The Food Service Manager’s Role in Regulating the Humane Treatment of Animals

By
April McMurray

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INTRODUCTION

The meat industry is a place of growing controversy. Many people are opposed to eating meat because of the way animals are treated. The FDA and USDA have already established regulations that ensure the humane treatment of animals, although there have been several cases when laws have neither been followed nor well regulated.

Food service managers can play a part in this growing controversy because of their purchasing power. Even if the laws are not regulated from the top down, managers can influence tighter regulations by choosing to purchase their animal products only from vendors that follow regulations for the humane treatment of animals. This paper will further discuss how managers can have this influence, as well as the positive implications this would have for their businesses.

ANIMAL TREATMENT

Current Regulations

Currently there are several laws and government regulations to ensure the humane treatment of animals raised for food. In 1966, the Animal Welfare Act was passed, and several amendments have been made over the years to further guarantee humane practices (1). Other organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States, are dedicated to advocating and campaigning for tighter regulations and practice improvements to better the treatment of animals (2). The concern for animals' feelings (pain, suffering, and distress or comfort and pleasure), the health and fitness of animals and the normal behaviors of animals in natural environments are some of the areas of focus when determining these regulations (3).

Several studies have been done in order to determine what practices are the most humane so that the FDA and USDA can establish more effective regulations. For example, several studies explore the most humane methods for animal slaughter. In one study, the method of
stunning the animals was examined, looking to see at which electrical frequency layer hens could be stunned most effectively when using water baths, allowing the hens to reach unconsciousness more quickly (4). Other studies have looked at the use of biotechnology, how it affects animal welfare, and how it may be used to improve welfare while still maintaining profitability (5). Research concerning the most humane methods of animal treatment continues to play an important role in the development of these regulations.

**Regulatory Problems**

These government laws, accompanied by scientific studies suggesting new ways to improve animal treatment, should be sufficient for proper animal care. However, not everyone follows these laws, and there is not always tight enough regulation on the companies that ignore the laws and treat their animals poorly. This is the cause of people's concern for the humane treatment of animals. In a New York Times article reporting the largest meat recall in the United States, the president of a meat packing company admitted to poor animal treatment and videos showed employees “kicking cattle or using electric prods on ‘downer’ cattle that were too sick to walk” and using forklifts to push the animals around (6). Such treatment is shocking and saddening.

The lack of tighter regulation could also be due to a lack of priority. In a questionnaire for animal science faculty members (3), faculty agreed that animals should be given adequate space, food and water, and be free from injury and discomfort. However, the majority of those questioned believed current practices already provided animals with the necessary care. Most of them also felt that it was a less important issue than that of food safety. This faculty may not be fully informed about the misconduct of some meat companies, but perhaps the issue to them is
not a big priority. While their mindset is unknown, it shows that the issue of humane animal treatment is not addressed enough to enforce tighter regulations.

The current practices and lack of tighter regulation, along with a lack of concern, and perhaps a lack of education are some of the problems facing the meat industry. Despite the laws, many, not just activists, are being led to doubt the industry as a whole. One way that a food service director can make a difference is by providing this type of information to both meat suppliers and customer. Through procurement decisions, an educated manager can also make changes to his or her business that reflects this concern for proper animal treatment.

**Food Safety Issues**

Another serious concern is that of food safety. The mistreatment of animals has led to food safety issues in the past—meat products derived from poorly treated or sick animals has been the cause of food-borne diseases and several recalls. In the meat recall incident reported above, the president of the company admitted that sick cows had been allowed to be introduced into the hamburger supply, but he had not previously considered it to be a food safety threat (6). However, this clearly may increase the number of food-borne illnesses, and the president's oversight in allowing sick cows to be used only perpetuated the problem.

Another example in China (7) illustrates the danger of poor animal treatment in terms of food safety. With a meat and dairy shortage in China, animal production intensified but humane animal treatment declined. The decline resulted in a surge of food-borne diseases which affected both health and confidence of consumers. This example demonstrates the importance of proper animal treatment to ensure food quality and safety, and certainly no manager wants to deal with customers getting sick at his or her restaurant.
ROLE OF THE FOOD SERVICE MANAGER

The food service manager has a unique power to create changes in the meat industry. As purchasing is one of the most important aspects of running a food service operation, a manager has the responsibility to decide from which vendors he or she will make purchases. As they make the decision to support only companies that treat and slaughter animals humanely, business will begin to decline for the companies that do not follow government regulations. Even if government officials and meat inspectors do not do anything to prevent inhumane treatment of animals, the lack of customers will eventually drive meat companies to improve their practices.

Signs of this are already occurring, as some food retailers and producers have already taken initiative to improve animal welfare standards (3). For example, McDonald's began auditing meat packing plants and found poor compliance with handling and killing standards from the American Meat Institute, which led to calls for “stronger enforcement of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act” (3). As other retailers have followed suit, it has had an impact on the meat producing companies. In January 2007, the largest pork producer in the U.S., Smithfield, announced a 10-year phase out-plan to replace cramped gestation stalls with group housing for the animals (3). The meat industry's lack of business is facilitating tighter compliance with current regulations.

Customer Satisfaction

There are two implications to motivate food service directors in making such an important decision. The first deals with customer satisfaction, which is a manager’s top priority. The results of a survey conducted in the Canadian pork sector showed that not only animals’ rights activists were interested in seeing more humane treatment of animals, but that the general
public was also concerned (8). By only purchasing animal products produced by compliance with regulations, managers will be more able to satisfy these customers.

It also gives them an advertising advantage if they can say all of their meat comes from animals that have been treated humanely. Food service managers that can show they have listened and tailored their organizations to their customers' wants will likely see an increase in business. In 2000, McDonald's published its welfare guidelines, and was followed closely by Burger King, in 2001 (9). Action like this speaks loudly to the producers at the top of the industry, as well as to customers who want to see reform. Customers can feel confident knowing food services are taking animal regulation seriously, resulting in better business for these food chains.

**Quality and Safety Assurance**

Another big motivation is the issue of food safety. If a food-borne disease is traced to a restaurant, it is often accompanied by negative consequences for the reputation of that service. The manager is often blamed for poor food handling rather than the meat companies. Incidents of recall and food-borne illness are embarrassing for food service facilities. While purchasing meat from vendors who treat animals well does not guarantee that food-borne illnesses will never occur, managers can have greater confidence in food safety and quality, and can prevent many problems before they even occur.

**CONCLUSION**

As the issue concerning the humane treatment of animals grows, managers have a unique power in driving changes within the meat industry. As they make informed decisions about the vendors from whom they will make their purchases, they can choose to buy only from those who treat the animals humanely and according to government regulations. There is the possibility of a
higher cost associated with more narrow specifications in purchasing, but its long term effects may be more beneficial. Ultimately, the choice to buy such animals products may drive many meat companies to follow the regulations so they can get enough business. In terms of managers' business, managers can advertise to their customers, showing that they only purchase animal products from certain vendors and can show their support for the humane treatment of animals. Their purchasing decisions will also decrease the possibilities of spreading food-borne diseases to their customers. Overall, the implications of these decisions will increase customer satisfaction, benefit managers' business, and improve the humane treatment of animals.
REFERENCES


