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Lessons From a Logger

Agriculture needs to adopt culture of positive activism to change the game.

by *Lora Berg*

Bruce Vincent, a third-generation logger from Libby, Mont., encourages farmers and ranchers to stand proud and tell their positive story instead of letting a misinformed, activist agenda define the business of agriculture in the eyes of consumers. Speaking to the recent Ag Media Summit audience of agricultural journalists in Saint Paul, Minn., Vincent shared lessons learned during the timber industry's fight against the anti-logging movement in the West.

When Vincent came home to join his family-owned logging business in the 1980s, his family business employed members of 65 local families. Then, during the latter part of the century, he watched in horror as anti-logging activists turned endangered species and a well-funded and carefully crafted anti-logging message into tools used to garner public support for regulations that gradually all but eliminated the timber industry in his area.

"Today we have three members of our family working in our business, and our equipment is used only for fighting fires," he laments, noting proper tree harvesting helped prevent many of those

fires and improved forest health while providing consumers a useful product. "We had a collision of visions with the rest of America, and America made a choice [that] did not grant us a social license to operate."

The timber industry fought back, albeit not very effectively, for a long while, Vincent relates. Eventually, it became clear that progress was not going to be made by constantly being on the defensive, because that strategy allowed the activist groups to control the message the public was hearing.

"We were the third ring of their three-ring circus, and they were taking the gate receipts," he says. The timber industry learned the hard way that there was money being made by those stirring up the controversy.

Conflict business model needs money, piñatas

Vincent explains that activist groups have built a lucrative business model around scaring the public. Many activist groups encountered by both the timber industry, and now by those in animal agriculture, operate within what Vincent describes as the "conflict industry." Groups such as the Humane Society of the

United States (HSUS) actually function as big corporations steered by CEOs, chief financial officers (CFOs) and boards of directors.

"They carefully work on message development to scare people out of \$20 to protect something," he relates. "This multibillion dollar industry of conflict needs a new piñata." Agriculture seems to have moved into the piñata role now, but Vincent strongly believes farmers and ranchers can learn something from the experiences his industry faced during its struggles while in a similar position.

"We (the timber industry) finally stopped fighting and figured out how to lead the discussion," he says. "We realized we needed to address the public's ignorance about who we are and what we do."

Many urban dwellers enjoy taking vacations in rural or wilderness areas. Then they go home and believe they have a duty to protect the places they visited, or they become convinced they need to protect their idea of an idyllic lifestyle. When faced with a lack of credible information, it becomes easy to believe the steady stream of information coming from a well-funded activist platform, Vincent says.

"Their vision of protecting the last best places does not necessarily include saving the last best people," Vincent notes wryly. He illustrates this point by throwing out the Will Rogers quote, "It ain't what you don't know that gives you trouble, it's what you know that ain't so."

Lead through education, communication

Time and again, Vincent repeats the point that there is a difference between fighting and leading. Industries such as timber and agriculture need to address the public's ignorance about who they are and what they do instead of spending all of their effort on the defensive.

"Rural folks have laughed for too long at the lack of information urban people may have about agriculture. Their ignorance is actually our problem, and it is no longer funny," he says.

Vincent urges farmers and ranchers to work to deliver their message in language the public understands. "For too long the timber industry talked 'forestry babble,' and used terms that didn't make sense to many people, for example," he says.

Vincent outlines three truths on which farmers and ranchers can build their game plan when it comes to getting their message out.

First of all, **democracy works, but it is not a spectator sport.** "In spite of what you may think, those who live in the city do not control everything. Those who live in rural

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Provider Pals Program builds bridges of understanding between urban, rural youth

Motivational speaker and third-generation logger Bruce Vincent of Libby, Mont., travels throughout the United States and Canada, urging primarily rural audiences to communicate effectively with consumers about their responsible stewardship of the environment. But Vincent's involvement with building for a better future does not end when he steps away from the speaker's podium. He coordinates a program, called "Provider Pals," that works to build a bridge of understanding and respect between urban youth, rural youth and their natural resource providers.

Since the pilot program was started in 1998, Provider Pals, a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit education corporation, has worked to help primarily 12- and 13-year-old youth learn more about different "cultures" within their own country. The Provider Pal program currently includes 325 classrooms and more than 8,000 students in the United States and Canada. More than 200 people from the production sectors of farming, ranching, mining, logging and fishing are available for adoption by classrooms. Some providers are adopted by several classrooms during any given year. The Provider Pals program is funded through grants from the Caterpillar, John Deere and Monsanto Foundations.

Each school year, classrooms within the United States and Canada 'adopt' a person working within the farming, ranching, logging, mining or fishing industry. Students learn about the resources their 'Pal' provides through letters, pictures and by communicating with their Pal on the Internet. Teachers have the option of using specially developed curriculum to support the experience by teaching the students about the Pal's industry. The

classroom and Provider Pal have a face-to-face meeting at the end of the school year when the Pal travels to the classroom for the day.

The Provider Pal program also offers an option for rural students to spend five days visiting with their peers in an inner-city classroom. The students attend urban cultural events and take tours of the city.

Students and adult chaperones from the schools that participated in the Provider Pals program during the school year also have a chance to spend a week of their summer at the historic Raven Natural Resource Learning Center in northwestern Montana. The urban students are matched with local, rural middle school students and the diverse groups share time learning about the outdoors, environment and each other.

The Provider Pal website serves as an information hub for those participating in the program in addition to hosting an interactive educational gaming site called, "Provider World."

Explaining the importance of building relationships between urban and rural youth, Vincent sums up the program by saying, "The future of our environment is one of the most important issues we, as a nation, will ever discuss. The tone of such discussions is dictated by the extremely different cultures of urban and rural America. It is imperative that we take the first step toward educated, respectful dialogue. That first step is meeting each other. We need to learn to talk instead of scream."

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America actually make up 20% of America," Vincent says.

Second, **when people lead, leaders follow.**

"The public needs to hear that they don't have to choose between a healthy environment and agriculture," he notes. Vincent delivers his heartfelt, sincere message about how the business of logging affects real people and real families. He says honesty

often appeals to even the most oppositional activist audiences.

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"America is concerned about the very things we're concerned about. Tell the public the truth about the choices they have, such as the importance of choosing corn from Iowa and not Brazil," he says.

The third truth is **the world is run by those who show up.**

"I believe the new environmental movement will be led by rural people because they are close to the ground," Vincent predicts. "It is important for all of us to have a 'line item' for activism within our culture." He challenges farmers and ranchers to spend at least one hour each week working on one of the three truths by engaging with the public in order to help maintain a "social license" to operate.

"Everybody needs to be a ripple, and together we become a wave," he says.

