Carnivores go Meatless to Save the Environment, Not for Taste

It might seem like improving the taste and texture of plant-based meats such as Impossible burgers would convince carnivores who love beef and other animal-based meats to try plant-based alternatives. It's not. Perhaps surprisingly, focusing on environmental and social benefits works better than talking about taste or even health.

Impossible and Beyond Target Meat-Eaters

While it might seem like meat-eaters would choose plant-based meats if they taste better or are healthier, the reasons carnivores buy meatless meats are actually different.

Pennsylvania State University professor Anna Matilla found in her research in the US, for instance, that consumers who saw ads that appealed to their social conscience were more likely to select plant-based burgers than people who saw health- or taste-based ads. Consumers choose plant-based meat more often when ads highlight social benefits rather than taste, she said, and showcasing the social costs of meat consumption also leads to a preference for plant-based meats. Whereas social appeals worked because they induced positive feelings of doing good, the health appeal was ineffective because the nutritional value of the two burgers is similar and appealing to taste didn't work because American consumers believe beef tastes better than plant-based meat.

University of Pennsylvania associate professor Kelly Allison similarly told SELF magazine that "this shift toward plant-based proteins is coming from wanting to have a more sustainable diet. Especially among the millennial generation, people are becoming increasingly concerned that an animal-based diet really is more stress on the environment."

And whereas research from Canadian non-profit foundation Angus Reid showed that 75 percent of non-vegetarians who tried plant-based meat said they liked or loved the taste, buyers chose the products due to concerns about sustainability.

In Asia, according to research published in the journal Frontiers, plant-based meat buyers in India and China similarly cited sustainability as a reason for preferring the product.

And in Singapore, Channel News Asia said people are growing more aware of the nutritional and environmental impact of their food. This awareness has been reflected in the growing appetite for plant-based meat. Perhaps surprisingly, a survey by YouGov even showed that 40 percent of Singaporeans are becoming flexitarians, who consume plant-based food without eliminating meat and dairy.

Plant-Based Products do Social Good and Improve Health

Science has increasingly shown that shifting to plant-based products does have environmental, health and social benefits.

Emissions from global livestock total 7.1 gigatons of CO_2 per year, according to the UN FAO, representing 14.5 percent of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Cattle for both beef and milk create about 65 percent of the sector's emissions, followed by pork, buffalo and chicken. Reducing meat intake would have a positive impact on the planet, *Fast Company* noted, since producing meat creates about 20 times more emissions than the same caloric amount of beans. Plant-based diets can also reduce food's emissions by up to 73 percent and would require about 76 percent less farmland than meat and dairy consumption, according to research led by University of Oxford researcher Joseph Poore.

While they may be less important to meat-eaters, the health benefits are clear as well. In 2015, for instance, the World Health Organisation said that red and processed meat are carcinogens that increase the risk of cancer. Even more concerning, Evelyne Richi, in research on behalf of the Federal Commission for Nutrition in Switzerland, said that evidence from large US and European studies as well as meta-analyses indicates that the long-term consumption of red and processed meat is associated with increased risks of mortality, cardiovascular disease, colorectal cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Meat-Eaters are Key Buyers of Plant-Based Products
While the percentage of the meat market taken by plant-based meats is still small, it is growing. Even though plant-based meat made up just 1 percent of the $1.4 trillion global meat industry in 2019, Barclays projects that the category could capture 10 percent of the market by 2029. Asia is a key focus for plant-based meat producers, since it accounts for 44 percent of global meat consumption.

Although one might expect that producers would focus on selling to vegans and vegetarians, that's not the case. "We are looking to replace traditional meat consumed by hardcore carnivores - consumers are buying into the way we make our meat and the challenges of feeding a population of 10 billion by 2050," Impossible Foods manager Henry Woodward-Fisher told Campaign magazine. Beyond Meat CMO Stuart Kronauge similarly said that his firm aspires to create a global shift in how people define and consume meat.

That strategy seems to be working. "Purchase data from one of (America's) largest conventional retailers showed that more than 90 percent of consumers who purchased the Beyond Burger also purchased animal protein," Beyond Burger vice president Will Schafer told SELF. A study by market research company Kantar Insights similarly showed that 92 percent of all plant-based meals were eaten by people who are not vegan. And research by Nielsen showed that 21 percent of American households are buying meat alternatives and 98 percent of those consumers also purchase animal-based meat.

Focus on the Planet and the Community
Research does show that plant-based alternatives to meat have environmental, health and even social benefits. Environmentalists and producers who want to convince meat-eaters to help save the planet would do well to focus on how eating plant-based meat does environmental and social good rather than talking about taste.