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# Overview

In an era of food-safety scares and a national obesity epidemic, the food industry has faced heightened scrutiny. Many have called for increased regulation of the food industry to help ensure the production of safe, healthy, quality food. But what do consumers think? Do they support more control over food production? Or do they worry that too much regulation will limit the industry and their personal freedoms? It's a complex situation leaving many Americans conflicted. This white paper explores these issues and helps bring a consumer perspective to food marketers faced with the potential of increased regulation.



## Contents

**This white paper explores the following topics on consumer perception of the government's regulation of the food industry:**

1. Government Regulation of Food
2. Consumers' Support of Food Regulation
3. Attitudes Toward Government Involvement
4. Implications

# Key Takeaways

**1 in 4**

consumers think the government can be trusted to act in their best interest.

## Split Opinions on Government Regulation

Consumers are split on how much involvement they feel the government should have in regulating the food industry.

### Benefits

Many recognize the benefits of regulation:

- safer
- healthier
- better-quality food

### Negatives

But they worry it may:

- limit choices
- restrict freedoms
- ultimately drive up costs

## Lack of Trust Creating Need for Regulation



Don't trust food companies to self-regulate.

Don't trust government to act in our best interests.



Consumers don't trust food companies to self-regulate, but they also don't trust the government. Instead, they know they need to take more initiative to learn more.

**73%**

of consumers agree that "I should take the initiative to learn about my food rather than trusting food manufacturers and government agencies."

## Consumers Want Empowerment, Not Restrictions

When it comes to regulation of the food industry, consumers don't want restrictions. They want to be empowered with information and make their own decisions. Many recognize the need to take matters into their own hands and learn more about the food they eat.

# Government Regulation of Food

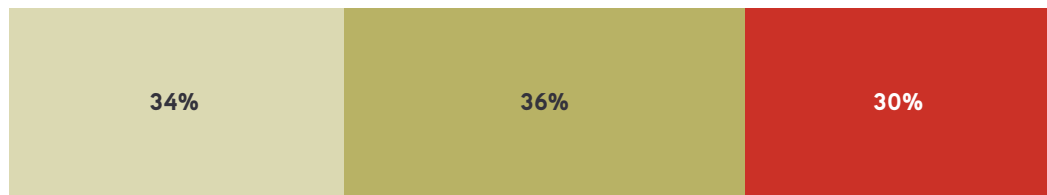
## Consumers are divided when it comes to government involvement

Americans do not universally agree on whether or not they think the government has too much, too little or the right amount of involvement. On one side, some consumers feel that the food industry has too little involvement and that more regulation could help provide safer, healthier, better-quality food. But on the other side, many Americans want the freedom to eat what they choose and don't want the government restricting their choices.

### Consumer Perceptions on the Amount of Government Food Regulation

Q. Do you think the government has too much or too little involvement in the regulation of the food industry?

● Too Little   ● Right Amount   ● Too Much



# Q. Why do you think the government has too little, too much, or the right amount of involvement in the regulation of the food industry?

## TOO LITTLE

“The government should require the food industry to provide safe foods for us and help us make an educated decision on what we purchase.”

- Female, 35-44/Gen-Xer, Midwest

## RIGHT AMOUNT

“Right amount of involvement, just not doing a good job at it.”

- Female, 35-44/Gen-Xer, South

## TOO MUCH

“I am an adult. I don’t need government telling me how to eat or how to feed my family.”

- Female, 45-54/Boomer, Midwest

“If we had more regulation, our population would be healthier and not so obese.”

- Male, 45-54/Gen-Xer, West

“The government doesn’t need to be involved any more than it already is.”

- Female, 45-54/Boomer, West

“I don’t think the government has as much experience as the growers or companies.”

- Male, 35-44/Millennial, Northeast

“Companies will do anything to make money. They don’t really care about the buyer. Regulation is a must.”

- Female, 45-54/Boomer, Midwest

“I think the government has enough laws in place to regulate the food industry. At some point, the people need to make better decisions about what they eat.”

