



Frequently Asked Questions About Food Systems

These are not intended as “the right answers” to questions you might be asked, but as illustrations of how to work with themes that research has proven to be effective, and how to turn unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to discuss more productive topics. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these principles into practice.

1. Aren’t most Americans pretty satisfied with their food options? Is it realistic to expect that changing the system would become a high priority issue?

Less effective: Most Americans do want the food they eat to be healthier, more nutritious, better tasting – and they believe that food could be all those things, and better for the environment, if we moved to a more natural, more balanced approach to producing our food.

Analysis: Reinforces the focus on individual eating scenarios
Mentions the environment as an end in itself without referring to “practical” implications of environmental degradation

More effective: We know from talking to ordinary people all across the country that Americans expect our food system to produce what we need now and for generations to come. We *are* concerned about whether we’re protecting or damaging the foundations that our food supply depends on – from a fresh water supply to healthy soil to ocean ecosystems.

Analysis: Bridges immediately to a big-picture perspective – in terms of the problems and the collective responsibility for them
Uses the Legacy value
Evokes a practical, responsible stance and avoids perceptions of environmentalists as extremists
Gives concrete examples of what’s at stake

2. Not everyone is going to be able to afford high-end foods like organically grown or free-range products. What do you tell those people?

Less effective: First, most families can probably think of places they're spending their food dollars that are less important than their health. But in the long run, of course, it's critical to find ways of making healthy foods less expensive and more widely available.

Analysis: Starts by placing the "blame" on consumers
Doesn't broaden the issue beyond the Consumer/Shopping Frame
Doesn't effectively challenge the framing of high quality food as elitist – allows organic food etc. to remain the "exception"

More effective: The problems with our runaway food system are not going to be solved at the level of individual shoppers. We all need to recognize the need to move to an approach that makes food that's healthy for people and the environment the norm rather than the exception.

Analysis: Rejects the appeal to Consumer framing in the question
Introduces a big-picture perspective with references to the runaway food system and to the need for collective attention to the issue
Forefronts the problem of organic foods etc. being "niche" products in the current market

3. The food in supermarkets is there because consumers want it there. Aren't producers just giving people what they want?

Less effective: The food companies spend billions of dollars a year on advertising that is designed to sell us unhealthy foods that we don't need, and that are damaging our health. They should bear some responsibility for that.

Analysis: Relies on a weak (if accurate) argument: that we are effectively manipulated by advertising – most Americans resist this idea
Doesn't effectively challenge the common default understanding of a consumer-driven food supply
Focuses on *blaming* the producers rather than offering a vision of what change would look like
Has the potential to define the speaker as anti-business and therefore suspicious

More effective: Anyone who has bought a tasteless (and less nutritious) pink tomato at their supermarket knows that when it comes to large-scale food production and distribution, consumers aren't exactly in charge. Food products are on the shelves and in the ads because producers and sellers make a profit from those products. The food supply system is too important to our society for us to ignore our collective responsibility to protect it from exploitation.

Analysis: Encourages people to think about the processes behind the store shelves

Replaces one causal story about the food system (i.e. consumer demand as the driving force) with a simple and familiar alternative (i.e. businesses want to make a profit)

Uses a familiar, concrete example from everyday life that directly counters the consumer-driven story

Establishes collective responsibility for protection; implies a line distinguishing acceptable business practices from non-acceptable

4. There are scientists in laboratories all over the world working to develop better ways of making food. Can't we reasonably expect science to fix today's food problems?

Less effective: Science has actually caused many of our current problems, from the development of toxic pesticides to genetic manipulations with unknown consequences. What we need is to get science back under control.

Analysis: "Demonization" of science counterproductive in the long run

Suggests no solutions other than "less science"

Obscures many of the important causal factors that have actually created problems

More effective: Technological changes don't automatically move us in the right direction. Science can help with some problems, but before we know what kind of science and technology we need, we have to set goals as a society, and understand what the current problems are. For instance, (continue with example)....

