

Ag Advocacy Advice

Two women share their tips for reaching out to consumers to develop trust in agriculture.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

“The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.” That quote attributed to Chinese philosopher Confucius is one Sarah Tveidt encourages producers to keep in mind as they consider opportunities to advocate for agriculture.

From her experience with ag outreach to consumers, Tveidt adds, “We can accomplish big things with little actions.”

Currently, Tveidt is the communications director for South Dakota Soybean, a commodity organization bringing together both the South Dakota Soybean Association and the South Dakota Soybean Research and Promotion Council, which oversees checkoff dollars. In her role, Tveidt also manages Hungry for Truth, a checkoff-funded initiative striving to share information and create conversations with South Dakota consumers about food and the farmers who grow it. Hungry for Truth includes online, print and video outreach.

Tveidt explains the Hungry for Truth effort was established because even in rural, agricultural states like South Dakota, many consumers have concerns and misunderstandings about food production. She shares that a 2014 survey in South Dakota



revealed 45.1% of the public had concerns over farmers' use of pesticides and chemicals, 22.2% indicated concern over the use of antibiotics and hormones, and 17.7% indicated concern about genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

“These are big things,” Tveidt says.

“With less than 2% of our population directly employed by agriculture, the ag community needs to work on building trust in agriculture and our food systems, or we may lose our ability to operate in the future.”

How to reach consumers?

So, what are successful strategies when it comes to “advocating for agriculture” to consumer audiences?

Tveidt suggests approaching outreach to consumers as a conversation. She explains, “If we have the goal to ‘educate’ someone, we’ll lose. No one wants to be told they are wrong about something.”

Instead, she says, “Stop and ask questions.” For instance, ask why they choose not to eat meat or why they are opposed to GMOs.

Tveidt adds, “When you listen to their answer, you will gain a better understanding for their reason. That can

help with your next steps for the conversation.”

As someone who grew up in the beef industry and is now a student at Texas A&M University, McKinzie Smith has embraced the role as an ag advocate. Smith has worked with the American National CattleWomen

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as a collegiate beef advocate and has offered training to FFA members on how to be an advocate.

She agrees with the approach of asking questions as the best starting point when meeting someone who may have a negative view of agriculture.

Says Smith, “It’s important to listen to the person’s reasons for why they think or feel a certain way.”

Smith says through questions and listening you will gain a better understanding for the consumer.

“Some consumer’s concerns stem from being health conscious, while others are more concerned about the environment,” she explains. “You must realize you aren’t going to talk to all consumers the same to have a successful conversation. You will share different points based on their area of concerns.”

As you have a conversation with someone, Smith suggests, listen more than you talk. Body language is also important. Smith encourages making eye contact and standing with your arms at your sides instead of crossed. She says this shows you are willing to listen.

Additional strategies

As the conversation unfolds, Smith stresses finding ways to agree.

“Both sides can usually agree that animals are important and deserve the best care,” she says, as an example. “We may see different lanes to achieve that, but as a basic premise, we can agree that we care.”

Tveidt adds that pets or kids can be another common connection point. She suggests using statements like, “We care for our livestock like you care for a pet,” or “We want healthy food for our children just like you do for yours.” As well, she suggests underscoring that farmers and ranchers are always striving to improve.

In her work with the Hungry for Truth campaign, Tveidt shares online recipes as another connection point to begin conversations with consumers.

“Food is the common denominator bringing the two audiences of agriculture and urban together,” she explains. “Consumers are not always searching for the information we may be trying to share with them. However, if we start by sharing a recipe — and then provide them some information about the food in that recipe and the farmers who grew it — we have built an initial connection.”

Above all, Smith says, “Be courteous. It is hard not to get

upset or angry, but you need to be respectful of differences.

Consumers remember that — and you are the face of your industry or organization.”


Tveidt adds, “Food is personal. Recognize that it is OK for consumers to have questions about something (farming or ranching) they don’t do every day ... We should be glad when consumers do ask questions because it gives us a chance to share our agricultural story.”

As a final point, Tveidt emphasizes the importance of being honest and transparent. She advises using words like GMO, instead of biotechnology, and pesticide, instead of crop protection products.

“Call it what it is,” she says, and cautions, “don’t pretend to be an expert.”

It is important to support farmer choice and consumer choice, Tveidt says. “Support choices. There’s room for all different types of food production, which gives consumers the choices they want to make at the grocery store.”

Lastly, Smith likes to remind those in agriculture to seize the opportunity to start conversations with consumers. She cites a quote from the movie *We Bought a Zoo* as her inspiration: “All you need is 20 seconds of insane courage, and I promise you something great will come of it.”

To learn more about the Hungry for Truth Initiative, visit <https://hungryfortruthsd.com/>. 

How would you respond?

Ag advocates suggest one of the best ways to prepare for a conversation with a consumer about agriculture is to be informed yourself. To polish your beef industry knowledge, consider completing the online Master of Beef Advocacy course at: www.beef.org/mastersofbeefadvocacy.aspx.

Another helpful resource to gain insight on specific ag topics — from GMOs to hormones to sustainability — is a series of video clips with real farmers sharing comments through the Common Ground initiative. Access them at www.youtube.com/user/findourcommonground.