- Male, 25-34/Millennial, South

“Anything the government gets involved in ends up costing consumers more.”

- Female, 25-34/Millennial, Northeast



## Older small-town consumers are more likely to think food is over-regulated

Thoughts on the amount of government regulation vary by demographics. Organic consumers and Millennials are more likely to think the government has too little regulation of the food industry, and they're more likely to support initiatives like restricting portion sizes. Organic shoppers are also more likely to support environmentally friendly packaging regulations.

Gen-Xers, boomers and those living in small cities are more likely to think the government has too much influence over the food industry. Those in small cities and rural environments aren't likely to support many government regulations, but they are more open to country-of-origin labeling on packaging.

### Consumers Who Think the Government Has Too Little, Right Amount or Too Much Involvement in Food Regulation



#### Too Little (34%)

**Organic Consumers (119 index\*):** More likely to support restricting portion sizes and environmentally friendly packaging.

**Millennials (106 index):** More likely to support taxing high-fat foods and restricting portion sizes.

#### Right Amount (36%)

**Bad Cooks (121 index):** Less likely to support taxing high-fat foods and restricting portion sizes.

**Urban (107 index):** Less likely to support taxing high-fat foods and restricting portion sizes.

#### Too Much (30%)

**Gen-Xers (110 index):** Less likely to support taxing high-fat foods and restricting portion sizes.

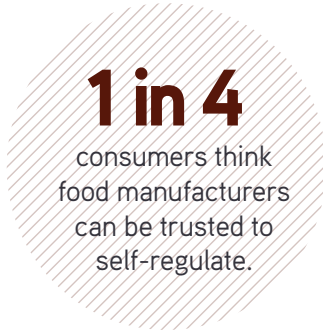
**Small City/Rural (117 index):** Same as above. And would support country-of-origin labeling.

**\*What's an index?**

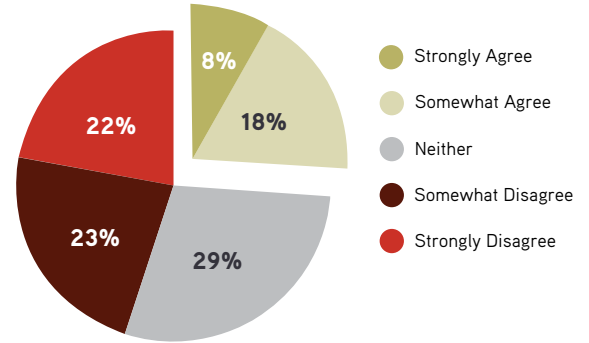
An index is a quick and easy way to see how the statistic for that consumer segment compares to the total responses. An index of 100 represents the average response. An index over 100 means that response is higher than average and below 100 means it is less than average. For example, an index of 120 means that it is 20 percent more likely than average and an index of 80 means that it is 20 percent less likely than average.

## Consumers don't trust food companies to self-regulate

Skepticism of food manufacturers is fairly strong, with 45% of consumers agreeing that food manufacturers cannot be trusted to self-regulate. Only a quarter of consumers (26%) think food companies can be trusted.

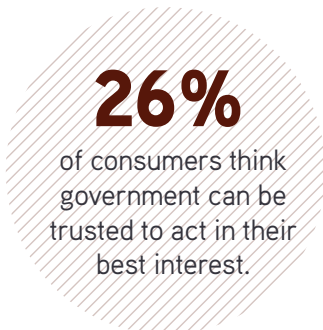


### Food Manufacturers Can Be Trusted to Self-regulate

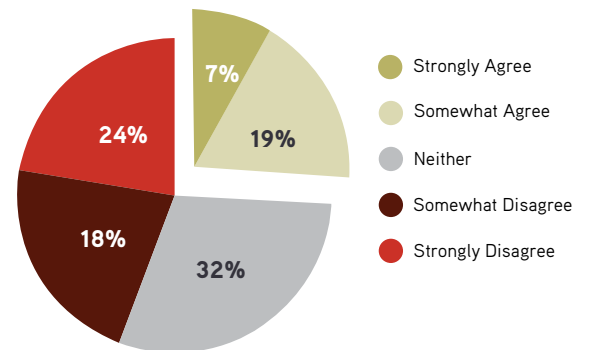


## And they don't always trust the government to act in their best interest

While many consumers don't trust food companies, they also don't trust that government involvement is the solution. Only a little over one in four consumers (27%) trust the government to act in their best interest. Millennials are more likely to trust the government (128 index) than boomers (78 index).



