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Can the Global Food Industry Overcome Public Distrust?

The public is losing trust in many institutions involved in putting food on our table, says **Ray A. Goldberg**, author of the new book *Food Citizenship*. Here's what needs to be done.

Food is the largest segment of the global economy. It is also widely recognized as more critical for human health than any pharmaceutical drug on the planet.

But significant changes in the industry are making people lose trust in many institutions involved in putting food on our table, says agribusiness expert Ray A. Goldberg, the George M. Moffett Professor of Agriculture and Business, Emeritus, at Harvard Business School.

The list of institutional offenders includes food conglomerates that create products unhealthy for human consumption, food scientists who genetically alter ingredients, and some farmers who are seen as wasteful keepers of their lands.

"Perhaps no economic system is viewed with suspicion by so many people around the world as the food system," writes Goldberg, who is recognized as the creator of the term "agribusiness" and has been studying the field for decades.

In a recent book, *Food Citizenship: Food System Advocates in an Era of Distrust*, he surveys the health of the industry, looks to the future, and interviews many of its most important players.

Goldberg opens the book by interviewing Marion Nestle, author of *Food Politics* and *Soda Politics*, who levels a blistering attack on food companies that put profit ahead of public good. "You really have discouraged me in trying to find a glimmer of hope for the future," Goldberg laments to Nestle at one point.

But Goldberg's outlook becomes more positive after interviewing some 40 food leaders in business, academia, science, health, and nonprofit organizations. And the message of his book is generally bright. The food industry and its supporting ecosystem are becoming increasingly aligned with the interests of consumers when it comes to promoting health, pioneering sustainable production and distribution methods, and protecting the environment, he says.

"I believe that the changes we are seeing in the food system, and

new technologies enabling easier recognition of fraudulent activities, will result in a safer and more nutritious food system for the future," he concludes.

Sean Silverthorne: Why did you write this book?

Ray Goldberg: Society doesn't really know the changemakers of the global food system. Twenty-five years ago I wanted the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors to better understand each other. I organized an annual meeting to help them do so: the Private and Public, Scientific, Academic, and Consumer Food Policy Group (PAPSAC) at the Harvard Business School for 10 years and then at the Harvard Kennedy School for 15 years. The result has been 25 years of working together and getting to know each other. This book sets forth their values and priorities and their vision of the future of the global food system.

Silverthorne: You say that the global food system is "the biggest quasi-public utility in the world." What do you mean?

Goldberg: The world food system is the biggest quasi-public utility in the world because the people within this system are responsible for providing food and water for humans and animals, managing land and water resources, utilizing food products for non-food uses such as energy, and, increasingly, producing pharmaceuticals from crops or through the milk of animals. In all of these activities it has to create national and global entities that oversee food safety and food security, and manage innovations from the scientific and agronomic world.

Silverthorne: What are the biggest challenges that food system advocates must overcome, both in the short run but also 10 or 20 years out, in what you describe as an era of distrust?

Goldberg: The biggest challenge that the global food system faces is to harness the new scientific discoveries that can improve the health of people, plants, and animals, and to overcome the poverty and malnutrition of the world in an environmentally sound manner.

To do all of this requires the new types of collaborations that are increasingly taking place in the food system.

Silverthorne: What are the biggest opportunities that participants in the global food system should be pursuing?

Goldberg: The biggest opportunities that participants in the food system have are:

- Investing in medical and food science research that provides new and unique foods that can maintain and improve peoples' health without relying on increasing the animal population.
- Using robotics for different human agricultural and food-processing tasks, and developing training programs that can provide alternative careers for those displaced by robotics.
- Creating a professional CPA-type organization to provide neutral evaluations of new discoveries and new protocols for food safety that are not tainted by a particular private interest.

