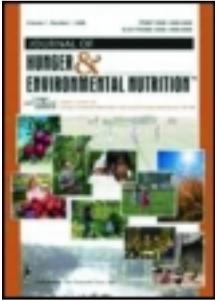


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Arlin Wasserman^a

^a Vice President, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility, Sodexo, Gaithersburg, Maryland, USA

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Recipe for a Better Tomorrow: A Food Industry Perspective on Sustainability and Our Food System

ARLIN WASSERMAN

*Vice President, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility,
Sodexo, Gaithersburg, Maryland, USA*

The food and agriculture sector is central to efforts to improve public health today and protect and restore natural systems necessary to support good health in the future. The sector has a greater direct impact on land and water resources, employment, and economic activity than any other. And, from a finite resource base, it is underpinning not only food and fiber production but is increasingly relied upon to provide the raw materials for energy, building materials, packaging, and nonfood consumable products. This commentary reviews consumer attitudes and the transformational changes required in the food and agriculture sector to meet today's needs and ensure a better tomorrow.

KEYWORDS *sustainable, agriculture, food, systems, bioeconomy, local, certification, performance, corporate, nutrition, health, wellbeing, environment, responsibility, food industry, food service*

Consumer interest about what's in our food has gained in both intensity and complexity over the past several decades. It reflects a coming together about our individual concerns for our own health and well-being as well as larger concerns about global sustainability.

At one time, when sitting before a plate of food, the question, "What's in this?" might have been a polite way of asking for a recipe or expressing surprise at some unusual, and perhaps unwelcome, flavor. In the past two decades, it has more likely reflected concern for our own health as we

Address correspondence to Arlin Wasserman, Vice President, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility, Sodexo, 9801 Washingtonian Boulevard, Suite 1046, Gaithersburg, MD 20878. E-mail: arlin.wasserman@sodexo.com

looked to make better decisions based on the ever-increasing amount of nutritional and ingredient information printed on food packaging.¹ Since the 1990s, more consumers also looked to organic certification as a sign of what is not in their food: intentionally used synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.²

But 4 years ago, consumers in North America and Europe began to ask another question with increasing frequency: how much oil went into my food? The use of oil for fertilizer production, farm operations, processing and—mostly visibly—shipping food by plane, boat, rail, and truck all gained greater meaning as more people understood that burning oil and other fossil fuels affected the health of our planet. In 2008, speculation in the global commodity markets gave the world a preview of “peak oil,” when availability falls below ongoing demand.³ It showed most people that oil was indeed a finite resource and the world needs to use less energy and look for other sources, for financial reasons in addition to environmental ones.

Partly as a response to the boom in media coverage of corn-ethanol production, concerns over climate change and, more recently, US dependence on imported oil and the spike in food prices last summer brought a new question: “How much corn went in my gas tank?”

The two questions—how much oil went into my food and how much corn went into my gas tank—frame a substantial change in the role of agriculture in our economy. We could also ask how much soy, corn, and potatoes went into my fork and plate or my furniture and building materials. Agriculture is now underpinning more of the critical parts of our economy, including food, energy, and basic manufacturing inputs, than at any time since early in the industrial revolution.

At the same time, consumer interest about our food, where it came from, and who grew it also has been driven to a new intensity both from concern about sustainability and healthy eating as well as other factors. Among the most notable is the record number of food safety events announced to the public in each of the past 2 years, now averaging about one every other day. Each food safety warning causes more people to inquire about the path their food has traveled from farm to table.

Regardless of the motivation, the keen interest in food, agriculture, and sustainability from both consumers and the business sector is wholly warranted. The food and agriculture sector has a greater impact on how we as people interact with the natural world than any other part of our economy. Food and agriculture engages about a sixth of the world’s population, dictates the use of about half of all inhabitable land, and consumes more than two thirds of all freshwater and more than 10% of all energy globally.⁴

Simply put, how we choose to feed ourselves and manage our agricultural activities determines how we protect and restore our environment. Though many people look at food choices as a touchstone for sustainability concerns,² we are at the same time focusing on the choices that actually have the greatest impact on our land and water resources.

That food is something we literally consume and incorporate into our bodies makes that concern more intimate than any other. For those of us who are fortunate enough, we get to make food choices about 3 times a day when we choose what to eat. And we often make the same choices on behalf of our family. Nothing can be more immediate and personal or so readily linked to our own health and the health of our families.

In part, the link between food and sustainability allows many people to also readily make the connection between our own health and the health of the environment at a visceral level. A focused survey of current scientific literature can help us understand the connections between climate change and the spread of disease or the preservation of natural areas as a way to ensure the quality of our drinking water. But many of us skip over a course in advanced study through our personal connection to food. The intimate nature of food also quickly allows us to bring in other concerns for the well-being of the billions of people involved in producing food.

