

Share Your Story

Illinois producers say ag's future tied to closing gap with consumers.

by **Barb Baylor Anderson**, field editor



► Mike and Lynn Martz, Maple Park, Ill., grow corn, soybeans and wheat, as well as manage a 3,500-head commercial beef feedlot.



► Above: Lynn and Mike say educating consumers helps agriculture as a whole.

► Right: The Martz family is not ashamed of any aspect of its operation and invites consumers to see it through organized farm tours.

Chances are you've run across a consumer who doesn't understand the beef industry. Farrah Brown, a mother and part-time nurse from Glendale Heights, Ill., is one of them. She says it has become increasingly important for her to know where her food comes from, and to be able to trust that it's safe and healthy. She says obtaining fresh meat from trusted sources is an obsession.

Brown is part of the Illinois Farm Families Field Moms Program, which is dedicated to helping educate moms in the Chicago area about modern production agriculture. Brown has visited farms and talked with commodity producers in Illinois, including Lynn and Mike Martz, beef producers from Maple Park, Ill. The Martz family grows corn, soybeans and wheat on 6,350 acres and has a 3,500-head commercial beef feedlot in the northern part of the state.

"I love the conversations that have started between farmers and moms. I love hearing truth from their lips and seeing it with my own eyes. I love seeing their passion and dedication, and maybe being able to encourage them a little along the way. Hopefully, I will be able to share with those around me what I am seeing and learning," Brown writes in her Field Moms blog.

That perspective is exactly why Lynn and Mike Martz have gotten involved with Illinois Farm Families. They hope Brown and others who visit will share observations with neighbors.



PHOTOS COURTESY ILLINOIS FARM FAMILIES

Training themselves

The couple first got involved with consumer education after completing the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA) Masters of Beef Advocacy program.

"We have always done farm tours here, but the NCBA program helped us get comfortable with becoming part of the conversation," says Mike. "Then Illinois Farm Families came along and sparked opportunities to interact specifically with consumers. We have no secrets on our farm, nothing we are ashamed of, so we want consumers to know our business is an open book."

Lynn and Mike have been farming since 1979 as part of the Larson Farms Partnership with Lynn's father, Ray, and her brothers, Dave and Norm. The couple's son, Justin, is also now part of the operation. Lynn and Mike spent the first nine years managing their backgrounding operation in Wisconsin. They moved to the main farm in 1988. Today the goal of the operation is to "provide safe, nutritious, wholesome beef products to consumers with humane treatment of each animal and production practices that are environmentally friendly."

"Where before we may have shied away from talking about hormones, for example, the training we have had makes us more comfortable about not only talking about hormones with consumers, but now bringing it up in our discussions and addressing consumer concerns," says Mike.

"Consumers do not always understand that natural or organic beef companies are marketing a product that provides them with a choice. They purchase based on marketing perceptions rather than reality. They may even pay more for a product that does not have safety or nutrition issues," says Lynn. "We like to point out they can purchase the food they want. But we want them to understand they have lots of choices, and



Tactics that work

Illinois Farm Families is composed of farmers from across the state "committed to showing consumers how food is grown, answering questions about farmers and their operations, and sharing what really happens on today's farms." The group, which is supported by the Illinois Soybean Association, Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Pork Producers Association, Illinois Corn Marketing Board and Illinois Beef Association, uses several educational tactics:

- ▶ **WatchUsGrow.org.** The website provides information about farmers involved with the program and answers to questions about producing safe, healthy food.
- ▶ **Field Moms.** Moms are selected to tour Illinois farms and ask questions. The Field Moms discuss chemicals, the environment, animal care, hormones and antibiotics, and more. They then blog about their experiences to share with other consumers.
- ▶ **Outreach Events.** Illinois Farm Families sets up activities at such locations as the Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago farmers' markets and state fair to share information.
- ▶ **Social Media.** Illinois Farm Families maintains a presence on Facebook and Twitter to keep the conversation going between producers and consumers.

they should base purchase decisions on facts."

Lynn and Mike are particularly surprised where consumers obtain information about farming. For example, consumers who have visited their farm tell them the seed company signs they see along fields led them to believe those fields were company-owned. Consumers are just as surprised to learn that 94% of Illinois farms are owned by families, not corporations.

"Working with consumers has allowed us to see and consider things through their eyes. We share that we all eat the same food," says Lynn. "From our perspective, for instance, biotech crops are good. They increase production and provide environmental benefits. Some consumers see biotech food as not safe. We have to explain we use biotech for the right reasons."

Mike says he hopes the time they have invested in sharing their story will pay off in the long run.

"We don't think getting involved with spending time with consumers will be a benefit to our own farm per se, but we do see a greater future benefit for agriculture," he says. "When issues come up or regulations are proposed, the more we educate people, the more they will understand."

Tips for talking with consumers

Lynn and Mike have developed a list of tips that other beef producers can use in helping to close the understanding gap with consumers.

- ▶ **Be nonconfrontational.** Tell your story, but don't say their perceptions are wrong.
- ▶ **Go through consumer education training,** like NCBA's. If your state does not have its own program, see what has worked for Illinois Farm Families.
- ▶ **Think like a consumer.** Don't talk in jargon or detail. Use simple answers to questions. When Mike was talking to a consumer during a training session, the

consumer was told to raise her hand as soon as she did not understand something Mike said. The first five words Mike spoke included cow-calf, which she did not understand.

▶ **Share one message with your group.**

Lynn and Mike recently talked with elementary-age students about the importance of grilling beef to a safe temperature. The message made it home; some parents unaware of safe grilling temperatures called to discuss it with them.

▶ **Be sure your message meets your audience.**

Lynn and Mike have preschoolers pick ears of corn, and learn to shell it and count while they do it. Another idea they've seen — offer a feed-ration contest, where children can measure and balance a 5-pound (lb.) feed ration while you talk with the parents about how and what cattle are fed.

▶ **Never stop learning.** The couple watches educational videos online from the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) and other groups about how best to educate consumers. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and then get an answer later.

▶ **Offer a general handout about your farm.** Have other handouts available that explain beef cuts, cooking recommendations and more.

"Telling your story is as easy as just simply talking about what you do every day," says Lynn. "You are in touch with consumers all the time. Not every person who lives in your local town has been on a farm. We met a woman who ran a meat market and had never been on a farm."



Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.