

Consider a few traits of today's food system:

- We allow sugar content to remain high, creating record levels of obesity and crippling our health service.
- We support low wages in agriculture, food manufacturing and hospitality, and disastrous environmental impacts, all for the sake of keeping down price.
- We focus our best innovation brains narrowly on convenience, because as long as our food arrives when and where we want to consume it, we don't really care how it got there.

Why? Because that's what "the consumer" wants.

In that phrase is a logic that seems inescapable. It lays claim to a fundamental truth about human motivation: we are consumers, driven by rational self-interest. And this apparent truth immediately limits the role people are capable of playing in society. It turns today's broken food system into an inevitability.

But challenge that one supposed truth and suddenly the possibilities for our food system look very different.

What if people are not consumers? What if it's just a mindset, a story we tell ourselves and each other? What if we choose a different story to tell? What if food brands sought our involvement, not just our spend? What if we thought of ourselves and each other as active participants in shaping the food system, and not just consumers?

This shift in mindset can help create a better food system. It is a future waiting to happen. And it starts with a single word: citizens.

perspective

Food Citizenship



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The Consumer Century

The rise of the consumer was the story of the 20th century. We began the 1900s as subjects: we broadly got what we were given. We were born into a station in life and the right thing for us to do was to do our duty

and make the best of it. The key icons of the era were religion and nation – God, King and Country.

But after World War II, a new idea took hold, spreading rapidly from its birthplace in America to take hold of all western democracies and defeat its rival, communism. The age of the consumer was upon us, and the idea of ourselves as consumers came to dominate all thinking about our role as individuals in society.

This was in many ways hugely liberating: as consumers, we gained freedom of choice and we gained rights. Consumerism came to represent a golden dream: that through consumption we could have not only everything we wanted, but could solve the world's problems too.

From hospitals to schools to the high street, our power as consumers free to choose raised standards and accountability. This progress sat at the heart of a remarkable period of peace and political consensus. But that period is now ending and progress is grinding to a halt.

Inevitably, the positives of the consumer identity also have a dark, shadowy side. Independence breeds a narrow focus on limited self-interest. Freedom of choice creates a sense of entitlement. Accountability delivers an obsession with objective measurement and data to the exclusion of the intangibles that matter most to our wellbeing.

As the idea of the consumer has become all encompassing, informing almost every interaction in our society, so the shadows have

lengthened and become darker. If people are best understood as consumers, then the right course of action for an individual or organisation is to choose whichever option best satisfies immediate self-interest. Simply using the word "consumer" can alter people's likelihood of acting for the common good (see The Well Scenario, below right).

This consumer mindset is deeply embedded in the food system. As a result, the system is not creating value – environmental, social or financial – in the way that we need it to in order to sustain us. And in the face of "what the consumer wants", we have very few ideas for what to do about it.

Changing Our Mindset

But no human being is by nature a consumer; limited in motivation to self-interest and in role to choosing between options – and there's a growing body of scientific evidence to back this up. It is our deeper nature to be something more. We are at our happiest when acting for a purpose that takes us beyond ourselves, and at our fullest when we are shaping what the options are, not just choosing between them.

We call this alternative idea the citizen mindset. It is emerging at a crucial moment, as the shadows of consumer thinking seem about to engulf us. The citizen is an idea that brings with it the freedom not just to choose between the options offered to us; but also to play an active, creative role in shaping what those options are. No longer do we tell ourselves that we are capable only of judging what is best for ourselves, as individuals, right now. Instead we must all step up and have a say about what is best for society as

a whole. Where we stand now is the moment where we can choose either to seize this promise, or let it slip.

This isn't about anti-capitalism, or populism, or any other –ism you care to mention. It is about harnessing a different aspect of our shared humanity with the potential to create benefits for us all. It means re-shaping our institutions, businesses and society to encourage broader participation and responsibility. It means communicating differently. Organisations that have seen the potential of this shift are already reaping the rewards, be it fast-growing beer company, Brewdog, which has been financed by thousands of individual shareholders called Equity Punks; or Oklahoma City mayor, Mick Cornett, who persuaded his city to go on a diet and collectively lose a million pounds in weight (check out his TED talk, the Million Pound Mayor).

There is an opportunity for us all to adopt this citizen mindset to help re-shape the food system. Are you prepared to step up and be a food citizen?

Working in collaboration with COOK and five other organisations, the New Citizenship Project has published a report called *Food Citizenship: How thinking of ourselves differently can change the future of our food system*. Find it at www.newcitizenship.org.uk

The Well Scenario

This was one of a series of experiments first published by a group of academics led by Northwestern University's Galen Bodenhausen in 2012. We worked with research agency House51 to replicate the study at scale in 2015.

Participants were asked to imagine themselves as one of four individuals dependent for water on a single well that is starting to run dry. As a group they need to use less water.

Two key questions were posed:

To what extent would you be prepared to use less water yourself?

To what extent would you trust the other three to use less water?

The subtlety is this: for half the participants, the scenario was framed in terms of individuals ("you are one of four individuals..."); for the other half, using the language of consumers ("you are one of four consumers...").

With no other prompt, no explicit attention drawn to this language, and no significant differences between participants, the results were astounding. Those who answered as consumers were significantly less likely to be willing to reduce their own water usage; and significantly less likely to trust their fellow dependents to do so.