### The Government Can Be Trusted to Act in the Best Interest of Food Consumers



"If I could trust food corporations, I'd be happy to leave the government out of it. I just want honest information."

- Female, 55-64/Boomer, Midwest



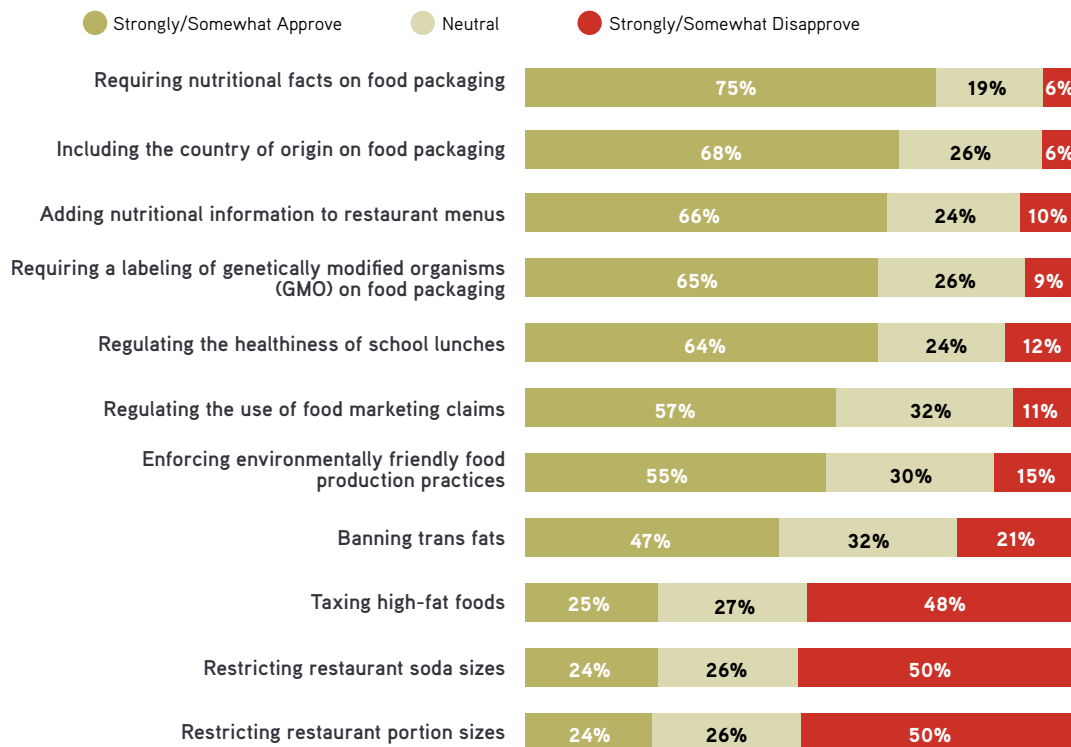
# Consumers' Support of Food Regulation

Regulation support varies, but consumers are generally receptive

While consumers don't always support government regulation, most of the regulations tested had positive support. However, some newer regulations that limit consumer choice (eg., soda size restrictions) are not as accepted by consumers.

