



Food Ethics Council



Business Forum Report, May 2021

Engaging others in your food philosophy

How can food and farming businesses meaningfully involve others – including customers – on their sustainability journeys?

Introduction

Sustainability expertise is at last being brought into the Boardroom, ensuring it is no longer just a tick box on the risk register. However, very few companies have successfully extended their invitation to their customers – and the wider community – to join them in tackling our collective sustainability issues. Why is this not happening more and what can we learn from where this has been done successfully?

What does food philosophy mean?

Food Philosophy can mean many things: for example

- (a) **Individual:** views about what's good for an individual's health (e.g. a wide variety of foods in moderation) and/ or what that individual prefers to buy and eat based on certain ethical values e.g. animal welfare, fair trade, local sourcing
- (b) **Organisation:** guiding principles behind what to source, sell & market/ branding – appealing to the public's concern for health, cost and ethical values – or its own concern for how to sustain profitability while engaging with stakeholders and/or itself promoting ethical values such as sustainability
- (c) **Philosophical:** reflection on the role/ meaning/ cultural significance of food in life, and on the ethical and prudential principles behind what we choose to eat and how public decisions are made, and critical comparison of different approaches.

Philosophy like ethics has an ambiguity: a philosophy of X can be a *set of individual and/or shared beliefs, values and norms* (**an** ethic) and an *activity* of reflecting on these (*doing* philosophy/ ethics). As an example, the Food Ethics Council illustrates both these senses. Its guiding philosophy is developing food systems which are fair to people, animals and planet, and it accepts an analysis of fairness into fair share, fair play and fair say. However quite a lot of its activity is actually engaging in philosophical/ ethical reflection on what these ideas really mean and critically examining the various approaches out there on the philosophy/ ethics of food, including how to engage people as food citizens.

"Anything that focusses on the future my children are going to inherit immediately gets me listening"

Is the aim to seem good, or to BE good?

Are businesses concerned with important ethical issues for their own sake, or because they relate to customer preferences? When thinking about where to source, market and brand food, catering for customers'

health, financial and ethical priorities are essential to the bottom line. But concern for profitability is different from having certain ethical values *in their own right*. Businesses are reflecting on trust: is that the bottom line of what you as a business are trying to achieve or is trust a side effect of doing meaningful work within your local community? Words are cheap, but passionate and compelling advocacy is priceless.

"All of these areas are now key drivers of trust, so we're not just doing it because we're a good corporate citizen. We're doing it because our customers, with whom we want to have an ongoing, loyal relationship, care about it and it's driving their perception of who they trust. The customer of the future - and the present actually - is demanding that every aspect of their life points in the direction of the values they hold."

However, demonstrably, people's 'philosophies' are not always reflected in their buying behaviours. Businesses are grappling with the fact that customers often shop by habit without necessarily articulating their own food philosophies.

It is possible to create a food system that is sustainable BUT is only attainable for a privileged few. There is an urgent need to democratise food and sustainability, putting decisions in more hands and normalising sustainable behaviours and actions.

Taking people on your food journey

"The starting point for a lot of this is that we do have a lot in common. We start from the premise that people care, and there is a lot we can do if we give people the knowledge and opportunity."

Businesses are thinking about the varied approaches they need to take different stakeholders on their journey. Suppliers, customers, peers – each requires a different sort of engagement. Expert stakeholders may want to see the detail - how a business balances, reports, measures, and takes decisions. People, the public, generally have other things they want to do with their time rather than scrutinise every single product they have and every interaction they have with food brands.

"We take different routes. Some need detail, some need inspiration, and some need to see that we're moving ourselves."

Communicating complex messages

Getting the message across to different stakeholders and communities is a huge challenge. Some things are so complicated that a separate bespoke approach is needed to have a chance of properly engaging. To what extent should businesses be helping improve the 'sustainability literacy' of their customers? What role do they have and how can they engage with often very complex issues?

On the one hand it may be important to have a simple message about the impact (environmental, health, animal welfare or worker conditions) of what is in a shopping basket because 'consumers' don't have time to read labels. However, that depends on customers having first built up a strong sense of trust in the organisation – including that any claims made are true.

On the other hand, the whole idea of food citizenship is to encourage people not just to take messages for granted as passive consumers, but instead to think critically about different ways they can bring their influence to bear. Businesses need to find different ways to engage with people on the huge range of concerns that people have.