So when we decide what to eat, we are often looking to make food choices that reflect our values.

What are these values? For Sodexo, and the 50 million people we are fortunate to serve each day, they include a desire for food that is

- Healthy, as in it will make you fit and vibrant for years to come.
- Green, as in it was produced in a manner that protects and restores local and global ecosystems.
- Fair, as in no one along the production line was exploited for its creation.
- Humane, as in care for the well-being of farm animals was ensured.
- Affordable, as in people of all socioeconomic backgrounds are able to purchase it and have access to it.
- Pure, as in not made with synthetic chemicals or advanced transgenomic technologies.
- Good, as in the individuals and communities involved in its production benefited as a result of my food choices, especially my own community where I live and work as a customer.
- Authentic, in that I know that real people and real farms are involved in growing my food.

But how we bring these values to our food choices and then convert these choices into a more sustainable food and agriculture sector is not a direct instance of consumer demand translating into more sustainable business practices.

First, the elements in this constellation of values are in tension with one another, at least some of the time. For people in North America's northern states and provinces, eating a healthy diet with an abundant supply of fresh fruits and vegetables means shipping in food from warmer growing climates rather than principally relying on local farmers.⁵ In Minnesota, sometime in

mid-February, the all-parsnip diet loses both culinary appeal and nutritional balance long before the growing season begins.

Second, we get set in our ways. Most of us, when we are walking supermarket aisles in our role as consumers, only occasionally consider our choices about what is the right product, brand, or diet for us. Then we stick with the decision until something disrupts our pattern, such as health advice from a medical professional, a food safety alert, a news exposé about a farm or factory, a clever marketing campaign for a new product, or a coupon promising a good deal on a competing brand. Something needs to make us revisit our decisions and choose again, such as the connection between food, health, and sustainability.

Third, conducting research into the health, social, and environmental impacts of our food options takes time and does not fit easily into a lunch break or a hurried trip to pick dinner up on the way home from work. We look for quick signs that we are making the right choices, such as endorsements and certifications. Certifications and endorsements at best focus on the process used to produce food and sometime only a portion of the process, not the ultimate impact the product has on your health or the environment.⁶ At worst, certifications and endorsements may reflect only that a company has paid a fee and agreed to some minimal quality standards or activities.^{7,8} And, certifications often act like privately owned “brands,” with the certification process capturing a larger share of the value created by more sustainable practices than the farmers and ranchers who are the identified best practices.

One of the most widely recognized—organic—focuses primarily on the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture production and food processing.⁶ This does little to let you know whether the certified organic cheesecake is a particularly healthy food choice or whether the organic peaches used less oil because they were grown next door or more because they were shipped in from Chile. The same holds true for many of the more than 800 environmental, social, healthy, and ethical food certifications used in the US marketplace.⁹

Fourth, and perhaps most significant, we are making fewer of our own choices. This goes beyond having our food options limited to the more than 46 000 or so items the typical supermarket chooses to make available to us in the grocery aisles.¹⁰ Sometime in 2008, we reached a milestone in the United States where more than half of our meals were prepared by someone who is not a member of our household.¹¹ Most of the meals we ate were cooked for us by restaurants, either to eat in or dine out; from the prepared foods sections of supermarkets, which are increasingly looking like cafeterias complete with seating; and by companies like Sodexo.¹¹

Over the past year, as the economy has turned down, we have backed away slightly as people look to save money by “brown bagging” it to work, eating out a little less, and working fewer days out of the home. But every indication is that the trend will reverse quickly with the start of the economic recovery.¹¹ Eating out is one the first affordable luxuries people in

the United States spend money on when their income improves and more of us may work more hours to rebuild our household finances.

Even as our interest increases in where our food comes from, who grew it, and how it was grown, we are ceding many, and most, of the decisions about what we eat to private businesses, including companies like Sodexo.

For Sodexo and other large players in the food and agriculture sector, being given the responsibility to make choices about the food we serve that reflect the individual values of the people we serve is both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is to meet a diverse set of culinary, dietary, and values-based expectations while also delivering real benefits to our public health, social well-being, and the environment.

As mentioned before, there is a tension between a diverse set of expectations and the many needed social, environmental, and health benefits. These include

- Serving up the contemporary and expected assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables in every town during every day of the year is a contribution to our health and works against efforts to reduce energy for transportation and support local economic development.
- Meeting the evolving dietary expectations of the world's developing economies as household incomes rise. As more people expect higher standards of living, one of the first changes in diet is to want more animal protein, notably seafood and beef. This trend also is present in the United States where an increasingly diverse population also is moving up the food chain. With seafood stocks in decline and cattle production a substantial contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, diet and environment are in tension.