Analysis: Addresses listeners as citizens who should try to understand the big picture – promotes collective responsibility
Effectively rejects the “silver bullet” notion of scientific solutions
Allows communicators to segue to any number of issues (including ones not amenable to “scientific” solution)

5. It seems like there is plenty of regulation – after all, you don’t hear about Americans dropping dead from contaminated food. Why do we need more?

Less effective: Actually, a significant number of Americans *do* fall ill from contaminated food every year. Regulatory bodies like the FDA and the Department of Agriculture can only inspect a tiny percentage of the foods that we eat. Years of budget cuts and lobbying by industry groups have weakened them at the very moment when new challenges like agricultural pollution and genetic engineering are demanding new, creative approaches to regulating our food supply.

Analysis: Argument about regulatory inadequacy is likely to trigger people’s familiar model of an incompetent government
Allows focus to stay on the narrow problem of food contamination

More effective: The question isn’t how *much* regulation we have, but whether we’re taking the *right* steps to protect both our food and the foundations of our food supply. The current runaway approach is allowing unprecedented amounts of chemicals in our food and our environment, for instance, and needs to be brought under control.

Analysis: Promotes collective responsibility towards the food system
Doesn’t promote the image of ineffective government
Uses the Protection Frame
Broadens the issue to include sustainability (using the effective “foundations” analogy)

6. What foods should Americans be eating more and less of?

Less effective: For their own sake, they should be eating food grown with fewer chemical pesticides, fertilizers, etc. And making these choices will also have consequences for the environment.

- Analysis:* Allows focus to remain on individual food choices, rather than bridging to big-picture perspective
 Draws a distinction between people’s interests and the environment, rather than drawing a bridge between health and environmental concerns
- More effective:* It’s more helpful to think about the changes we need to make in how we get and produce our food. We need to be growing food in ways that don’t damage the foundations that agriculture ultimately depends on – like healthy soil and available water; we need to process foods in ways that preserve their natural nutrition; we need to build a system that can support agricultural workers at a reasonable standard. It’s also true that if we do a better job with how we produce food, better eating will result.
- Analysis:* Promotes a broader perspective
 Promotes collective responsibility
 Conveys the idea of sustainability in understandable terms
 Establishes individual choice as dependent on systems reform

7. What is your company doing to make the food system more sustainable?

- Less effective:* We have as strong a commitment to sustainability as any of the major food producers, and have supported test programs in areas from pesticide reduction to water savings to aquaculture.
- Analysis:* Uses jargon that many readers will not understand
 Takes for granted that readers understand “sustainability,” which most don’t – and doesn’t imply a practical need for sustainable practices
- More effective:* We believe that one critical measure of any method we use to produce food is its impact on the foundations of the food supply, from the fresh water supply to healthy soil to ocean ecosystems. We’re making sure that, in all those areas, the foundations we depend on are being protected, rather than destabilized.
- Analysis:* Uses concrete language and images
 Conveys the idea of sustainability in understandable terms, and makes the practical stakes clear

8. The world's food systems are producing more food now and feeding more people than ever before. You can't really argue with success, can you?

Less effective: Our current emphasis on producing as much food as we can, by whatever means, comes at a real cost. It's time to weigh the quantity we're able to produce against the quality of the food we're producing, the quality of the environment, and the quality of life of the people who work to produce our food.

Analysis: Sounds like it is advocating producing/eating *less* – likely to trigger backlash, or to be dismissed as unrealistically anti-modern
Overall, very ineffective at addressing the Quantity argument, which will always trump unless a strong alternative “bottom line” is introduced

More effective: One of the most critical measures of success is how well we're protecting the foundations that our food supply depends on, from ... to ...

Analysis: Uses the Protection value
Doesn't repeat/reinforce the quantity argument, which can derail any move towards more productive thinking
Uses the foundations model to effectively convey an alternative “bottom line” (i.e. sustainability)

9. We've experienced a variety of food scares over the years, and the situations have always been corrected. Isn't it alarmist to talk about a “Runaway Food System”?

