

Use Values

To connect with consumers, explain the why of agriculture before the how and what.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Agriculture advocates are great at explaining the how and what of production agriculture. What the ag industry lacks is explaining the *why*, says Jana McGuire, from The Center for Food Integrity (CFI).

Take a second to think about why you decided to make your career in agriculture. Is it because your family has a tradition of agricultural pursuits? Is it because you love working outside and with animals? Do you love the lifestyle that agriculture offers you and your family? There are many reasons why farmers and ranchers devote their life's work to agriculture, and those reasons are great ways to connect with consumers.

Work the why

With many advertisements or coordinated campaign efforts by anti-agriculture groups out there, it is easy to get angry. However, responding with anger doesn't garner many supporters. These ads are successful because many consumers simply don't know any differently. McGuire points out that farms look different than they used to — compounded by the fact that most people are three generations removed from the farm — and this unfamiliarity opens the door to misconceptions.

McGuire reiterates that bad news makes news, and that is why establishing and maintaining trust is so important. She says if you maintain the public's trust, generally it will leave you alone. Misinformation feeds formalized restrictions.

Some of CFI's research indicated consumers trust larger operations less, and they believe that smaller operations are the ones who share their beliefs and values. When operations only talk about how they do something, consumers' positive opinions dropped.

However, most consumers' definition of a "large" operation is different than most of those in agriculture. When CFI asked consumers, answers were varied, but McGuire reports that many said 100 animals or 100 acres were considered a large farm. It is our job, she says, to show that



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEBBIE LYONS-BLYTHE

► **Debbie Lyons-Blythe**, author of *Life on a Kansas Cattle Ranch*, says bringing a calf to school is a great way to teach children about agriculture. This can be especially effective if the class doesn't have the funds for a field trip.

people with "large" operations still have the same values.

When big-bucket issues come up — like animal welfare, the environment, food safety, antibiotics and hormones — she says the ag industry often turns to research, economic impact and assuring that regulations are met. The assurance of simply meeting regulations doesn't inspire much buy-in from consumers.

"The ag industry is good at the what and how, which are usually science and economics. People act on how they feel, though. They don't act on science and economics," says McGuire. "Consumers want to know what you're doing coincides with their values and expectations. They don't want to be an antagonist unless they feel they need to be because of a food recall or

the release of a farm animal abuse video, for example."

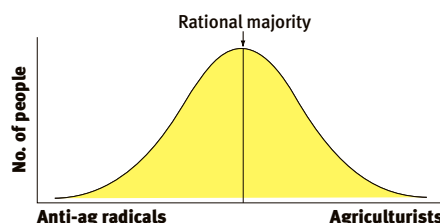
Think of consumers as a bell curve graph (see Fig. 1). Let's say agriculturists are at the right end of the graph, the small right tail. The small left tail represents the anti-ag radicals. The large bell of the curve is full of what McGuire terms the rational majority. Unfortunately, she says, the anti-ag radicals are very good at targeting that rational majority of consumers with messages, while agriculturists generally focus on battling the anti-ag radicals. To succeed, agriculturists need to focus on the consumers, not the radicals.

Debbie Lyons-Blythe, author of the popular *Life on a Kansas Cattle Ranch* blog, agrees. She says most consumers are just trying to make the best decisions for themselves and their family, just like she is.

"I am not going to change the mind of an activist, but I might help a mom choose beef to feed her young kids," she explains.

She started blogging because an urban cousin, who did have experience on the farm yearly, came to her with questions about antibiotics in meat. Her cousin was getting so much misguided information about these topics from her neighbors and

Fig. 1: McGuire says think of consumers as plotted on a bell curve



to Connect



the media that she doubted her experience on the ranch. Lyons-Blythe explained why antibiotics are used — to keep animals healthy, just like her cousin uses them to keep her children healthy. By explaining the why behind antibiotic use, she quelled her cousin's fears, and was even able to educate about how they administer antibiotics because the why sparked more interest.

Opportunities to engage

“We have to take the opportunities to get the word out about the great things happening in agriculture,” McGuire emphasizes.

There are many opportunities to build trust by leading with values. McGuire says local conversations, public speaking, videos, online engagement and participating in the media are ways to engage consumers. She suggests writing letters to the editor, commenting on articles either in print or online, or writing an opinion editorial piece as ways to reach consumers through the media. Even in rural areas, there are still consumers who don't know much about agriculture.

Social media has exploded in popularity, and it is a great platform to engage consumers. McGuire offers some guidelines for social media effectiveness. She recommends seeking out relevant online communities and following the conversations happening there. Focus on shared values and providing information and resources, but don't advertise. Additionally, steer clear of staunch anti-ag communities where you likely won't be able to engage in productive conversations.

This may seem obvious, but think before you post. Even though there is a delete button, it's much like trying to squeeze toothpaste back into the tube. Once a post is out, it is out. Don't let that scare you, though. Social media is an opportunity to be transparent, she says. It is ok to admit when you don't know something, but follow up when you do find the answer.

“Be yourself and be proud of what you do,” she adds. “Many, when they are defensive,

turn to science and following regulations. This makes them inaccessible.”

Lyons-Blythe also offers many ways to engage consumers at any age. Blogging is a great method to share stories about what you do on the farm or ranch and why, but she is quick to admit that you shouldn't post about agriculture constantly. She also posts personal stories, recipes and photos to engage with other moms to keep them coming back. She doesn't have the opinion that agriculture is more important than other jobs; she says a mutual respect for what consumers do helps establish trust.

Bloggging might not be for everyone, but she assures that there are other ways to connect with consumers. Other options include farm and ranch tours, reading at schools and handing out samples in grocery stores. These only take a few conversations with a teacher or a meat department manager to get started. For tips on getting started with reading in the classroom, the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) organization has a Reading in the

Classroom toolkit available at www.ancw.org/readinginclassroomstoolkit.aspx.

Additionally, she adds that many times, classrooms don't have the funding for field trips, so you could even bring a calf to the school to teach kids about different aspects of

raising cattle. It is important to expose children to agriculture at a young age.

When establishing connections with consumers, Lyons-Blythe agrees with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) that even the way agriculturists identify themselves can have “factory-farm” connotations, like beef producer, beef industry and conventional.

She suggests using farmer and rancher, beef community, and traditional instead. This lets you start off on the right foot when you tell your story of why you are in agriculture.

Lyons-Blythe says she paraphrased Troy Hadrick, but the message rings true. “My time online is as important to the future of my ranch as my time with the cows.” Establishing trust with consumers is never a waste of time. Trust comes quicker when you tell your story of why you are in agriculture.

“My time online is as important to the future of my ranch as my time with the cows.”
— Debbie Lyons-Blythe



► Lyons-Blythe says putting a personal face to a meat department in a grocery store can draw in consumers. It only takes a conversation with the meat department manager.

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