These and other tensions exist within a context of scientific uncertainty. For every research project comparing the benefits of certain farming methods or measuring the carbon emissions from a supply chain, the real world provides a multitude of variations. Some distributors use more efficient trucks and refrigerators than others. One farm has different soil chemistry or temperature patterns than another. Changes in our climate will alter local growing patterns in coming years and further muddy the waters, especially in those areas that will see a significant increase in rainfall.

Conversely, scientific assessments of the consequences of our current food and agriculture system are unequivocal. More people across the world are experiencing both hunger and obesity and the cluster of lifestyle diseases associated with a more affluent and Western diet.¹² Fishery stocks are in collapse or decline in many parts of the world's oceans. And farming and livestock production are contributing significantly to both local water scarcity and global climate change.¹³

Those are the challenges.

The opportunity is to make collective choices and decisions on behalf of our customers that contribute to global sustainability including issues of health and well-being, community development, and the environment and for the food and agriculture sector to make a more significant contribution than any other part of our economy. Specifically for Sodexo, this means making food choices on behalf of the 50 million people we serve each day and the 100 million people a day we plan to serve by 2015.

Working with incomplete and conflicting information is not uncommon for businesses. Predicting cultural trends or changes in the economy is not a perfect science, as the recent unwinding of the financial sector clearly shows. Rather, on issues of sustainability, business needs to apply the same rigorous management approaches used to support strong financial performance.

The critical changes among businesses in the food and agriculture sector include

- Moving forward even though tensions and conflicts exist. There is no clear, scientifically validated guidance for how to choose among the many competing consumer and marketplace demands. Action cannot be delayed while waiting indefinitely for a single best choice. Businesses have to be able to decide, lead, and act in both certain and uncertain situations and not wait until tensions are resolved through additional research. And being early to respond to market signals is a contributor to business success.
- Increasing transparency. Businesses have to robustly share the reasons behind the choices we make with our customers and clients. This is the only way to demonstrate to consumers that their values are present in the choices before them. This means refashioning supply chains so that it is relatively straightforward to share more information with clients, customers, markets, and stakeholders about who grew their food.
- Accepting responsibility for improving our public health and the health of our environment. Consumers have ceded decision making about our daily food choices to businesses and this implies that we have put our trust in businesses to make expert choices. In response, businesses must deliver only good, and an increasingly better, set of choices to our customers regardless of how they choose to use our goods and services.

Current fashionable efforts to inform consumer choice—from the latest low-carbon to the newest low-fat diet—make for good advertising copy.¹⁴ But these kinds of approaches place the responsibility for improvement in the food and agriculture sector onto the choices individual consumers and how they choose to use the set of choices before them.

Often driven by business, they cleverly avoid highlighting the key factor that on any given day, at any given meal, consumers are choosing from only from a narrow set of choices put before them. As consumers, we are

more likely to make the effort to search out the best options when making infrequent choices, giving more serious consideration to buying a new car, a refrigerator, or a pair of shoes than we are to a single food purchase.

The right response for leading businesses is that, regardless of how our customers decide to use our services or the food choices they make, we must improve the overall benefits we deliver to the environment, the well-being of the people we touch, and the communities in which we do operate.

This means working to meet the needs of customers while also managing the overall impact of a company by regularly measuring and reporting of sustainability performance into the regular reporting of food and agriculture companies. Here, food businesses are a newcomer to a well-established set of best practices used by leading companies in other sectors. These include

- Setting forward-looking performance targets for the company as a whole;
- Reporting on progress; and
- Including stakeholders in the process of validating results and identifying areas for improvement.

It is the same approach used to share a company's financial performance where independent auditors review and comment on quarterly and annual results. Moving forward, leading food and agriculture companies need to bring that same rigor to reporting on how a company is affecting the health of the population it serves, supporting favorable conditions for its business partners and their employees, and creating conditions that allow natural systems to be protected and restored.

In an increasingly busy and affluent world, we are unlikely to move away from tacitly letting businesses make our food choices. But with this kind of information broadly available within the food and agriculture sector, and with businesses continuously working to improve their sustainability performance, the relationship is a powerful one.

When we next ask, "What's in this?" as we look at our next meal, we will not only be more certain that our values are reflected in the choices made by business, but we will also know that the choices made on our behalf have resulted in substantive benefits to our health and the health of the planet. And in the today's marketplace, that's a good deal.

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