

Attitudes Toward Ag

The public's perception of agriculture is shaped by the media and industry groups. What's your farm's role in the process?

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What role do you play in helping shape the public's views about agriculture? Small-scale farmers and large-scale corporate agriculture firms may not see eye-to-eye on many issues, but there's one point that they need to unite on—shaping the public's view of agriculture.

With every generation, more of the population is farther removed from the farm.

Not only does that mean that people don't understand where their food comes from, it also means they don't understand how it's produced.

Around the world, "animal-rights" groups are taking advantage of this knowledge gap and capitalizing on the general lack of understanding. When they see pigs standing in a muddy lot (created from four straight days of rain) or pass by a farm with cattle that doesn't smell as pretty as roses (on a humid August day), they can turn that normal farm scene into ammunition for their cause.

Agriculture—big or small—doesn't need to be a victim of this war, but it's time for farmers to start taking action of their own.

The Need for Discussion

"The Changing Face of Animal Agriculture" was the theme for the National Institute for Animal Agriculture meeting in Louisville, Ky., March 31 through April 1, 2009, and various aspects of this topic were discussed throughout the sessions.

In one session about food and nutrition policies made in Washington, D.C., food policy consultant Lisa Katic, R.D., named a list of people who are influencing nutrition—and, therefore, agriculture—perceptions.

Among them are Neil Barnard, M.D., a renowned nutritionist and vegan-lifestyle promoter; Kelly Brownell, Ph.D., director of Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and anti-"big-food" author; and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Ph.D., an author who opposes agribusiness and meat eating.

Also on Katic's list of people who are making an impact on policies that affect the industry are three familiar faces to the small-farm movement: author and "real food" proponent Michael Pollan, restaurant owner and sustainable-agriculture supporter Alice Waters, and Food Democracy Now! co-founder David Murphy.

As visible figures for their cause, the people listed are generally regarded by the public as credible. They've created platforms that Americans (not involved in agriculture) can relate to, and they've gained their trust.

Animal agriculture, in turn, is largely left in a reactive—rather than proactive—position to defend itself against allegations of poor food safety and animal treatment.

Dan Sutherland of Johnsonville Foods stressed the public's cry for more transparency in the industry. It's not enough anymore to have high animal-care and facility-maintenance standards on your own farm. It's time to prove your commitment to these standards to the public.

"The social issues of today are the issues we have to face for tomorrow," Sutherland said. One prime example is the video from Hallmark Meat Packing in Chino, Calif., that was released by the Humane Society of the United States in early 2008. The footage of downer cows being sprayed in the face with hoses and pushed around with forklifts made international news headlines and understandably turned Americans' view of agriculture sour, despite the processor's and industry's statements condoning the events.

“What are we going to do as an industry to prevent this?” Sutherland asked. “This is not a competitive issue. We need to band together. Everyone in [the industry] can be a target [of regulators, activists and boycotting consumers]. When are we going to start looking at it as producing food instead of producing pigs?”

The Need for Action: Make Yourself Visible

The common theme throughout the sessions was the need for better communication. It's not often you meet a farmer who doesn't hold his animals' welfare as the highest priority, after all. With high values already in place, it's just a matter of letting the public know about your commitment.

Chris Sigurdson, assistant vice president of external relations at Purdue University, points out, “We are a nation of meat eaters. ... You enjoy a great deal of goodwill toward your product and your industry. Hang on to that goodwill. Start talking to that next generation of consumers.”

The next generation is all over the Internet. Having your own website is no longer enough.

It's time to interact with the public through sites such as Facebook and Twitter. (Follow the HF editors on Twitter—KarenKAcevedo, Karri_Sandino, sjstaton, LisaMunniksma and KrissaSmith—and become a friend of Hobby Farms, Hobby Farm Home, HobbyFarms.com and editor in chief Karen Acevedo on Facebook.)

Also make yourself more visible in your community.

“Your job is to bridge the disconnect,” Sigurdson says. “They don't really want to know how food is raised. They want to know you have their best interest at heart.”

Liz Doornink, co-leader of American Farmers for the Advancement and Conservation of Technology, said producers should create a value statement to share with their customers and the public: “This is the most important way we can connect with our customers ... they need to find out that you do care and have values.”

Farmers can do their part to improve the public's view of agriculture by starting in their own communities, on their own farms.

By being good rural neighbors, and as these grassroots building blocks are put in place, the industry can better work together to present the truth and improve attitudes about agriculture. The longer it takes for the ag industry to pick up the pace in creating its public image, the farther behind it will be in the battle for the public's favor.