*Q. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of the following governmental actions regulating the food industry?*

## Support of Government Regulations in Food

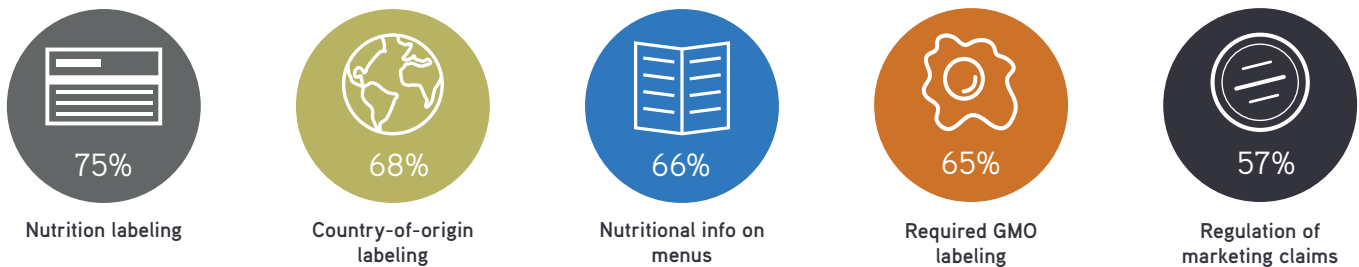




## Consumers support better labeling and initiatives that help them make informed decisions

Consumers seem to be more supportive of initiatives that offer information to help them make a more informed decision. The majority of consumers support better labeling of products and initiatives, like nutritional labeling and country-of-origin labeling. Consumers want to be empowered with information that will help them make decisions, but with the freedom and control of their own decisions.

### Percentage of Consumers Who Approve of the Following Government Regulations:



“There is a lot more the government could and should do to make sure we’re educated on foods. By making the information readily available for consumers to see, it can help us make educated choices on what to eat.”

- Female, 55-64/Boomer, Midwest

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## The Power of Food Labeling

For some food marketers, adhering to government food regulations can be cumbersome. But product labeling is very important to consumers, and food marketers can use it to clearly and effectively communicate with them. Beyond adhering to regulatory compliance, here are some tips for food labeling:

- Be clear, don’t mince words
- Be honest and straightforward
- Avoid industry jargon, use easy-to-understand language



## Consumers don't approve of regulations that infringe on personal choices

The majority of consumers (73%) think individual citizens do not need the government's help guiding their food decisions. On regulation issues that seem to inhibit freedom of choice, consumers are less receptive. For instance, only a quarter of consumers support taxing higher-fat foods (25%), restricting soda sizes at restaurants (24%), and restricting portion sizes at restaurants (24%).

### Percentage of Consumers Who Approve of the Following Government Regulations:



Taxing higher-fat foods



Restricting soda size



Restricting portion size

"I believe trying to regulate is good, but dictating portion sizes served by a restaurant is out of line. We have the info and facts and should be able to choose our portions ourselves."

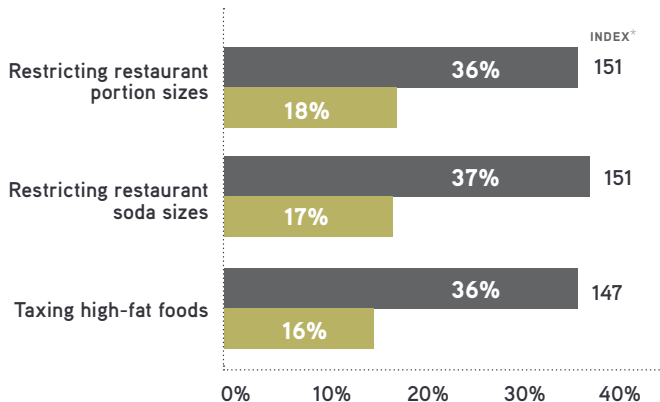
- Female, 35-44/Gen-Xer, Midwest

**73%**

of consumers do NOT agree that "individual citizens need the government's help guiding their food decisions."

## Those struggling to eat healthy are more likely to want government restrictions

Consumers who identify themselves as nonhealthy eaters are twice as likely to support government regulations restricting portion sizes (including soda sizes) and taxing high-fat foods. While these regulations have less support overall and are more controversial, they may make a real impact on some consumer groups.