Less effective: Actually, many of the situations you refer to have never been effectively dealt with. Tuna still contains dangerous levels of mercury, mad cow disease still represents a real threat to our health and to the beef industry, etc. Promoting a realistic awareness of risks is responsible, not alarmist.

Analysis: Promotes fear as a motivator
Limits the issue to the narrow question of food safety
Likely to evoke individual “adaptationist” response (“How can I eat safely?”)

More effective: We've got a Runaway System in the sense that it's becoming bigger and more powerful all the time, with insufficient safeguards in place. Our methods of producing and distributing food are altering the foundations that the food supply itself depends on, and unless we get them under control, they threaten the environment and economic systems that our children will have to live with.

Analysis: Bridges to a big-picture perspective
Offers a concrete sense of what sustainability means
Uses Legacy and Protection values to drive home what's at stake

10. You've talked about problems with our "food system." For people unfamiliar with the term, what is a "food system"?

Less effective: It's the seeds that get planted, the animals on the farm, the food on your table, and everything in between – including methods of planting and harvesting and storing crops, processing food, shipping and selling it.

Analysis: Infers the system is a natural or uncontested process, not man-made
Misses the opportunity to frame the food system as something that can and should be *managed*
Reinforces the default, little-picture perspective on food by mentioning the table early on

More effective: It's all the processes that go into producing and distributing food – whether they've developed haphazardly or with careful planning – from breeding crop seeds, to fishing, to raising cattle, to processing food, shipping, storing and selling it.

Analysis: Makes it clear that food systems are man-made, can and should be managed

11. It sounds like you're saying that we're producing more food than we need to. We all need to be less greedy and wasteful – to consume less food and fewer resources. Is that the case?

Less effective: A more economical approach would certainly help. We are currently taking more out of our resource base than it can support, and we need to bring things back into balance.

Analysis: Seems to accept the question's premise about an ascetic approach to food – a losing argument
Sounds as though it is advocating turning back the clock on modern progress – another losing position

More effective: Actually we are talking about working with what we've got in order to achieve the greatest possible food production over the long-term. We're talking about avoiding damage to the foundations that food production depends on so that they remain productive now and into the future.

Analysis: Uses a responsible management frame
Avoids calling for "belt-tightening"
Aligns sustainability with maximizing production
Refers implicitly to our legacy to future generations

12. In our free market society, how can we expect to control how food companies operate?

Less effective: We have always regulated agriculture and the food system in order to protect public health and the common good. We need to update this approach in a way that meets the current challenges, including problems like the growth of huge food conglomerates and the decline of small operators.

Analysis: Treats "regulation" as the main tool for change – misses the opportunity to broaden the picture
Accepts the implicit opposition between market and government – most Americans believe the market delivers better outcomes
Mentions problems – growth of conglomerates, decline of small operators – in a way that most readers will not understand

More effective: We're not talking about controlling companies – we need them to be as creative and innovative as ever. But we are talking about setting some reasonable standards to guide that innovation, like not destroying important ocean ecosystems. And about making sure that smaller operators can survive, so that competition and market forces can work better.

Analysis: Rejects the opposition between reform and businesses/markets
Introduces the idea of basic standards – ultimately these are yardsticks by which we can evaluate the food system

6. Are you suggesting that the food supply isn't safe in this country?

Less effective: In some ways, the food supply is safer than it has ever been. In other ways, however, it is a public health disaster. Rates of diabetes, obesity and other food-related illness are reaching epidemic rates. Our food system is also causing environmental degradation that is contributing to health problems throughout the population.

Analysis: Good idea to draw links to health problems (diabetes, obesity) – but most people strongly associate these with *individual* choices
Answer doesn't help them draw connections to the food system
Refers to environmental problems without explaining – most readers are likely to miss the connection

More effective: One problem is that we don't know how safe it is. We are introducing unprecedented levels of chemicals into the food supply chain, for instance, and can't really know what that means. The impacts certainly extend beyond the health of individuals to the natural systems we all depend on.

