

Successful public engagement: Be a positive voice for the dairy industry

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Abstract

As the average consumer becomes farther removed from the farm and is continuously bombarded with misinformation, there's never been a more critical time to better communicate the message of sustainability in agriculture. Your profession has a specific challenge in connecting with a general public that too often values opinion over science. Agriculture is under attack from the increasing number of activists, non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and environmental groups. Incorrect stories about agriculture continue to circulate daily throughout the media, going mostly unchallenged. This has become dangerous over time, as the misinformation has disguised itself as the truth. It's time for *everyone* involved in agriculture to better lead the discussion to help protect the use of science, technology, and innovation in how we grow and raise food.

Key words: sustainability, dairy, advocacy

Résumé

Comme le consommateur moyen est de plus en plus éloigné de la ferme et est bombardé continuellement avec de la fausse information, il n'y a pas de meilleur moment pour communiquer le message de durabilité en agriculture. La profession vétérinaire fait face au défi particulier de rejoindre un grand public qui trop souvent privilégie l'opinion plutôt que la science. L'agriculture est en butte à des attaques d'un nombre grandissant d'activistes, d'organisations caritatives et non gouvernementales et de groupes environnementaux. De fausses histoires concernant l'agriculture continuent de circuler à tous les jours dans les médias et la plupart ne sont pas contestées. Ces fausses histoires au fil du temps deviennent dangereuses car la fausse information se confond avec la vérité. C'est le temps pour tout le monde en agriculture de mener la discussion afin de protéger l'utilisation de la science, de la technologie et de l'innovation dans la culture des aliments et l'élevage.

Introduction

It is our job, each and every day, to speak up and insert our voices into the discussions happening around us concerning farming and farming practices. One effective

technique to help better share the true story of agriculture is communicating with E.A.S.E (Engage ~ Acknowledge ~ Share ~ Earn Trust). We have to stop leading the discussion with science, but rather focus on improved engagement and better listening to identify shared values. One of the most important things we need to do is not only explain the *what*, but the *why*. The words we choose are also crucial to shaping perception. James Humes once said, "The art of communication is the language of leadership." Just as there is a certain "art" to caring for cattle, there is also an "art" to effective communication. It is our role and responsibility to shape the story of agriculture and drive the narrative. The goal is to connect with people and become a trusted resource with consumers in a very cluttered space of self-proclaimed experts, who use fear and misinformation to prey on everyday consumers. Our competition is tough.

Our Story

The real truth about agriculture lies in the powerful story of continual improvements. The message that matters is how farmers are always improving how they care for their animals, improving how they care for their land, and how they are always improving to conserve resources. The dairy industry produces more milk using fewer resources than ever before. The total carbon footprint of every glass of milk has been reduced by 63% since 1944¹. We have done this with improvements in genetics, improvements in animal care, and improvements in cropping practices². Animal welfare is farm-size neutral³ and has continued to improve over time with ongoing research in nutrition, housing, cow comfort, improved diagnostics and treatments, and continual improvements in overall management. Farmers and veterinarians work tirelessly together to prevent disease and to avoid overuse of shared class antibiotics. The perception of animal welfare is 1 of the most important issues to address, and the voice of the bovine practitioner is key. The United States farmers are the leaders in growing food worldwide, and protecting the 1% who contribute significantly to providing our food, fiber, fuel and pharmaceuticals has never been more important.

Resource Websites to Support Advocacy

The following list is everchanging, but provides a great platform of information to help support advocacy efforts: usfarmersandranchers.org, milktruth.com, gmoanswers.com,

geneticliteracyproject.org, kfoltablogspot.com, bestfoodfacts.org, betterseed.org, biofortified.org, enoughmovement.com, bovidiva.com, foodinsight.org, KNOW GMO project on youtube.com (Rob Saik).

Conclusions

With farmers involved in a daily battle to retain a social license, it is necessary for the true experts in agriculture to speak up and lead the discussion. We need to be diligent in our efforts to improve public perception of agriculture to positively affect policy at the state and local levels, and protect the overall use of science, technology and innovation in how we grow and raise food. Aside from effectively communicating using *E.A.S.E* in everyday conversations, we can also reach people through media outlets, programs at schools, community events, on-farm events, through serving on local town and county boards and by participating in legislative

events. The true voice of agriculture is needed everywhere. Advocacy for agriculture needs to be intentional...the future of your clients depends on you.

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