

FOOD PRIORITIES FOR NEXT 10 YEARS DEBATED

Market opportunities and the supermarket ombudsman were among topics discussed as a five-member panel took questions from the audience at Reading University

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT

The question of how the UK governments should establish the priorities for domestic agriculture and food production for the next 10 years drew responses on the future of the CAP, the role of a supermarket ombudsman and the importance of connecting with consumers at a recent debate held at Reading University.

A five-member panel consisting of Duncan Sinclair, an agricultural manager from Waitrose, Jan Lloyd, the chief executive of New Covent Garden Wholesale Market, Richard Copas, a leading arable farmer from the Thames Valley area, Dr Simon Mortimer from the Centre for Agri Environmental Research at Reading University, and Mark Varney, the head of business development for food at the Fair Trade Foundation, considered questions from an audience of more than 60 for almost one-and-a-half hours.

Of particular debate was the role a supermarket ombudsman might play in protecting suppliers, while not disadvantaging consumers. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the make-up of the panel – all parties in the supply chain are supportive of ethical practices and no one wants to condone abuse of suppliers – the Government's decision to proceed with the creation of a supermarket ombudsman was regarded as a step in the right direction.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Concerns arose, however, about what its terms of reference might be and how effective it might be in the long term. Attitudes can therefore be considered cautious. It remains to be seen what impact the ombudsman will really have.

The importance of farmers having access to sound market data to guide future financial decisions was also raised. It is critical that producers are well informed about market opportunities and conditions to avoid over exposure to risky trading and marketing conditions.

It was the belief of the panel that there is still scope for greater cooperation throughout the supply chain in order to secure new and existing markets. The role of the CAP in insulating producers from the ravages of the market, at least until recently, was high-

lighted and it was generally accepted that as the CAP is reformed some businesses would need to revise their strategy and tactics to suit the new environment.

Delivering the Government's stated objective of "producing more with less" was interpreted by some as reason to raise levels of self-sufficiency, but while this is a fine aspiration, and one likely to be greeted warmly by the UK's farmers, it was considered to be largely unrealistic. Instead, there would be more emphasis on the most effective use of available land and natural resources, even with an overlay of EU subsidy. Long-term food security was seen as a bigger priority for the UK.

MARKETING EXPERTS

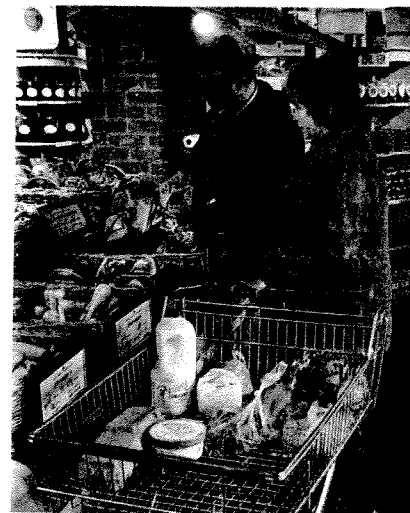
As befits a discussion that consists of a number of marketing experts on its panel, the importance of customer engagement and the value of strong brands in delivering sustainable returns were emphasised. Issues such as sustainability, animal welfare and nutrition would all be more important in the future for consumers and governments alike and provide a significant opportunity for farmers and food suppliers. This will allow for a variety of mixed business models to emerge for those who possess the skills to identify market opportunities.

On a more topical note, the recent news that two dairy farmers in Lincolnshire plan to build an 8,100-cow super dairy was discussed and how this might be viewed by those consumers misled by some of the hype surrounding so-called 'factory farms'.

The news was greeted with typically measured responses with the panel and the audience largely in agreement that so-called 'super farms' were part of the ongoing evolution of domestic production. It was generally accepted as a myth that small automatically meant beautiful and large farming businesses could not demonstrate strong environmental credentials. This was seen as further reason to engage consumers in the realities of food production.

It hardly seems possible that a discussion on agricultural productivity and how, as an industry, it can play a part in responding to the need to feed a grow-

Customer engagement and the importance of strong brands were emphasised as key to future success



ing world population without a mention of genetically modified crops or the decline in investment in government sponsored research.

Most of those in the industry who have followed the debate surrounding GM crops would agree that, as an issue, it has been handled appallingly and those opposed to GM use have seized the lead. The panel was largely in agreement and, while accepting that there was a need for GM in the future to help ensure the future competitiveness of the industry, none were able to fully articulate a suggestion as to how the initiative might be regained from the objectors; beyond that it would need to be handled more carefully in the future.

While much of the discussion focussed on the 'big picture' issues of tomorrow, the panel also concluded that the priorities for UK agriculture and food were to make best use and share best practice when it comes to the use of science and R&D in farming and food production.

The need to connect effectively with consumers to secure a greater proportion of the customer spend while also helping the UK to meet the mid to long-term challenge of feeding a world population of nine billion by the year 2050 and tackling climate change were all identified.

• John Giles of Promar International recently chaired a Question Time-style event, run jointly by the Institute of Agricultural Management and the Chartered Institute of Marketing, that considered how UK agriculture and food can respond to the demands of society in the next decade.

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