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Influential Food eVangelists May be Emerging as the New Core Food Consumer (With Infographic)

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(PRNewswire) — Food eVangelists, a small but globally powerful group who want to impact the way food is raised, packaged and sold, are quickly becoming less of an influencer audience and more representative of mainstream consumers. This, according to the fourth global [Food 2020](#) study, released today by leading global public relations agency [Ketchum](#), which hones in on this vocal group in 11 markets across North America, South America, Europe and Asia.

Globally, the incidence of Food eVangelists, a cohort first

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identified by Ketchum just two years ago, has grown 10 percent and now accounts for 24 percent of the general population. Food eVangelists, who engage in conversation and share their opinions about food online or in person multiple times each week, also have become more diverse. Italy and Argentina, the markets studied in which the incidence is highest, saw large increases – from 37 percent to 43 percent in Italy and from 29 percent to 33 percent in Argentina. In the U.S., the incidence is 14 percent, representing 45 million people, and a 27 percent increase in two years.

"Food eVangelists are becoming a mainstream, dominant market force, exacting marked change on the way the food industry operates and communicates, and we predict they will become the 'new normal' among consumers," said [Linda Eatherton](#), partner and managing director of Ketchum's Global Food & Beverage Practice. "While Food eVangelists have a desire to influence others, it's important to remember that they don't promote a specific agenda. Rather they seek information from multiple sources, listen to varying opinions, and make their own decisions."

Eatherton continued: "What's more, they are raising the next generation of Food eVangelists who, in many homes, are playing the role of 'family conscience keepers' and have significant influence on how the family defines healthy eating and the food purchases they make."

The Food 2020 study also probed what Food eVangelists deem important for children to learn about food, along with what they are reporting about their children's actual behaviors and attitudes. Globally, half of all parents say their children take an active role in choosing the types of food the family eats (49 percent) while 39 percent say their children look at labels and shun foods with certain ingredients (38 percent). Furthermore, one-third of respondents say their kids express a preference for organic or locally produced food, and 26 percent say they stay away from processed foods.

"Not surprising, many children hold the same beliefs and preferences as their parents. However, what does appear to be new and growing is how actively engaged children are in making family food buying and eating choices," said Eatherton. "The data clearly signifies that the children of Food eVangelists are poised to become the influencers of tomorrow."

A Strong Preference for Local

The Food eVangelist is redefining what it means to eat healthy. Not long ago, healthy eating meant consuming a balanced diet; today it includes such factors as how and where food is produced, what the animals are fed and how they are cared for, and the values of the company. Among the most notable findings from this study is the Food eVangelist's increasing preference for locally grown and produced food. Indeed, nearly half of global respondents (49 percent) trust the quality of food from a local retailer more than from mass supermarkets, while 47 percent say food from smaller producers is safer than food from large ones. However, those data points jump to 66 and 58 percent, respectively, among Americans.

Just over half (56 percent) of global respondents say the world's food supply would benefit from more small, local producers, and 54 percent say the best food to buy comes from farmers with whom they can interact.

These preferences for local food indicate that some consumers place higher value on small, local brands and regard them as premium. They also reflect a Food eVangelist's belief that simpler is better. They want foods with simple ingredients, few or no preservatives, hormone free and organic. In fact, when asked about the value of organic and simple foods, 60 percent of Food eVangelists said that it's very important for them to teach their children the value of organic foods and 58 percent said the same about simple foods. Further bolstering the preference for organic is the fact that in the U.S. between 2005 and 2014, organic food sales increased 170 percent, and organic sales continue to increase more than double the rate of total food sales, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA.) In the United States, the number of farmers' markets has grown from 1,755 markets in 1994 to more than 8,140 in 2013.¹ Globally, the market for organic products in 2013 reached \$72 billion. Further, 170 countries now report organic farming activities, up from 164 in 2013.²

One flash point ahead is the high demand for convenience and time-saving technologies like online grocery shopping. Yet, 50 percent of respondents report that they either don't shop for food online or are doing so less often than they did a year ago – illustrating a gap between people's desire for convenience and their interest in engaging with their food retailers.

"We believe the desire and the demand for online food shopping is very real, but the technologies and the go-to-market strategies have yet to find a way to truly resonate with highly involved consumers who need significant access to information, insights about the food production and people behind the brands, and a high-touch, engaging experience. For Food eVangelists, this is much more than a simple transaction," Eatherton said.

There is good news for the food industry at large: Food eVangelists don't expect perfection. "In fact, they don't think perfection is possible," Eatherton explained. "What they want is for food companies to demonstrate honesty and to provide access to many different information sources who are not representatives of the corporation."

Responding to the Food eVangelist

In many cases, the food industry is responding to input from Food eVangelists and seeing some positive results. In recent years there has been substantial renovation of the value chain, with many high-profile brands announcing changes in the product formulation, ingredient lists or supplier demands. Another indicator of progress is that Food eVangelists polled in the U.S., U.K. and Germany today have greater confidence in the safety of the food supply than they did in 2013. When asked two years ago how confident they are that the food they buy is safe and good for them, only 39 percent of those in the U.S. expressed a high degree of confidence. Confidence levels in Germany were 34 percent and a mere 32 percent in the U.K. Today, those percentages have increased, with 55 percent in the U.S. expressing a high degree of confidence, 47 percent in Germany, and 45 percent in the U.K. However, confidence levels in other markets are poor, with fewer than one in three people expressing high confidence (Singapore: 30 percent, Hong Kong: 21 percent, and Brazil: 25 percent).

While the Food eVangelist is unsurprisingly an active social media conversation driver, they turn to traditional sources, rather than social media connections, for more information. The study shows that Food eVangelists prefer to access information about food companies, brands, production and processing from a wide variety of sources, favoring traditional media sources like national TV news (51 percent) and newspapers (48 percent) over a favorite blog (43 percent) or Twitter (34 percent).

"It's apparent that the voice of the Food eVangelist is not falling upon deaf ears in the food industry and that some forward progress in reaching this group has been made," said Eatherton. "Many brands have directly addressed consumer concern and become increasingly more open, and, as a result, we've seen an increase in trust and respect. This is the type of behavior that the industry must continue to nurture in order to win tomorrow's core consumer Food e-Vangelists."

Methodology

The Food 2020 study has been conducted by Ketchum Global Research & Analytics since 2008, with the goal of understanding and predicting consumers' shifting attitudes and behaviors around the food production, processing, and the values behind the companies from which they buy. In 2013, the study looked at how the general population thought about and acted around food, and in doing so identified two distinct groups: the Food Involved and the Food eVangelists. The Food eVangelists are those who are informed and actively sharing their opinions about food, whether in person or online, while the Involved are those who are listening to them.

In 2015, Ketchum and IPSOS conducted an online survey of 2,098 Food eVangelists in 11 markets of the world, including the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, mainland China and Singapore. (Note that in 2013, China data is reflective of mainland China versus Shanghai-only in 2015.) It focused solely on the Food eVangelists to get a better idea of who they are, what they are thinking and doing, and whether this group was growing in size.

The findings from this survey are supplemented with focus groups and in-depth discussions from select participating markets to further illuminate the issues and thinking behind these important individuals.

About Ketchum

Ketchum is a leading global communications firm with operations in more than 70 countries across six continents. The winner of 17 Cannes Lions and an unprecedented four PRWeek Campaign of the Year Awards, Ketchum partners with clients to deliver strategic programming, game-changing creative and