Working with complexity and dilemmas

Businesses report many instances where, in trying to fix one problem, they exacerbate another. For example, switching from plastic to glass packaging may lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions in transport and/ or more breakages. Similarly, a move to reduce plastic by introducing self-service unpackaged mushrooms inadvertently led to more waste, as the mushrooms got so bruised that noone would buy them after the first hour. Solutions are not always straightforward. Dilemmas should be carefully thought through, trade-offs considered and balances struck.

“When trying to define a ‘sustainable’ food basket, we had to answer the question - what does it entail? Is it just climate change, or just packaging? Is it just deforestation but not food waste? Actually, we landed at the point where we said - it's everything”.

Crucially though, businesses are aware that complexity isn't a reason for paralysis. There is a lot of room for action – and no time to wait.

Food waste was recognised as one area that in some ways is easier to address because it is fairly uncontroversial. Conversations about *what* to eat are likely to remain controversial, but nobody thinks it is a good idea to waste food they have paid for.

There was broad enthusiasm for work to develop a simple harmonised set of (environmental and social) metrics, underpinned by robust and rigorous research, to indicate with one glance a score based on a broad spectrum of sustainability factors. If a universally understood and trusted scoring system can be achieved, it would support the commercial case for actions on food sustainability.

“It doesn't matter if it's a kitchen table or board table. We all give a damn about our families and communities. We're just stuck in systems that measure things in a weird way that doesn't help anybody.”

The power of the story

Businesses are increasingly reporting examples of where they are inviting their customers to act. **Crucially, the credibility to issue that invitation starts with a sincere, authentic, transparent explanation of what the organisation has done itself.**

“We chose our pork supplier because they're a free-range farm and they also supply food and habitats for a million bees. It's this story that people care about, it has resonance”.

Ensuring a fair say

How do you make sure that people have a fair share of voice and representation? An important question for private sector companies now is how to get the customer voice represented at strategic and Board level? How can businesses get the right input from communities and really listen to and amplify voices?

Drawing on views and experience of participants from all parts of the organisation's wider community is invaluable in getting different perspectives and voices heard. Getting stuck in an echo chamber of just your immediate customers is a possible pitfall. The real rub in terms of bringing the customer voice into the board room is around how to meaningfully implement what customers have voiced as important in a way that helps deliver overall corporate targets on a day-to-day basis.

“We've all got corporate targets, but from a buyer's perspective, the current position is 'consumers aren't ready to reduce meat by 50% therefore we can't do this' But they question must be - if people are not ready, how do we get them ready”?

Do different ownership structures make it easier or harder to engage the public on sustainability?

The co-operative model can be very powerful. Through their membership structure, cooperatives arguably have more opportunity to meaningfully engage far more people in positive sustainability action. One cooperative business described its approach: *“We have a members’ council and a young members’ council... At each AGM there are ‘members motions’ brought by our members on sustainable sourcing, climate change and fair trade issues... We also have member pioneers that sit in communities who have a role to play in supporting our stores and talking to our communities about the issues that we’re trying to focus on. It allows [us] to have a detailed conversation about these issues”.*

A shared sense of urgency

Time is running out. There is a shared sense of urgency, and recognition that we must all take urgent action in the next two to three years to strive for a future we can leave our children. But there is no ‘super plan’ in a bottom drawer that is about to be brought out.

“It’s truly amazing if you think about how many people are increasingly banging the same drum [and the] consistency of similar messaging. We need painful, brutal conversations around the commercials.”

Don’t COP out - collaborate

COP26 offers a unique opportunity to focus in and try to build collaboration amongst peers. Talking to competitors about making changes is key, and some businesses are showing leadership. The changes that are needed are not about competition, they are about systemic change for the good of the planet. Those things can only happen if we have brave leadership and big decisions, as well as small actions.

One major retailer cited an example of introducing a reusable packaging offer. In this instance, the customer, or citizen, is being invited to join a movement where they are empowered to take certain actions. Crucially, it is up to food retailers and foodservice companies to show what they are going to do to support people to act, to make it easy for them. It was suggested it is easier to breakthrough and be brave at Boardroom level than it is with middle management – that is where more action is needed.

Beyond education, education, education

Some businesses are tentatively stepping into a role of educating the public but are nervous about being seen as ‘telling people how to lead their lives’. Indeed, thinking of ‘them’ and ‘us’ is part of the problem – we are all in this together.

“We all feel very uncomfortable as big businesses to be seen as lecturing or telling people how to live their lives, yet we see that that’s a conversation we have to step into”.

Meanwhile, it is widely acknowledged that education on its own won’t fix things. A mix of behavioural and cultural change, government policies, regulations and changes to the physical environment all need to work in tandem. These are not all levers that businesses feel able to pull. Every part of society has a role to play.

