

Nearly half a billion dollars is spent each year to influence public attitudes about agriculture, reports Jay Byrne, and the message isn't coming from farmers and ranchers. It's a fact producers don't like to hear, but it's only the beginning of the shock wave.

"Producers feel they should be the voice of agriculture, and yet there are hundreds of millions of dollars a year being spent by special interest activist groups, essentially usurping the agricultural community's role as the spokesperson for what constitutes responsible food production," says the president of v-Fluence Interactive Public Relations Inc., a public affairs and issues management firm.

Advocacy groups spend millions, but it's more than the amount of cash spent — it's the specialized marketing campaigns they use to alter public opinion with their views. The networks these groups create using scare and marketing tactics catch many agriculturalists off guard.

"When producers see the extent, depth and influence that black marketing is having on consumer attitudes, and when they see that black marketing is contributing to and working hand-in-hand with the advocacy groups in many cases, it outrages them because they find out that, unwittingly, their names may have been used because they are members of a trade association or a professional group that has participated in some of this," Byrne says.

Byrne has presented information including research and monitoring from his company's experience with a wide range of clients in ag. "We tend to work with both companies and nonprofit organizations, helping them understand the Internet and how to manage risks, as well as take advantage of opportunities that are principally involved with the online environment," he says.

How it begins

Money, marketing and the Internet — these three key factors flood the public, influencing public opinion of food today, and those involved in agriculture need to be aware of and plan for it, Byrne says. "These factors are often unacknowledged, frequently unanticipated and always underestimated."

The beef industry and traditional agriculture are under attack, Byrne reports, with more than 50 nonprofit organizations generating industry-critical statements about bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), for example. More than 100 are lobbying on

Target Practice

Advocacy groups target food producers by spending millions to influence public attitudes.

by Corinne Patterson

animal ag-related trade, animal testing and other regulatory constraints. Black marketing, the act of misrepresenting an issue in favor of a certain product or idea, is the major attack front.

Where do most of these advocacy groups spread their messages against ag? The Internet is home to more than 400 food and ag-related advocacy and special-interest groups, Byrne says, lobbying opinion leaders, engaging the media and seeking to influence consumers.

"Today there is really a blurring of lines between the Internet and the real world in the sense that they reflect one another," he says. "Virtually everyone is online — at least opinion leaders and folks that make decisions on the food chain in terms of what farmers are going to be able to sell."

To understand the types of influencers out there, Byrne defines them as: 1) advocacy groups, 2) competitors and 3) opportunistic feeders (litigators, socially responsible investment groups and alternative health proponents). He says there are three general subcategories of advocacy groups targeting agriculture, including: 1) animal welfare/vegetarian, 2) pro-organic (anti-conventional) and 3) anti-corporate/industry/trade groups.

"These advocacy groups align themselves with the competing interests and opportunistic feeders to achieve their goals, often with an ends-justify-the-means, anything-goes [mentality], making alliances of convenience today with former, or future,

adversaries," he says.

"Producers are often unaware of the marketing interests that can join up with advocacy groups to leverage a political issue for a marketing purpose," Byrne says. "Industry is always struggling, I think, because of some of its traditional and inherent foundation elements with the Internet."

Advocacy groups have had a stronghold on Internet persuasion since the late 1990s.

"Around 1996 and 1997 we started seeing activist groups understand the power and value of the Internet for influencing public attitudes and for promoting their agendas," he says.

Only recently has the ag industry started looking at the Internet differently. From producers with Web sites to local or national trade associations, Byrne says, really great sites have been developed, but these sites lack the uniform voices and interconnectedness that advocacy groups have nearly perfected.

Influencing public attitude

So just how do advocacy groups do it? Byrne says these groups influence public opinion by linking together and creating an online environment that consistently backs up an idea. Activist groups link together and share content. Those types of tactics improve search engine visibility online. Traditionally, linking together and sharing information aren't strategies mainstream ag producers would dream of pursuing.

"The private sector likes to be distinctive.

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We compete with one another. With Web sites, for example, you don't usually want to link to your competitor and share content," he points out. "You are always looking to brand yourself as different."

However, when an industry is faced with an issues-management challenge, such as defending the safety of beef in light of the discovery of BSE in North America, advocacy groups and those who seek to take advantage of consumer fears around an issue use the situation to promote their views, many times in conjunction with unconscious targets.

An example, Byrne says, is a Dec. 29, 2003, article, "Organic Beef gains amid mad cow scare," published in the *Christian Science Monitor* that stated:

"Certified organic beef has become the new gold standard for safety," suggests Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association in Little Marais, Minn. ... 'The fact that there has never been a single organically grown cow [that has] come down with mad cow in England, France, the U.S. or Canada is pretty telling,' says Cummins."

Byrne says the *Monitor* never challenged this false statement to note that organic farms were actually among the first to report cases of BSE in Europe.

Byrne has presented information about misleading and black marketing claims by organic advocacy and related marketing, professional and trade groups to many organizations, and organic farmers are just as alarmed to learn this type of information

is broadcast to the public. It doesn't just hurt traditional beef producers; it may scare the general public from eating beef at all, thus hurting organic producers in the long run. These false statements put a negative spin on the entire industry. While the previous statement could have been made to promote organic beef, the general public is exposed to the BSE issue, and it may only increase fears.