● Nonhealthy Eaters\*\* ● Healthy Eaters\*\*

\*What's an index?

An index of 100 represents the average response. An index over 100 means that response is higher than average and below 100 means it is less than average.

\*\*Individuals who agree or disagree they are firmly committed to eating healthy

## Millennials are more likely to trust the government and food companies

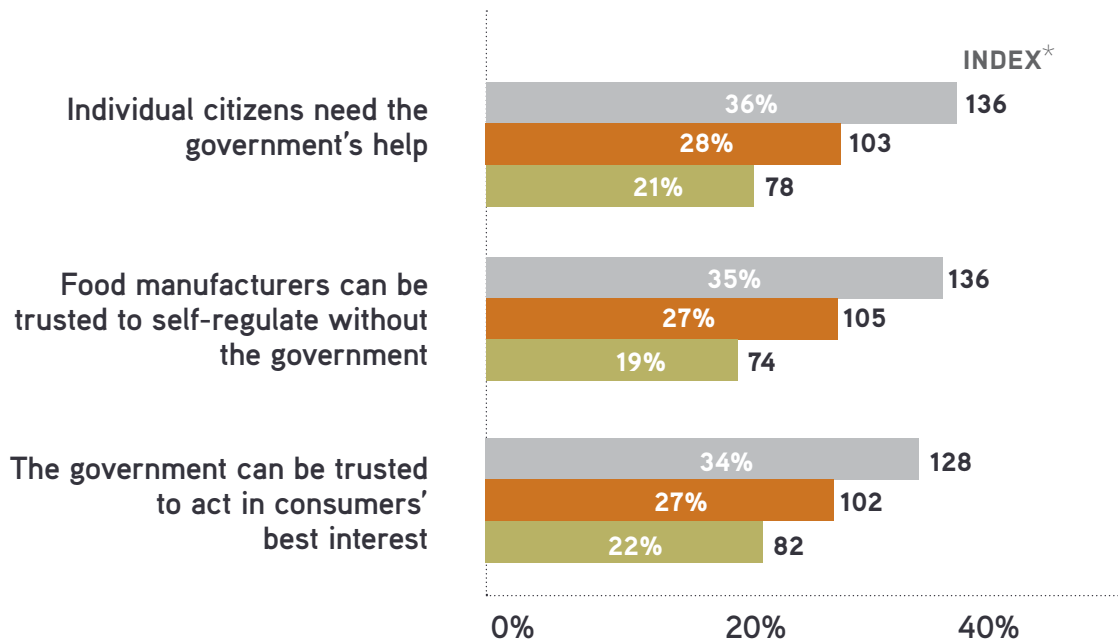
Boomers and Gen-Xers are more likely to be skeptical of the government and food manufacturers. Millennials are more trusting of the government and that food manufacturers are acting in consumers' best interest.

Millennials are also more likely to think that individual citizens need the government's help regulating food choices, while boomers and Gen-Xers have a much more independent mindset.



