



Why today's farmer is losing his voice with the consumer.

Commentary by **Kevin Murphy**, www.truthinfood.com

Editor's Note: Kevin Murphy is the owner/founder of Food-Chain Communications, a marketing communications firm devoted to helping companies that touch our world's food supply communicate more effectively. Truth in Food is an online forum that seeks to tackle the most controversial issues in food, but to do so from the unique perspective of having traversed the entire food chain, from conception to consumption.

Farmers sense the need to reconnect with consumers and with those who represent their products to those consumers. Their mounting frustration arises from a sense that their voices are muffled by the layers of people who now inhabit the space between them and the ultimate consumer. Worse yet, they feel they're missing out on the conversation because farmers, and those speaking on their behalf, are losing in a new war of words.

Our lives are in a constant state of rush. Brevity rules. Therefore, our choice of words matters. If you want to get your point across, short words prevail. Even better are short words strung together into inspiring, motivational language: "Be all that you can be." "Just do it."

Like hand grenades exploding in a person's mind, the right emotionally-charged words instill passion and motivation, fear and uncertainty. Words will drive a grocery shopper from one aisle to the next (Organic! Fresh! Natural!) or a diner from one menu panel to another (Weight-Watchers! Healthy Choice! All-you-can-eat!)

In this explosive crusade of launching just the right word in just the right place at just the right time, farmers are losing.

What's in a name? Everything.

Notice I said "farmers." I didn't say "producers."

Notice I did not say the war of words is being lost by the agriculture "industry."

When the 133-year-old *Farm Journal* spun off a new publication two decades ago for its biggest farmer subscribers, its conscious choice of the name *Top Producer* echoed a widespread sentiment in the struggling agricultural sector at the time: Those who grew pigs or corn or calves or wheat were told they couldn't afford to look upon themselves as "just farmers" anymore. The economic climate dictated they become more businesslike, more professional — that they stop being farmers and become producers.

The shift in language was successful. An underlying, often unspoken inferiority complex about being just a farmer — typically not expressed as often by farmers themselves as it was by those in support industries around farmers who represented them to the public — translated into an

almost universal shift to the use of the terms *producer* and *industry*.

The shift is illustrated by comparing the 1938 Farm Bill, in which references to "farmers" and "farming" outnumbered references to "producers" by about four to one, to the similar bill a half century later. By 2008, the proportion had flipped, with "producer" outnumbering "farmer" by three to one.

Was it a necessary shift in mind-set, away from understanding farming as purely a way of life to one that recognized the lifestyle might not long survive if it couldn't support its professional capability to profit? Perhaps.

However, it's important to realize American farmers, small-scale and large-scale, never gave away such priceless equity in anything as they did when they collaborated in their rebranding away from farmer and into producer. The average person understands the word farmer in almost a universal image, drawing on a reservoir of good will derived from the word. The producers of the anti-capitalist-farming screed Food Inc., for instance, recognize the pure power in the simple word and its associated images:

"The way we eat has changed more in the last 50 years than in the previous 10,000. But the image we use to sell the food is still the image of agrarian America. You go into the supermarket and you see pictures of farmers, the picket fence, the '30s farmhouse, the green grass. It's the spinning of this pastoral fantasy."

Meanwhile, the farmer's use of "producer" restricts the flow of positive images and intimates that the value of a farmer runs only as deep as what he's capable of producing. "Industry" conjures up images of big corporations, the cold steel exterior of a building, a nameless, faceless, ruthless blob with designs to take over the planet. It's a subtle abandonment of every powerful image farming contains, illustrated by North Dakota sustainable agriculture advocate Gary Holthaus in his 2006 *From the Farm to the Table: What All Americans Need to Know about Agriculture*.

"You don't have to be a farmer to farm anymore," Holthaus quotes a small Minnesota farmer "... I knew this guy in Bellechester who rented 160 acres ... hired someone to no-till beans in. ... Then he hired the elevator to spray the things, then he hired somebody else to combine the beans, and then he hauled them to Red Wing. ... all he did was coordinate. It was nothing but

Simple words and phrases have always penetrated the heart of the common man because they often appeal to common sense.

telephone farming. Telephone farming.”

“You can’t call those guys farmers,” Holthaus descendingly concludes, “they’re ‘producers.’”