“We’ve made the commitment to 300% increase in plant-based food but if people don’t buy it, what do we do then? We need other parts of society to help fuel this movement, so the demand is also there.”

Businesses spoke of the need to encourage a collective uprising so that people are voting with their feet and supporting increasingly ambitious targets. Sometimes it makes financial and sustainability sense to make tough decisions on a customer’s behalf.

“With things like health to a degree it’s a personal choice... but carbon is a slightly different argument in that it’s not necessarily a personal choice. It’s like, ‘Well, actually we need to take that choice away from you”

Getting the order right when it comes to actions

One communications approach proposed was announce what you’ve done and what you’re doing right now; then what you’re about to start and what promises you are making. This was preferred by most to simply making big announcements without having taken steps to build foundations that give credibility.

“We created the system, we can change it and we should collectively mean what we say about collaboration and tell the government the need to change the metrics”

Food Citizenship

As people become more informed and concerned about health, climate and biodiversity emergencies, many are increasingly acting as ‘ethical food citizens’. Many businesses are gaining confidence in the idea that fundamentally you can trust people if you give them the knowledge and opportunity to do the right thing for themselves, their family and the planet. That includes recognising their role in challenging frameworks that stop that happening normally. The job is to build frameworks that **make** good things happen.

Treating customers as engaged food citizens, not simply as ‘the end consumer’ shifts relationships. It increases opportunities to build trust and diversify positive interventions to address big sustainability challenges. There are opportunities for businesses to give the public a role in decisions about sustainability, moving beyond simply telling customers what they are doing to benefit society and the environment – and *involving* them instead.

Applying food citizenship mindset to value chains

Organisations that do not deal directly with the general public may not feel able to have the same reach as those with customer-facing outlets. But through their interactions with suppliers – treating them as ‘citizens’ of the supply chain - they can have a significant impact. Self-identifying as a food citizenship organisation, and engaging with others with that mindset makes a difference, even when not directly engaging with the general public. It is about changing what is normal.

“It’s about celebrating what we eat and our role as a retailer in influencing sustainable nutritious food...”

A challenge to the business community

Businesses were challenged to think about how they and their shareholders could position themselves to move away from a GDP-centred approach, towards natural and social capital. If we have 10 years to get this right, what are the metrics and measurements that need to be developed now? What gets measured, gets done – and is more likely to get invested in.

“Ultimately the citizens of the future will not [accept] any green dressing. They’re not interested in straplines. They will know who really means that they’re going to invest in a different, kinder... fairer future. And that’s where they’ll spend their money. So how can you engage with citizens to make sure that you play a part in that kind of prosperity?”

Concluding comments

We need a fair transition that ensures people are not left behind. Telling stories, raising awareness, shifting mindsets (from consumerist to food citizenship) and asking questions are vital. There are already examples of companies taking positive action. Taking people along on the food journey involves building trust and finding ways to engage on complex issues. **Let’s make this a collective mission to lift the voices in our communities and meaningfully involve others in our sustainability journeys.**

What next?

Tips:

- Identify opportunities to collaborate not compete
- Don’t allow complexity to be paralysing
- Building trust is crucial if you want citizens to believe in your brand
- Involve your communications team from the outset

Selected key questions:

- What is your food philosophy?
- How can you involve customers in decision-making?
- What collective sustainability missions might businesses take on in the future, together?
- How can we change conditions so sustainability can flourish?
- How can we go beyond the transaction of selling food to instead develop lasting food relationships with customers to deliver meaningful change together?
- What role should there be for harmonised metrics?
- How can citizen-led movements creatively become part of your strategic thinking?

Further resources

Other relevant Business Forum reports:

- Embracing Ethics at a Time of Crises – link [here](#)
- Purpose Driven Business – link [here](#)
- Changing Appetites Business Forum – link [here](#)

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 11th May 2021. We are grateful to our speakers: **Kené Umeasiegbu** is Campaigns Director at Tesco, where he leads the company’s public and stakeholder engagement on key societal issues including climate change, food waste, plastics, food sourcing and plant-based proteins. **Pam Warhurst** is Chair of the Board of the Forestry Commission and co-founder of Incredible Edible Todmorden, which has since catalysed the Incredible Edible movement. **Dr Nigel Dower** is Chair of the Food Ethics Council and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Aberdeen. **Dan Crossley**, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley dan@foodethicscouncil.org +44 (0) 333 012 4147.