### Those Who Agree with the Following Statements

● Millennials      ● Gen-Xers      ● Boomers

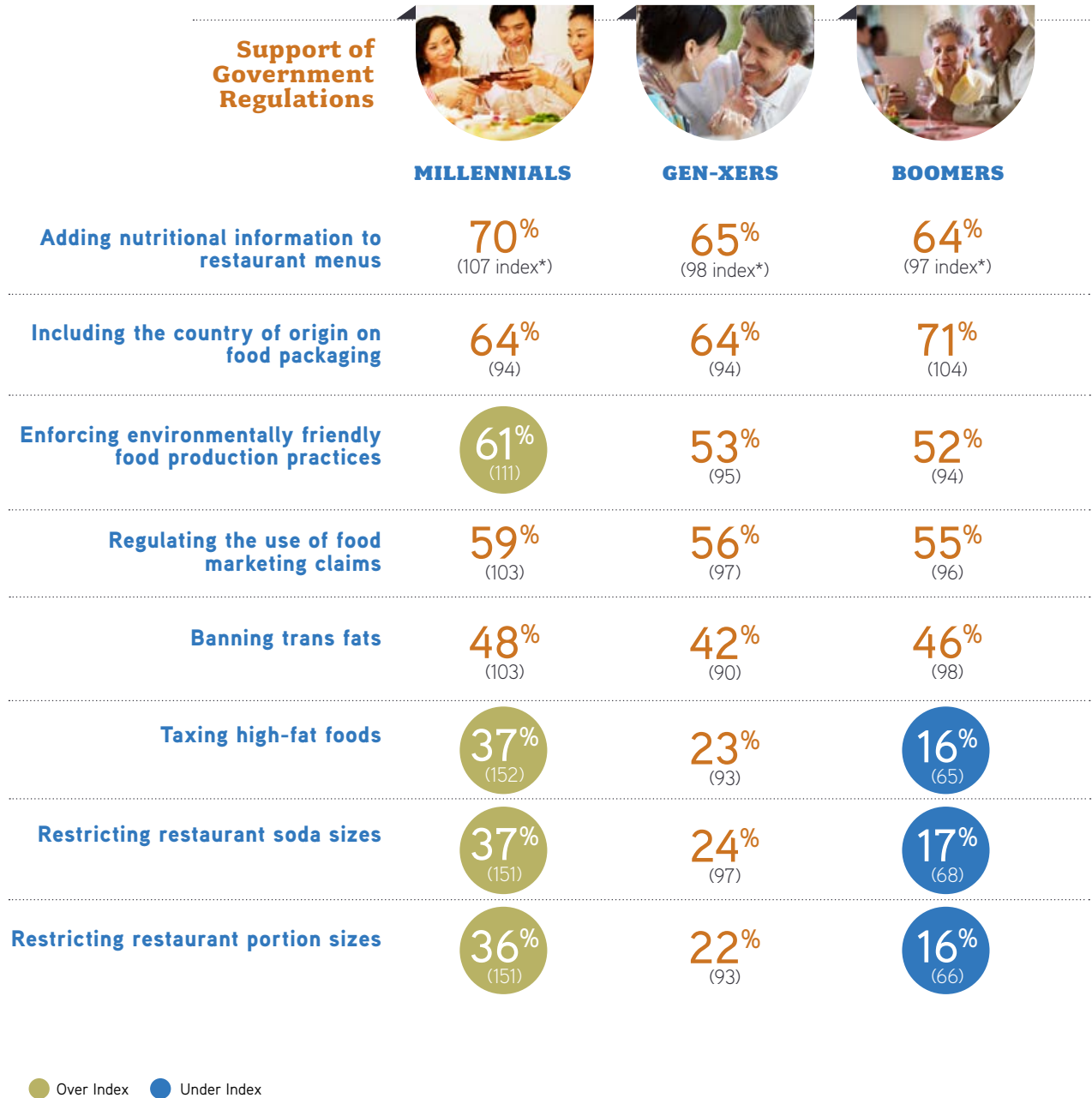


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# Younger generations are the most supportive of government regulation

Millennials are more likely to support a variety of government regulations of the food industry. Compared to boomers, Millennials are more than twice as likely to support taxing high-fat foods and restricting portion sizes, as well as soda sizes. They're also more likely to support environmentally friendly packaging. Boomers are somewhat more likely to support country-of-origin labeling.



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# Attitudes Toward Government Involvement

Consumers aren't universally sold on the benefits of government food regulation

Americans are mixed on whether or not we have too much government regulation of food. Consumer acceptance of government regulation depends on a clear understanding of pros and cons.