Silverthorne: An interesting tension runs through *Food Citizenship*. You document companies such as Nestle and Walmart that claim to speak up for consumers, offer wellness initiatives, and provide good working conditions for their food suppliers. Then there is critic Marion Nestle, the first interview in the book, who paints a rather pessimistic portrait of the food industry as harming consumers by selling unhealthy foods, creating exploitive working conditions, and working to defeat consumer initiatives. What's your view? Can producers create social value as well as economic value?

Goldberg: Food leaders can create social as well as economic value. In my book, one of the founders of Jain Irrigation in India describes developing a drip-irrigation business for small-scale farmers, and convincing crop buyers to provide a floor price for these farmers' production, with the opportunity of a higher price if the market went up.

Baldemar Velasquez, one of the leaders of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, describes the late Harvard professor John Dunlop's creation of a dispute-resolution commission to bring farm labor and food companies together in a win-win relationship. This commission has provided labor-management peace domestically and is in the process of creating global labor-management relationship structures.

Candy producer Mars now labels its candy "to be consumed occasionally, no more than once a week" as a measure to combat child obesity. Wegmans supermarkets did not wait for a law to put nutrition information on all its food products.

Not all food firms are as consumer- and public-conscious as those in the *Food Citizenship* book, but more and more are becoming so. From my point of view, they really have no choice but to think of the consumer's health as well as enjoyment. Companies that are the most profitable in the industry are taking consumer health into account and have a value system that attracts men and women who want to further that effort.

Silverthorne: You have a term for the new global food system, calling it an "agricultural system." What does that mean?

Goldberg: I use the term agricultural because food is now widely recognized as more critical for human and animal health than is any pharmaceutical product. What a woman eats before and dur-

ing her pregnancy will affect the health and well-being of the child from birth to death. We now have animals that can produce pharmaceuticals in their milk. Scientists such as Dr. George Church, interviewed in my book, are finding ways to alter a pig's biology so that its parts—Dr. Church feels even eventually organs such as its heart—can be transplanted into human beings without triggering the human's immune system. This could be a major medical breakthrough.

Silverthorne: You've studied agribusiness for longer than just about anybody. So what's your view of what the global food picture will look like in 20, 30, 40 years as the current agricultural revolution plays out? Are you optimistic?

Goldberg: It is presumptuous to pretend to know what the global food system will look like 20 to 40 years from now. I know that climate change is already impacting where crops are grown all over the world. Animal and fish life will be threatened as well as human life. Scientific developments of alternative sources of protein and fuel, such as the use of algae, will become increasingly important.

Desalinization of the ocean will become more common as pure and safe water becomes more rare. Nutritional science and a better understanding of microbes and bacteria—knowledge now in its infancy—will enable specific diseases to be attacked by appropriate nutrition programs. Medical and public health schools, public policy schools, and agricultural and business schools will have to work more closely together; cross-registration will be more common and academic training will be more multi-disciplinary; (and) cross-sector collaboration will become more prevalent and enabled by more sophisticated tools.

Bipartisanship in politics will become a necessity. Even in today's (politically divided) world, two Republican and two Democratic senators are proposing legislation to provide food to food deserts in the United States. The World Trade Organization and its peace-keeping role in trade disputes will grow in importance. Farmers will know more about each inch of their soil and what it can produce.

Silverthorne: You say the food system is making a critical shift, converting from a commodity-driven, competitive, transactional model to a partnering, relational model. What's driving this change?

Goldberg: This model better serves consumers and producers because collaboration enables both parties to understand each other's needs better, and to relate these needs to the ultimate consumers and to the society they serve.

There is always a natural tension between buyer and seller, but if you understand each other's needs, you can make your relationship a win-win for both. That means taking into account that consumers do want to eat healthily, they do want to protect and improve the environment, they do count on the food system to treat workers, farmers, and suppliers fairly, and they want to be assured that what they eat is safe.

As mentioned earlier, neutral institutions are vital in order to determine whether and how the food system is improving the environment, the lives of people dependent on it for a livelihood, and the health and well-being of the consumer. The academic community must help develop organizations capable of measuring that improvement in an unbiased and effective manner.