

General Sessions

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Help consumers *hear* what you say

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A comment from the University of Minnesota-Duluth student handbook states: “Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. If you are not hearing-impaired, hearing simply happens. Listening, however, is something you consciously choose to do. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes meaning from words and sentences. Listening leads to learning.”

And learning leads to understanding. This process is the skeletal backbone of successful communications. We speak. People hear. If they choose to, they listen, learn, and understand. In the popular vernacular, they *hear* what we are *saying*.

People in agriculture are passionate about their profession. So passionate that often discussion defending industry-standard practices leads with science and a lifetime of experiences. That communications path is not wrong—but unfortunately, it’s disconnected. Consumers are often woefully ill-informed and, by no fault of their own, cannot empathize with what those on the farm or in the veterinary profession go through every day. They don’t feel the passion, so they just hear. They don’t really listen.

A study commissioned by the United States Farmers and Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) in 2011 validated that what we in agriculture say is not necessarily what consumers understand. Through a series of focus groups, USFRA showed a video of a person making a statement about a specific aspect of agriculture. As the audience watched the video they were given a device with a dial that, when turned 1 way or another, reflected the user’s either positive or negative perception of what was being said. When statements were made regarding food raised on family farms, or the lengths farmers go through to ensure food is safe before it leaves the farm, consumers in the focus groups had ambivalent or even negative perceptions of what was being said. More positive responses resulted from statements that depicted transparency, empathy, and a willingness to help consumers gain a better understanding of how food is produced.

The research also uncovered disconnects in the way common phrases used to defend agriculture are perceived by consumers.

Even if communication is backed by science and research, people may still not understand. Here are a few skills to help people go from just hearing what we are saying to really understanding our words:

Use simple language. While veterinarians may be able to fully recite the hormonal cycle of a female bovine, it’s safe to assume that consumers can’t. When describing technical situations, try to use simple language.

Be an active listener. Remember that communication is a 2-way street. Listen intently. Ask questions for clarification. Don’t be distracted. Listen the way you want the person you are communicating with to listen to you.

Limit emotions. It’s tough not to get emotional when defending an industry or practice you feel passionate about. Limiting your responses and sticking to the facts will help.

Know when to stop. Often when in a conversation we want to say everything we know, especially when we are trying to convince someone or nerves are unsettled. But it is best to be concise and stick to the topic. When more is said than needs to be said, opportunities for further questions and topic exploration can lead to an unfamiliar and uncomfortable communications path.

Be open-minded. Don’t go into any conversation with preconceived notions about your communications partner. Ask questions in advance to get a better understanding of who they are and their understanding of agriculture or the food system.

While communicating, using the best techniques is important. It is also critical to understand what consumers really want from their food. In 2012, Charleston | Orwig partnered with Datassential to poll more than 2,600 consumers about their food purchasing habits. When consumers were asked to rank their top 3 key purchase criteria, 60% listed price, 55% listed flavor, and 44% listed safety. Essentially consumers want flavorful, safe food priced to fit their budget.

With this understanding in mind, veterinarians cannot directly impact food price or flavor. However, veterinarians can impact the perceptions around safety by helping consumers understand the role of the veterinarian in supporting the health and safety of animals.

SAY VS. HEAR

Farmer says...	Consumer hears...
Our methods are proven and safe.	Your methods tamper with nature.
We keep food affordable...	...but at what expense to quality?
Most farms are family run...	...but beholden to big processors.
We care about our lands and animals.	You will take shortcuts to be profitable.
We need to produce more to feed the world.	You will want to produce more to sell to the world.
We have a secure food supply.	You want subsidies.
We have the safest food supply in the world.	Pesticides, antibiotics, and hormones may not be safe in the long run.

60% OF CONSUMERS AND 58% OF OPERATORS RANKED PRICE IN THE TOP THREE KEY PURCHASE CRITERIA



55% OF CONSUMERS AND 56% OF OPERATORS RANKED FLAVOR IN THE TOP THREE



44% OF CONSUMERS AND 58% OF OPERATORS RANKED FOOD SAFETY IN THE TOP THREE



Source: Datassential – Proprietary Consumer & Operator Survey for Charleston | Orwig

In this regard, veterinarians can plan a key role in the communications process because, in general, consumers trust veterinarians, mostly because they are familiar with the care their local veterinarian gives their family pet. Because of this trust, consumers will *listen* to what

veterinarians have to say. By practicing the use of the right communications tools, veterinarians can help consumers have a more positive perception of agricultural practices that will lead to a more favorable climate for all food industry stakeholders.