## At Its Best:



Improves Food Safety



Ensures Honesty in  
Food Claims



Helps Consumers Eat  
Healthier; Better Quality

## At Its Worst:



Drives up Costs



Restricts Personal  
Freedoms



Not Effective

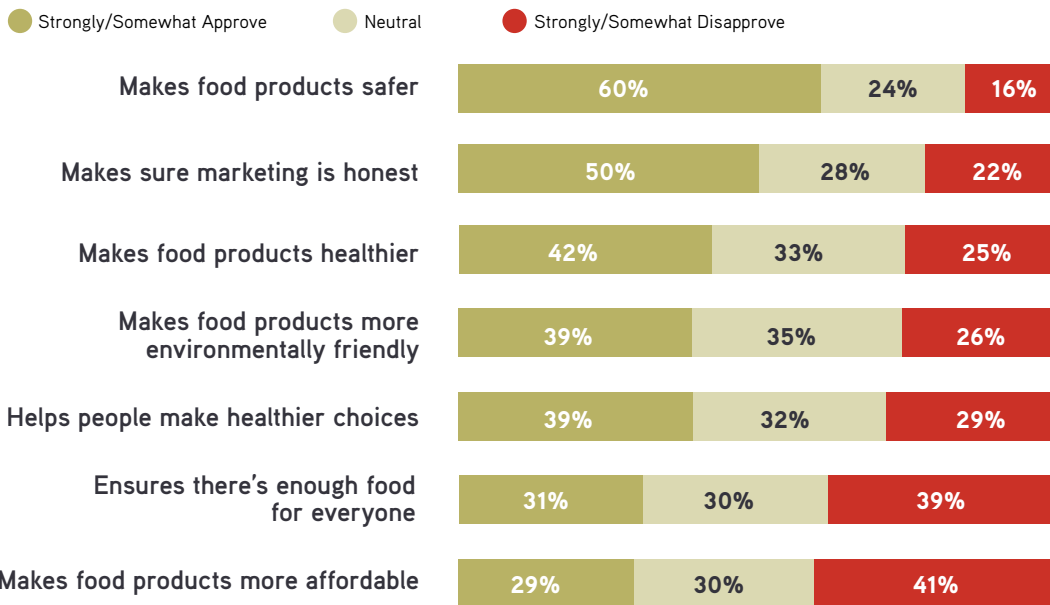


## Opinions are mixed on the benefits of government food regulation

Most consumers (60%) agree that government regulation can help make food products safer, and half (50%) believe it can help food marketing remain honest. But there isn't an overwhelming view that more regulation would produce tangible benefits. Consumers are more evenly split when it comes to thinking regulation produces more environmentally friendly and healthier foods. More consumers agree that the government does not help ensure there's enough food for everyone and does not help make food more affordable.

*Q. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the government's regulation of the food industry?*

### Benefits of Government Food Regulation



## Regulations can help alleviate food-safety doubts

Only four out of ten consumers (41%) trust that if a food product is on the market, it's safe to eat. Distrust of the food industry apparently remains quite high. This is the area consumers feel could benefit most from government regulation – making food products safer.

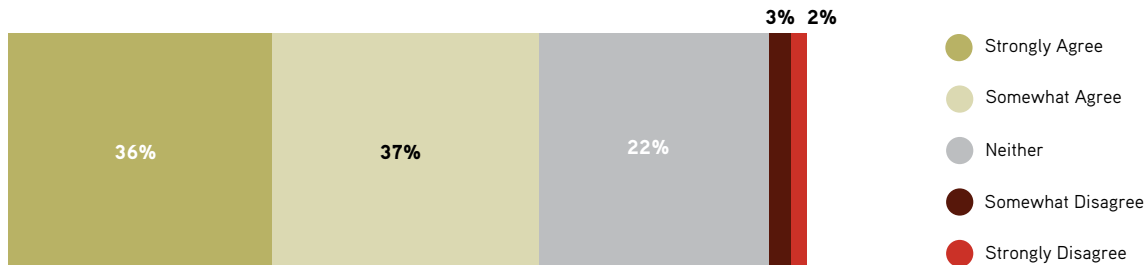


## Consumers know they should take the initiative to learn more

While consumers recognize some benefits of government regulation, the majority (73%) admit that they need to take the initiative to learn more about their food rather than trusting food manufacturers and government agencies.



