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- [Latest Video](#)
- [Weather](#)

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- [Packer Archives](#)
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- [Fresh Trends](#)
- [Infographics](#)
- [Packer 25](#)
- [Going Rates](#)
- [Executive Briefs](#)
- [The Guide](#)
- [Video Archives](#)

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- Newsletters
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- Consumer Sites
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# Science must resume active role in decision making

By Jeff Dlott and Kerry Tucker

**(Oct. 8, GUEST COLUMN)** Traditional science institutions, especially the land grant universities, appear to be taking a back seat to popular and private information sources in many discussions about agriculture, food systems and food choices.

Science is not the foundation for decision making it once was. Support for "public" science across a number of traditional fronts is eroding. As this plays out, important decisions affecting the produce industry may be made using only perception and inferences rather than data and facts.

The challenge for science and, we would argue, the agrifood industry is to reclaim relevancy for science in long-term decisions.

#### THE INTERNET

Consumers, and for that matter, government officials and health professionals, are not turning to the traditional institutions as a resource like they once did. They're pulling the information they want from sources they choose, such as the Internet and personally selected media and expert sources. Many even customize how they receive it — TiVo-ed news and programming, push e-mail newsletters or personal news pages that appear as home pages on Web browsers.

To the chagrin of traditional scientists and some industry leaders, few check or verify the information that these consumers, thought leaders and policymakers receive (and often believe).

This new paradigm counts on the collective wisdom of the crowd to trump the professionals who once served as guardians of accuracy. In fact, research from a variety of Food Foresight sources shows that the biggest influence on consumer decisions is coming from personal networks of neighbors, family and friends. And with the Internet, that neighbor or friend may be next-door or around the world.

"We're depending more and more on systems where no one is in charge; the intelligence is simply emergent," writes Chris Anderson, editor in chief of Wired magazine in his best-selling book, "The Long Tail."

"The advantage of probabilistic systems is that they benefit from the wisdom of the crowd and as a result can scale nicely both in breadth and depth. But, because they do this by sacrificing absolute certainty on the micro scale, you need to take any single result with a grain of salt," writes Anderson.

Under this scenario, Wikipedia is the first source of information, not the last. It's information exploration, not the definitive source of facts.

"The same is true for blogs. You just need to read more than one of them before making up your mind," writes Anderson.

Reclaiming relevancy for science will take new approaches. One example comes from the Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea (COMPASS), an organization focused on creating incentives for marine scientists to be more engaged and relevant.

Founded in 1999, COMPASS is a multistakeholder partnership made up of academic scientists, media experts and influential not-for-profit organizations that provide scientists with communications training, better connections with journalists and policymakers, and new opportunities to communicate their work. The COMPASS charter is to make science-based information a part of the collective wisdom.

#### CREDIBILITY FROM COLLABORATION

Whatever the approach, credibility is likely to come from sources inclusive of many points of view. Picture multistakeholder partnerships around issues like obesity, sustainability and the health care/food nexus.

These arrangements will feed on public, private and popular information sources. Fundamental



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honesty will be the price of admission, with inaccuracy or insincerity quickly identified as such and exposed.

It will be up to scientists — and for that matter, agrifood companies — to determine the advantage of participating in what is likely to be a transparent process of vetting and distributing credible information. Science can have a say, but it won't be the only voice. Organizations and individuals that choose to go it alone, no matter how "good" their science, will be marginalized as these stakeholder partnerships build trust and credibility.

The benefits of agrifood scientists and companies engaging and embracing in these new consumer-driven information venues and fueling a voice for science within "the wisdom of the crowd" far outweighs the risks of standing on the sidelines and allowing inaccurate information to continue to go unchecked.

As the saying goes, you're either at the table or on the menu.

— **Jeff Dlott is chief executive officer of SureHarvest, an integrated agrifood management software and sustainability service company headquartered in Soquel, Calif. Kerry Tucker is chief executive officer of Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc., a San Diego-based public relations firm. Both are involved with Food Foresight, a trends report.**

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