Conference participants represented many facets of the food chain and had much to contribute to the ideas of risk communication in food safety. The following is a summary of their comments.

If risk communicators are to motivate and build trust, they will need to acknowledge that different hazards require different communication strategies and that as technologies evolve, greater openness and transparency in the process of assessment will be required. Value and cultural differences increase the difficulties of risk communicators in building trust in our evolving world economy. Sensitivity must be shown when dealing with various groups, especially when crossing international borders, and those involved in risk communication must understand and anticipate questions that may be raised to determine appropriate communication channels and messages that will help alleviate consumer fears.

While various issues are currently being discussed as risky, biotechnology heads the list. This is a very young science that has been the target for a good deal of positive and negative misinformation. Concerns voiced in Europe have also had a major impact on perceptions in the United States, which has led to concerns with the regulatory system and agrifood industries’ willingness to be transparent with consumers. The popular mass media has played a role in inciting consumer fears, and it is imperative that reporters, regulators, industry representatives and consumer activists begin speaking to each other instead of trying to out-shout each other.

The irradiation of food has been under fire for more than three decades. A comparison of irradiation and biotechnology debates highlights the fact that news consumers do pay attention to negative informa-
tion. Again, the co-optation of other groups will help normalize the discussion of this technology. This is not to say that all will readily accept the technology if a consumer group can be found that approves of the technology. Instead, it can move the debate from a contest of finger pointing to an exchange of information.

Other current controversies include pesticides, organic vs. traditional agriculture and bovine tuberculosis. Each issue has unique characteristics that must be communicated, but some common risk communication guidelines might include navigating through and steering clear of exaggerations, seeking to include opposing viewpoints, communicating past mistakes and current and future procedures, and listening to consumers. To reiterate, these steps will not dissolve all dissension—the point is to elevate the discussion.

A partial solution to some of the consumer concerns over some of the scientific technologies discussed is labeling. Again, there is little consensus on the value of labels, as industry argues that labels unnecessarily raise consumer fears, and activists claim the labels do not explain enough. Still, it was thought that progress toward user-friendly labels could provide the information that consumers are seeking. The public needs to understand its choices and be heard in the marketplace. In addition, consumers need to become savvy in terms of their food choices.

Any system that is used to transport food from the farm to the table will have drawbacks. One tool that is currently used to check this system is recalls. When a recall is activated, risk communication must be prompt, specific and focused. The topic is not speculative—the risk is known. However, not all agencies involved in recalls have the same agendas. Regulatory agencies have a different approach to recalls when compared to industry, which is yet again different from public health agencies. This
lack of coordination can call into question among consumers the validity of the recall as well as the credibility of the organizations involved. Some steps that could be taken to help alleviate the anxiety created by this situation are to have an integrated investigation system that includes all involved organizations and a plan in place for quick, thorough information dissemination with considerations for consumer inquiries.

Finally, we have only begun to understand foodborne pathogens and other risks associated with food. Emerging diseases and technologies will continue to challenge our abilities to communicate across ideologies, cultures, religious preferences and ethical beliefs. Rather than treat these new risks as the issue of the week, a systems approach should be taken. Such a system must include those parties mentioned in this discussion of risk communication. Only through the inclusion of all these actors will real progress be accomplished.

There is a teachable moment. There might likewise be a communication moment.