and vice versa. Previous examples of these phenomena can be seen with terms such as “frankenfood,” which was picked up by the media and resulted in prevailing negative perceptions of genetically modified foods. As with GM foods, providing information on the benefits of eating less desirable foods in order to correct negative predispositions caused by inaccurate information is a looming challenge.

In the case of food waste, it is evident that perceptions towards less desirable edible foods requires being understood prior to any communication efforts can be made towards changing behaviors in the interest of reducing food waste. In particular, the impact of the social media amplification of risk around “pink slime” must be thoroughly understood in order to be addressed effectively. Pink slime is a particularly catchy phrase with the potential to elicit visceral reactions of disgust that can be easily conjured in the mind. This increases consumer attribution of the frequency of occurrence and consequently the

severity of risk because of its salience—referred to as the *availability bias*.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the salience of the term “pink slime” and it being “... gross enough for fast food restaurants to ban, but apparently our government wants so-called pink slime to be a staple in your kids’ lunches”<sup>15</sup> requires communicators hoping to change attitudes to also take into account the powerful heuristics and biases involved. In addition to being highly salient, pink slime is also accused of affecting children in situations that are potentially out of parental control. Risks perceived to impact vulnerable populations (e.g., children), and which are out of immediate control are attributed with greater perceived severity than risks that do not impact children and are voluntary.<sup>16</sup>

We suggest “garbage chic” to reframe the way society looks at traditionally less desirable foods as an attempt to associate positive words and images with these less desirable foods that are contributing to food waste. Alison Spiegel wrote in the Huffington Post:

Luckily food waste is no longer a niche issue confined to environmental circles or marginalized on the fringes of the food world. Thanks to policy makers, chefs and the media, it has become a mainstream topic.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, such views appear premature. Dining on “garbage chic” cuisine is still a voluntary activity for adults and therefore will not be perceived with the same severity of risk attributed to pink slime. While exclusivity has the potential to create a lucrative market, garbage chic cuisine is a long way from mainstream appeal. Changing perceptions towards perfectly nutritious, but less desirable foods for the purpose of combatting food waste will take time, but there is promise in the efforts to understand and address perceptions before any efforts to communicate. The initial success of wastED suggests that such a reframing might be possible; however, there is a long way to go. “Fish bone fingers,” which appeared on the WastED menu, almost make skate wing skeletons sound glamorous. Almost.

13 Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). “Choices, values, and frames.” *American Psychologist*, 39, 341-50.

14 Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. (1973). “Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability.” *Cognitive Psychology*.

15 Velez-Mitchell, Jane (March 7, 2012). *CNN.com*. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1203/07/ijvm.01.html> Accessed Aug. 17th, 2015.

16 Slovic, P. (1987) “Perception of risk,” *Science*, Vol. 236, No. 4799, pp. 280–285.

17 Spiegel, A. (Mar. 27. 2015). “Blue Hill’s ‘WastED’ Pop-Up Restaurant Shows How Appetizing Food Waste Can Be.” *Huffington Post*. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/27/blue-hill-wasted-pop-up\\_n\\_6949058.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/27/blue-hill-wasted-pop-up_n_6949058.html), accessed August 25, 2015.