"Sometimes the marketing side of an industry is making contributions and funneling money to activist groups," Byrne says. "We certainly see that in the case of beef, where many of the advocacy groups attacking the safety of beef are receiving financial support from competing industry interests. That's something that's important for producers and everyone else in the beef industry to become aware of."

Let farmers be heard

"Are you lending creditability and support to an organization that somewhere down the line is going to cost you in ways that you haven't anticipated?" Byrne asks. "What role should you be playing in holding both your professional associations and your competitors to ethical and professional standards of conduct when it comes to marketing of the products?"

Farmers and ranchers need to examine and understand segments of their own industry to avoid engaging in activities that may in the short term help one niche market over another, but do so by discouraging another aspect of the marketplace until consumers become confused and concerned

about the overall safety of food, Byrne points out. Producers must avoid pitting one producer against another, and they can do so by simply promoting the healthful benefits that make their products better to eat than existing safe and healthy products.

Producers should use their Web sites to help promote the safety of all food products and to help educate consumers. This is an area that traditionally farmers and ranchers allow a trade organization to take care of for them. However, consumers don't see that a trade organization represents hundreds of thousands of producers; they see it as one voice and see producers ignoring consumer concerns because they are never addressed on producer Web sites.

"That's very common. It's not as if the people in the beef industry are doing a bad job; they are doing a traditional job," Byrne says of using the Internet. "The Internet has changed the rules a bit, and that forces us to as well."

The ag industry also must consider the language used by the general public. Consumers may not even be able to pronounce, let alone spell, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, but they know about mad cow. Byrne says ag sites should use consumer language so they will be directed to these sites when they do an Internet search for something like mad cow. Your site should contain information about industry issues, or at least provide a link to a trade organization with which you share views.

"You spent all this money building this

The money

More than 40 nongovernment organizations (NGOs) with combined annual budgets exceeding \$250 million are seeking to influence consumers and regulators regarding bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

v-Fluence, a public affairs and issues management firm, has compiled IRS tax forms to show producers how the professional protest industry is well-funded.

| NGO | Budget |
|--|---------------|
| Consumers Union | \$156,662,610 |
| HSUS — Humane Society of the United States | \$67,993,634 |
| PETA — People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals | \$17,012,128 |
| CSPI — Center for Science in the Public Interest | \$13,992,634 |
| Public Citizen | \$12,961,512 |
| PIRG — U.S. Public Interest Research Group | \$5,869,514 |
| IATP — Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy | \$3,623,577 |
| Farm Sanctuary | \$3,283,967 |
| GRACE — Global Resource Action Center for the Environment/Factory Farm Project | \$1,832,828 |
| CFS/ICTA — Center for Food Safety/International Center for Technology Assessment | \$1,400,000 |
| Organic Consumers | \$1,241,567 |

really fabulous destination,” Byrne says of a traditional ag Web site. “Think about it as if that were your dream house. You put all of your best thinking into building the best house possible, but didn’t put one minute of thought into where you were going to build it — essentially, rolled the dice and tossed it out into the environment. You don’t know in what block, in what neighborhood, in what city, in what state it’s going to land. That’s essentially what our industry has done.”

It’s now costing the ag industry to be found in the Web environment. Web site owners have engaged in a tactic called search engine optimization, where money is paid to be found in their own neighborhoods so that when consumers use search engines to locate information, an ag site is listed at the top of the search. This forces sites to compete with one another for top placements, raising costs and bumping off other potentially supportive sites.

Speak their language

Many times the agricultural industry wants to avoid certain language that it considers to be inflammatory, says Jay Byrne, president of v-Fluence Interactive Public Relations Inc. Using the words “bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)” vs. “mad cow” is a prime example.

“Well, the fact of the matter is no consumer is typing ‘bovine spongiform encephalopathy,’ and certainly even if they are the chances of them spelling it correctly are very slim in their Google™ searches. They are typing in ‘mad cow’ or a couple of other terms like ‘mad cow concern’ or ‘mad cow facts,’” he says.

That’s why v-Fluence specializes in understanding what language an industry needs to adopt so that the industry can, in a responsible way, address people’s concerns without raising them and act responsibly when it comes to managing issues. He says, “[Agriculturalists] should do so in a manner that is cooperative with all of your other stakeholders and allies, which includes often your competitors within an industry, while still maintaining your ability to effectively distinguish yourself and responsibly compete with one another.”

Instead, producers should be thinking about using the Internet to create the best possible environment for all consumers.

Byrne says, “I think we are in a slightly dangerous downward spiral exacerbated by money, marketing and the Internet that is going to cost American food producers — beef, dairy, crops, you name it — a lot of money to catch up on because they need to be more proactive and effective, particularly in regard to the Internet, in defending the great products that they have.

“The only way that we are going to see some of these activities, which some people characterize as black marketing, go away will be if the industry itself, right down from the producer all the way through the food chain, makes demands of its own members to act responsibly and in the overall best interest of the industry as a whole.”

