

The Pros Cons Of Cool

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Trendiness definitely has its place. Things that become trendy tend to generate unfathomable amounts of demand, attention and, perhaps most importantly, revenue. Trendiness can revive flat or struggling products, or even, entire industries.

Film-induced tourism is a good example of this. The Devil's Tower National Monument reported a staggering 74 percent increase in visitors the year after *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* used this location as a space ship landing site. The little-known town of Dyserville, Iowa now has over 55,000 annual visitors, thanks to *Field of Dreams*. These visitors pour money into hotels, food, and local businesses. Recently, it seems like the food industry has entered trendy waters. Seven years ago, when I first started working for Food Manufacturing, my friends (somewhat average consumers) were unconcerned and unimpressed with my choice of professions. Today, many of my friends not only read my column on a daily basis, they offer me consistent feedback on the issues at hand. Now, either my choice in friends has improved, or it has become exponentially cooler to understand where your food comes from. I tend to go with the latter (no offense, guys).

Perhaps this can partially be attributed to the film industry. Recent movies, such as *Extract* and *Food, Inc.*, cast the spotlight on the food industry. While they are two very different movies (*Extract* is a Mike Judge comedy featuring Jason Bateman as the owner of a flavor extract factory, and *Food Inc.* is a criticism of corporate greed in the food industry) both put have brought public attention to an industry that hasn't always been the topic of water-cooler discussion. Both have made my job - and the jobs of all my readers - something consumers care about.

Of course, trendiness is not without its downfalls, and *Food, Inc.* is a good example of this. Trendiness embeds things firmly into the public eye, opening them up for scrutiny, and sometimes exploiting them beyond repair. When it comes to movie-inspired trends, we often fall victim to whatever opinion the film makers want us to have. If they show us images of chickens crammed into cramped cages, or cows being dragged to their death, that's what we walk away with. What we don't see is the U.S. food industry's impressive ability to feed not only our nation's 300 million people (and do so at the lowest cost of any developed nation) but also its ability to export food to other nations unable to feed their own populations. For whatever reason, it had become cool to worry about the feelings of baby chickens, but uncool to care about starving people.

So the question is, is it a good thing or a bad thing that the food industry has become a trendy topic of discussion? Do trends divert our attention away from the real facts for the sake of keeping public interest - or do they bring much needed publicity to industries that haven't always been recognized?

As a huge proponent of our nation's food industry, I have no problem with increased visibility, as I truly believe there is little to hide. There will always be those who break the rules, but overall, food processors are running their plants safely, cleanly,

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and humanely. And in addition to that, let's not forget that America is a country fueled by hot dogs and chicken wings - seeing a 30-second clip of those animals moving down a processing line might stimulate some water-cooler discussion and fuel a few angry blogs, but it does not make these food choices any less delicious come the next baseball game.

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