Farmers are losing the war of words by surrendering their ownership of “farmer,” along with other words that once so clearly belonged to them (green, sustainable, Earth Day, animal care, organic). By giving up the name “farmer,” they’ve discarded words of high yield for a low-grade variety, allowing spokespeople to rob them of the critical authenticity lying at the heart of most of today’s demand for local, natural and organic food.

Back to the language of the land

This was recently on display for me when Food-Chain Communications, in conjunction with the National Grocers Association, hosted a program called Farmer Goes to Market. Designed to bring farmers and grocery men back together into a face-to-face dialogue about today’s most controversial food issues, it solicited a cast of successful farmers from the representative commodities based on their understanding of the issues and their ability and willingness to explain what they do and why they do it.

It seemed straightforward enough.

Yet in the weeks leading up to the event, I received a flood of telephone calls and a flock of e-mails from often-nervous media trainers and public relations professionals, offering their services to coach and school these professional farmers. These PR professionals reassured me not only that they could help improve the ability of these men and women to meet their public, but also that the farmers in fact needed that help to properly tell their story. Some even hinted I was acting irresponsibly by allowing farmers to go face-to-face with grocery men.

“So, how are you deciding who to send?”

“What training requirements must a farmer have to participate in Farmer Goes to Market?”

“What happens if the conversation progresses to a technical level? What will you do then?”

On one hand, I certainly agree that farmers can benefit from some training and preparation. I have been in the uneasy position of watching a farmer interview go awry. I have personally witnessed a well-trained, media-groomed farmer whom I was convinced was going to conquer the world with his simple, straightforward nature melt down like cheese under the lamps of a television crew.

However, one of the qualities not only most endearing but most powerful about American farmers is their unpretentiousness.

In nearly a quarter century of dealing with them almost daily, I believe I have yet to see a real farmer put on airs. He speaks from the heart. His land or livestock can often be as much a soul mate to him as a spouse. His language reflects that. It enables him to speak with passion and, some would say, perfectly equips him to defend his practices.

Others object. His vocational call alone does not make him fit to debate in the pop-culture arena. He needs to undergo training so his brutal honesty is not perceived as gullible or, worse, uncaring. A farmer must be trained in the wiles of the media world so that he can recognize when the serpent approaches. A single careless word broadcast through modern media can instantly declare him guilty in the court of public opinion.

While I agree with the need for preparation, there is a fine line between equipping a farmer and marring his clear language with insincerity. Suddenly, a “media-trained” farmer tells his story through someone else’s words. Adorning him with flowery language and big words that fit like a bad suit

only ends up actually raising suspicion. It’s like showing up at the local diner to share a warm conversation and an even warmer cup of coffee with a farmer, only to see him arrive with a lawyer in tow. In the end, the PR professional who wanted so sincerely to equip him has actually done him a great disservice by robbing him of his native power.

Farmers and those who represent them need to get back to simple words and simple phrases. The concept is clearly endorsed by Matthew Scully, a conservative political

speechwriter whose book *Dominion* advocates for animal welfare on the grounds of a higher moral calling.

“Reform will come about in the care of animals by people not speaking the language of some alien ideology or liberation movement but in the simplest terms of reason and common decency everyone can understand,” Scully says (page 42).

It’s a potential Achilles heel for modern farming that’s well-understood by those who oppose it — well-applied and well-capitalized upon. One of the recognized masters, the Washington, D.C.-based public affairs firm Fenton Communications, succeeded in killing Uniroyal’s highly popular Alar pesticide — along with \$250 million in collateral damage to U.S. apple farmers — by hewing to its advice: “When researching the messages your audience will find persuasive, you also need to know who your audience trusts. The American public listens to people, not organizations.”

Likewise, the media consultant group Public Media Center, which strategizes communication for many activist groups, counsels, “Effective advocacy communication is predicated upon the strong, clear assertion of basic values, moral authority and leadership.”

Be careful what you don’t say?

Meanwhile, those who advocate for the ability of modern, technology-focused farmers to be permitted to do their jobs too often seem to miss the need for evaluating the subtle messages their words communicate about our values, moral authority and leadership. Increasingly, farmers are playing into activists’ hands by becoming slothful

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with their language. Let's look at just a few examples of how words can go astray.

