

Subject: An open letter the Chick-Fil-A regarding antibiotic free chicken

By: Steve Martin

Hello. I wanted to take a minute to reach out on the antibiotics in chicken position taken recently by your company seen at [www.chick-fil-a.com/Antibiotic-Free](http://www.chick-fil-a.com/Antibiotic-Free). First I want to let you know how much my family enjoys your restaurant. Growing up in Alabama, I have been a customer for a long time. I remember the first location for me was in Eastwood Mall in Montgomery back in the late 70's.

I now live in Colorado, have a family of 7 and would certainly be on the same page with your company on values and world view. I work in the dairy industry where I am a nutrition and management consultant for dairy farms. Our firm ([www.DNMCmilk.com](http://www.DNMCmilk.com)) consults for dairy producers who own farms in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Washington and California. All but one of our clients are family run operations. The one that is not is the teaching herd at Washington State University. Most of these farms are quite large ranging from 200 cows to more than 7,000. These businesses are important to their local community and economy and most of these dairy people have the same values that my family shares with your company and founder.

Our industry has struggled in the arena of public perception against extreme animal rights groups for a number of years now. This threat, though real, has not been accepted by main stream Americans that enjoy meat, milk and eggs. Many of the approaches of these groups have been extreme and in poor taste to most consumers. The recent threats though, have been harder to sort out. I think it started in the Super Bowl commercial in 2012 when Willie Nelson sang Coldplay's "The Scientist" with a very well done and endearing animated farmer story on the screen. This was a very smart approach by Chipotle that changed the narrative going forward. Who could be against Willie Nelson whose Farm Aid personality endeared him to rural and farm people worldwide? The song and cartoon were very different from the extreme animal rights groups that have concerned animal agriculture now for at least 10 years. Willie and the very well done cartoon were very different from an extreme group burning down an animal research lab or vandalizing a farm. More recently, many farmers have been very insulted by the scare crow series at Chipotle and the cartoon chickens at Panera that featured a gel-cap pill as a body and lived in a barn made of pills for bricks. Panera implied, and then retracted it that farmers that used antibiotics on their farms were "lazy"! These producers pay thousands of dollars each year to consulting veterinarians in the effort to keep their animals healthy. At risk animals are monitored closely in some cases with daily body temperature checks, dietary intervention and even aspirin to make them feel better. These farmers are certainly not lazy.

I had the opportunity to have a personal conversation with the director of marketing at Chipotle. He commented to me that he and his staff never dreamed of the farmers they would offend with the scare crow and factory farm cartoon series. Though he seemed to understand the position of the offended farmers, I see that they have extended this effort with a mini-series available on Hulu internet streaming TV. It seems that the pleas of those in animal agriculture for Chipotle to be more truthful in their satire have gone unheard.

Panera has joined Chipotle attempting to differentiate their chicken from their competitors. The comfort I have felt with Chick Fil A is stressed now that I hear of your company's plans to follow down the same path. I know that there seems a lack of connection between the use of antibiotics in animal production and what you might call militant anti-animal agriculture activity. But, there is a connection. I think the end game for much of this effort may be a non-meat agenda; or at least a "less-meat" agenda.

I think efforts like “no-meat-Mondays” in public schools are endearing to the same people that are overly concerned about how animals are treated, use of GMO crops, organic options and the like. These things are all pointing in the same direction and the probable results of this will be a generational change in thoughts on food.

I will take the opportunity to say that our industry had and still has some improvements to make in some of these areas and I promise you there is a full court press inside our industry to make the needed improvements. No doubt, there are individuals in the industry that need to change some things about how they handle, treat and house their animals. But, this change is happening, and fast. In many cases, the producers with these problems are being weeded out economically. You see, happy animals are profitable animals and producers with antiquated facilities and animal care approaches are not sustainable. There is a limit though to where the animal care efforts need to go. After all, we can't have them living in our homes with us. I feel God created animals to serve us and we need to respect them by giving them a good life as an animal, but not as a human. Those of us in animal agriculture like and enjoy animals, and we respect them as well. We often say, “at the end of the day, the cow is our boss”.