### I Should Take the Initiative to Learn More About My Food Rather Than Trusting Food Manufacturers and Government Agencies



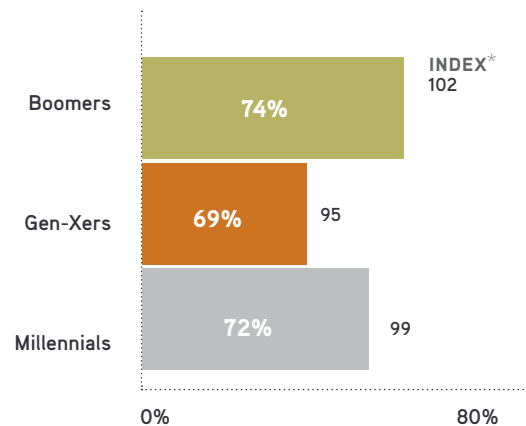
## But will the rubber meet the road?

Across the board, most consumers say they should take the initiative to learn more about their food. But will consumers actually do so?

Boomers were the most likely to distrust the government and food manufacturers. So it makes sense that the majority (74%) say it's on them to learn more about food production.

Millennials are the most dependent on and trusting of government regulation. And even they (72%) say they should take the initiative to learn more about food production.

### I Should Take the Initiative to Learn More About My Food Rather Than Trusting Food Manufacturers and Government Agencies



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# Implications

## Dealing with Government Regulation

Government regulation is something most food marketers can't avoid. It's a requirement and a necessary part of the food industry, even though many consumers have mixed feelings on the issue. When thinking about regulation, there are several questions for food marketers to ask themselves, both from a government and consumer perspective:



### Government Requirements:

- What do the government and other regulatory bodies require now and in the future?
- Are we in compliance?



### Consumer Requirements:

- Do consumers understand and see the benefits?
- Are we going above and beyond to answer the consumer questions about how it impacts them?

# Implications



## Give guidance, but don't restrict freedom.

Consumers aren't as supportive of regulation that limits their choice. Even when complying with guidelines, make sure customers have options that fit all their eating needs and occasions - from when they want to eat healthy to when they want to splurge.



## Continue to build consumer trust.

Many consumers call for more government regulation because, at the heart of it, there is a lack of trust in the food industry. Consumers don't totally trust the government, so trust needs to be built on both ends.



## Make it easy for consumers looking for healthier options.

Consumers struggling to eat healthier are more open to health regulations. Before it's even a requirement, help consumers make healthier choices.



## Empower consumers to learn more and take initiative.

Consumers recognize that they should take initiative to learn more about what they're eating. Help by giving them access to information and answering questions. Consider websites, videos, signage, labeling claims and other tactics that help them easily learn more.



# Stand out from the flock

## **About Sullivan Higdon & Sink's FoodThink:**

Sullivan Higdon & Sink is a full-service advertising and marketing agency with offices in Kansas City, Wichita and Washington, D.C. SHS is the agency known for hating sheeplike advertising that follows the flock. One of SHS' core focus areas is food value chain marketing — promoting products all along the farm-to-table spectrum.

In early 2014, SHS conducted the latest round of its FoodThink research study monitoring how consumers think about what they eat and America's relationship with food. After conducting its first study in 2012, SHS continues to monitor and research various food topics.

The study was executed among 2,004 consumers across the country via an online email survey (confidence interval of +/-2.19% at a confidence level of 95%). Respondents had to be at least 18 years of age and have joint or primary responsibility for the grocery and food decisions in their household. They came from a mix of demographic backgrounds and regions across the U.S. The study covered a wide range of topics, such as perceptions of food production, cooking trends and changing thoughts about food. FoodThink was developed to help SHS and its partners uncover insights about food in America in order to help craft effective, unsheeplike marketing communications.

**FOR MORE** about Sullivan Higdon & Sink's FoodThink study, please visit  
[www.shsfoodthink.com](http://www.shsfoodthink.com)

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