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, 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.

Keywords: sustainability, dairy, advocacy

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 1944\(^1\). We have done this with improvements in genetics, improvements in animal care, and improvements in cropping practices\(^2\). Animal welfare is farm-size neutral\(^3\) 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 one 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 one percent 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
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References