On a similar note, I must say that there are some things I like better about our small cattle and crop farm where I grew up in central Alabama than one of my client's 3,000 cow commercial dairy farms. But, there is a reason that the majority of our food is now produced at facilities that look more like the big dairy than our small farm. This reason is based on the fact that we have a hungry world to feed. Though my politics would usually make me not a big fan of the United Nations, the UN Food and Ag Organization seems to have it right on world population growth and resulting food production needs. We have a growing and increasingly hungry world that American agriculture has a moral obligation to feed. If all of the farms are like the one I grew up on, we will fail in this effort. We have to use technology to improve the efficiency with which we grow and raise food with increasingly limited resources.

Chief among these limited resources is water. The limitations of water for agriculture in the US should give us all pause as it relates to an economic food supply. We have to use water efficiently in agronomy and animal agriculture to continue producing food with less available water. This will be a chief issue in our country for years to come. Pulling proven technology off the table for agriculture will not help us win this battle.

Not only do we have a world food issue, I read recently that one in six Americans have what are called “hunger issues”. Most of these people living in our country are not starving or even close to that, but they do have questions about their next meal. This is in our own country; people we pass every day. My point is that these people are interested in having chicken that is good, safe and approved by the USDA/FDA and state inspectors. They are not necessarily focused on buying chicken from Chipotle, Panera Bread and now Chick Fil A that has been marketed to be “better” because it was raised on an antibiotic free farm.

We are creating two types of food consumers. There are those that can afford a \$7 antibiotic free Napa Valley Chicken Salad sandwich at Panera or a \$7 burrito from Chipotle and those that are relegated to eat “regular” chicken from another store. Is the consumer to believe that if they can't afford Panera or Chipotle, that they are relegated to consume chicken that is ridden with antibiotics? I think of the low income mom who saved money to treat her kids to a meal of McDonald Chicken Nuggets and some fun time in the play place that has to think that she just fed her kids chicken that is full of antibiotics. This is not true. Our country has the safest (and probably least expensive) food supply in the world. Though

our government has its issues, food safety is not one of them! The chicken at McDonalds is just as safe as the chicken at Panera. It is disingenuous to suggest anything other than that.

You might say that it would be better to not use antibiotics on farms. But, is that doing right to the animals? What would be suggested that we do with animals that get sick? Shall we not treat them? Shall we euthanize them even though we have tools to make them better? And, if we do use an antibiotic to help them get well, do we have to send that chicken into another market stream destined for consumers that can't afford the \$7 chicken salad sandwich? We are working on technologies such as probiotics to reduce the need for antibiotics but we are not there yet. And, with the non-GMO feelings of late, it will be harder to develop these technologies.

I recently toured a facility that makes some of the antibiotics we use in animal agriculture. What I saw there looked more like a beer brewery than some factory where they are producing chemicals to be pumped into animals by lazy farmers. No matter if it is a probiotic or an antibiotic to keep animals healthy, they are almost always the result of a natural microbiological process that exists already somewhere in nature. Do we want to use less antibiotics on farms? Of course we do. But can we fix the "one out of six" hunger issue problem in the US or the increased food needs predicted in the next 50 years by the UN without using some antibiotics on farms? I think the answer is no. We would all like to use less antibiotics in both human and animal applications. The overuse of antibiotics should be avoided. The emphasis on the animal side of this is probably unfair. Increases in antibiotic resistant bacteria cannot simply be blamed on animal use. It just depends on which expert you ask. Both sides should work to use less. I am sure that the number of kids with a runny nose and sore throat leaving the doctor's office headed to Walgreen for a Z-Pak is not helping the situation either. However, I don't see Chipotle doing a 3 part mini-series satire to malign the medical community and suggest that they are lazy. There is an agenda. Don't be mistaken.

I am sorry for the length of this message but felt strongly that we were losing one of the good guys to the dark side with your announcement. I encourage you to rethink your position. I know it is trendy now to be super aware of the impact of things like GMO crops and antibiotic use on farms. I even heard of a company selling antibiotic free bottled water in California. Is that where this is headed? Our society is so concerned over these issues in their food but think nothing of holding a cell phone next to their head for hours each day, texting while driving and participating in extreme sports. The things society worries about seem to be more related to trending issues in social media than real science. I encourage you to market your chicken without implying that the chicken at McDonalds or even the so-so looking fried chicken in the case at the convenience store is less safe than yours. Your marketing has been second to none for quite some time now. You do not have to delve into implied mistruths about food safety and issues of animal husbandry to continue building your brand. I prefer the commercials with the cow in the elevator.