"Pork is Safe to Eat, Handle, Says Pork Industry." This was released on April 26, 2009, two days after the *Drudge Report* first mentioned swine flu, with an accompanying picture of what seemed to be a rabid pig biting at a worker's leg. Two big problems arise with this headline.

Although the words are simple, they communicate a self-authentication that's bound to raise suspicion in an already suspicious consumer's mind. Imagine if I put out a press release that said, "Murphy to be No. 1 Overall Pick in NBA Draft, Says Murphy." Unless the saying Murphy is someone other than the playing Murphy, this smacks of self-love.

The author uses the term "industry." Traveling around the United States, I find one overall consensus: We need to put a face back on agriculture. Nothing is more faceless than the term "industry."

"The livestock industry, not people, are this flu outbreak's real casualties." This was the lead sentence for an e-mail newsletter designed to draw people into the body text through the all-important click. Once again, "industry" is used. But more importantly, the writer distinguishes between "people" and "the livestock industry." Here is a sympathetic reporter trying to make the point that the viral effect of a poorly titled influenza outbreak (swine flu — two very small but potent words) is proving more deadly for pork farmers than for those who actually contracted

the flu virus. But even he undermines his own efforts by failing to visualize who "the industry" is. Are they not people?

"As an industry, we continue to remain committed to a broad, coordinated effort to solve pathogen issues by developing industry-wide, science- and risk-based strategies to address safety challenges." As Fenton advised its clients in the

Alar apple scare, one of the commandments of communication is "know thy audience." All communication about farming should be geared toward the consumer. The consumer is the ultimate buyer. But, because food is so political and at times highly scientific, those crafting communication messages often end up talking like politicians and scientists.

"This recall is happening, out of an abundance of caution, because the company did not follow regulations for handling non-ambulatory cattle." This statement was released after the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued the largest beef recall in history (143 million pounds). It all hinged on an undercover video produced by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) showing a "downer" animal being prodded by workers through electrical shock and the use of a forklift in an attempt to get the animal into the food chain. Knowing the context in which you are communicating is critical to the formation of your words. In this case, the consumer is looking for

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comfort, authenticity, assurance and words that reflect genuine human emotion. Instead, the statement is a reluctant deference, cold, "industry-like," and uses a term that evokes an image of a cow riding in an ambulance.

"These types of challenges demonstrate why it is critical for all the industry to come together and support the 'We Care' program."

This statement was released in response to the Home Box Office (HBO) shockumentary, *Death on a Factory Farm*, in which undercover video reveals pork farmers mistreating pigs. The handling of the pigs

is disturbing to watch, and I know many people associated with farming who could not stomach it. The spokesman for pork farmers uses the movie as a platform to entice farmers to participate in the "We Care" initiative. Two points:

The "We Care" initiative graded on its own merit is no doubt a worthy endeavor, but the name "We Care" is imprecise and impersonal. It would be better named "I Care." "I Care" vs. "We Care" is the difference between personal safety and public safety. Although you may support public safety, you can't help but be engaged in personal safety.

In a time of crisis, actions speak louder than words. Pork farmers cannot passively adopt a "We Care" initiative, abiding by its letter but not its spirit. It has to be embedded in more than their vocabulary and shown forth through their actions. "I Care" should also reach beyond caring for animals and reflect the care farmers have for their fellow man.

So, rather than devolve into a Pee Wee Herman vs. Francis "I-know-you-are-but-what-am-I" debate after viewing a super-secret, hidden, undercover video posted by a no-name activist group, pork farmers should rather ask, "What is the proper response for someone who is at the service of their fellow man, putting their health ahead of his profits?" Additionally, what other actions can a pork farmer take to show "I Care" to those who actually are suffering from the flu's ravages? This would give spirit to the flesh of an "I Care" program.

Communication is a tough battle these days. And with apologies to the professionals who no doubt carefully crafted the above examples that I've chosen at random with the intent of some constructive (albeit, painful) criticism, they are no more egregious than most others that present farmers and farming to consumers every day. The truth can hurt, but until farmers and those who represent them lay bare the self-inflected communication wounds, farmers will continue to face real potential damage in this new war of words.