Analysis: Highlights the idea of a lack of control, management, knowledge and foresight over the system as a whole
Extends the topic beyond individual health

7. How can an individual make a difference on this issue?

- Less effective:* There is a lot of information that can help shoppers choose foods that are healthier for themselves, for the community, for the environment. We believe that if people have more of this information, they will make responsible choices, and will end up eating better food in the bargain!
- Analysis:* Accepts the question's narrow frame by limiting individuals' role to shopping choices
Implies that facts are enough to change minds – rather than offering a new and more helpful frame
- More effective:* The first thing people can do is to become more aware of the issue, the runaway food system and the threats it can pose to critical foundations of our lives. If we're all aware of the problem, we have a better chance of coming up with good solutions as a society that will protect our food system for our children. On a daily level, individuals can also choose foods that are produced in ways that are fair, healthy and ecologically sound.
- Analysis:* Emphasizes the citizen role rather than only the consumer role (uses ordering deliberately)
Introduces simplifying models early in the communication
Connects the reason for change to future generations

8. Wouldn't serious changes in the food business mean serious rises in food prices?

- Less effective:* Some things are worth paying for, and health, the environment and the preservation of the rural way of life are certainly among them.
- Analysis:* Not helpful to focus on higher prices (even in cases where it's true) – instead, it's important to offer people an alternative “bottom line”

More effective: The critical question we're facing now is whether we can afford to keep disrupting ecological systems, the economies of whole regions, and the nutrition of our food. We have to get serious about getting our runaway system under control, and of course cost must be factored in as we work out the best solutions.

Analysis: Offers people a compelling bottom line other than prices at grocery store checkout
Evokes a big-picture perspective that can get people thinking like citizens

9. Most Americans are probably nostalgic for the days of the small family farm, but those days aren't coming back anytime soon are they?

Less effective: The family farm continues to be an important part of both our food system and the fabric of our nation.

Analysis: Asserts the current relevance of small farms without helping people get around the common idea that they are fading away
Reference to "fabric of our nation," in the absence of helpful explanation, may reinforce (nostalgic) associations between small farms and the nation's *past*

More effective: There's nothing old-fashioned about today's modern small farms, from the technology they use to the increasingly sophisticated markets they serve. In fact, demand for locally produced food is rising both because of its quality and because planners are recognizing the practical value of supporting local producers and the networks of businesses that surround them. Our future food system is likely to be increasingly diverse.

Analysis: Reframes the family farm as part of a modern, future-oriented model of the food system
Highlights the practical reasons for supporting small, local farms

10. To be frank, most Americans probably can't see any reason to be concerned about our food supply. Is there a looming crisis we should be worried about?

Less effective: Actually, there's more hunger and less food security in this country than most Americans realize. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, up to 12% of Americans don't consistently have access to enough food for everyone in the household. For millions of people, the crisis is already here.

Analysis: In the absence of helpful framing, this (very important) problem is likely to be dismissed, because it clashes with most people's default understandings, and is therefore hard to see/remember.

Uses a term (food security) that very few people understand

Moral appeals for sympathy on behalf of a deprived subgroup are (unfortunately) limited in their effectiveness and may be limited to charitable donations as a response

Takes up the over-used Crisis Frame in the question. This is likely to be ineffective because (A) people can only believe in/focus on a very limited number of "crises" at a time, and (B) if it has any effect, it is based on evoking anxiety, which is generally the wrong motivation for productive thinking.

More effective: There is an important area of our national life that is not being managed properly, and the consequences are significant. One in eight households currently doesn't consistently have access to enough food, the natural foundations that our food system depends on are being altered, and the nature of our food is changing in ways that we're not keeping close track of. Society needs to get control of our runaway food system that is responsible for these negative effects on our country.

Analysis: Places the issue in a big-picture context

Makes it clear that it concerns everyone, not just a minority

Calls for a collective, responsible approach