



# Make Every Conversation Count

Information is power. So take time for public relations and teaching others about the beef industry every chance you get.

by *Kindra Gordon*

It's a statistic that is quoted often: "Less than 2% of the population today lives on a farm (or is involved in production agriculture)."

Looked at from another angle, that means 98% of people know little or nothing about what happens on farms, points out Donna Moenning, who raises Angus cattle with her family on a farm in Minnesota.

Moenning has a long history of educating others about agriculture. She was formerly on staff with the National Livestock and Meat Board and worked as a radio farm broadcaster in southeastern Minnesota. Today, she is vice president of image and industry relations for the Midwest Dairy Association, which represents dairy producers in nine states.

Because of her roots in agriculture, Moenning is a passionate advocate for teaching consumers about the process behind bringing food from the farm to their table.

"Food is very emotional and personal. Many consumers don't have a clue what we do on farms — and yet, they choose to buy

our products — milk, meat, grain," she says.

However, because so many consumers are removed from agriculture, Moenning says it does not take much for them to get misinformation about their food products and the farming process.

"How has that lack of information impacted you and your business?" she asks producers to consider. And more importantly, "How are consumers going to get the right information about what farmers and ranchers produce?"

"It starts with the producer," Moenning says. "They are the most credible source."

She recognizes that everyone is busy on their farm and doesn't need "one more thing to do." But, she points out, often the mainstream consumer media doesn't portray agriculture's story accurately. "If you don't tell your story, someone else will," she says.

Likewise, Lynn Gordon with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) encourages those in agriculture to take time to educate consumers about the products they produce. Division

**"Ag producers should be open-minded when visiting with non-ag folks; don't assume they understand your industry."**

— *Lynn Gordon*

administrator for NDA's Ag Promotion and Development Department, Gordon says, "Information is power, and an informed consumer is more likely to be supportive of our agricultural industries."

"Ag producers should be open-minded when visiting with non-ag folks; don't assume they understand

your industry," she adds. "Often, they only hear or read about agriculture secondhand — and it may not always be correct information."

It's not just consumers in urban centers like New York City or Los Angeles, Calif., who need to be educated about agriculture. Even Midwestern areas like Omaha, Neb.,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 384

## Make Every Conversation Count CONTINUED FROM PAGE 383

have many consumers and families who have limited knowledge about agriculture,” Gordon says.

### Crucial conversations

Gordon and Moenning suggest producers look for opportunities to inform and educate the public about their farm or agricultural operations. Perhaps it is through conversations you have with neighbors or



► Farmers and ranchers are the most credible source for supplying information to consumers about how their food products are produced, says Donna Moenning, who raises Angus cattle with her family on a farm in Minnesota.



► “Information is power, and an informed consumer is more likely to be supportive of our agricultural industries,” says Lynn Gordon, division administrator for NDA’s Ag Promotion and Development Department.

moms at community or school events; maybe it is talking with people who are attending county or state fairs during the summer, or perhaps you are hosting school tours.

“These are excellent opportunities to share positive messages about your industry and put a face on agriculture,” Gordon says. As one example, she tells that NDA’s Youth Council hosts Urban Farm Tours each year for fourth-grade students from a Lincoln or Omaha school to give them a firsthand view of farm life.

Whatever the setting, Moenning stresses that you should understand your audience and keep your message simple. “Simplicity is not an option — it’s essential,” she says, and adds, “A confused mind says no.” For example, she says the consumer doesn’t want to understand every detail about cloning. They only want to know why it’s done and if the food produced is safe.

To keep your message to consumers effective and understandable, Moenning suggests having a few key messages you want to convey identified in advance, so you are prepared for whatever situation you are in. This is the message you want them to remember about your farm or industry when they get back home.

For instance, food safety, the environment and nutrition are often the key concerns that consumers have. Thus, Moenning suggests being prepared to offer assurances such as these:

**Food safety.** Our goal is to produce a product that is wholesome and good to consume. Our cattle must be healthy and well-cared-for in order to produce safe products. Our livelihood is based on the food we produce.

**Environment.** As farmers who live on or near this land, we understand the importance of protecting our natural resources. My family lives here, so it’s important to care for the land and water. We depend on this land for our business.

**Nutrition.** Beef [and/or milk] offer a powerful package of nutrients, including zinc, iron and protein. Moenning suggests being well-versed in these nutrition facts so you can speak about them confidently.

Additionally, Moenning and Gordon suggest producers be knowledgeable about the economic effect their industry has on the county or state. Be prepared to tell others how livestock production produces jobs, which in turn has a multiplier effect on local spending.

For instance, Gordon shares, in Nebraska

agriculture is an \$11 billion industry with one in three Nebraskans earning their livelihood from an ag-related industry.

### More messages

In addition to one-on-one conversations with consumers, Moenning says there are endless opportunities to convey positive messages about your farm or ranch to the public. She encourages producers to consider some of these:

**1.** Establish a farm mission or vision statement and then post it where visitors to your operation can read it. “This says a lot about who you are, what you do, and what you stand for,” Moenning says.

**2.** Post a farm sign so neighbors and passersby will recognize your farm identity and what you produce.

**3.** Develop a brochure about your farm or business. Moenning says this can be a useful handout to provide others information about your farm when you are at events. And, if you host classroom tours, it’s a good resource to give the teacher to provide students background information before the class arrives.

**4.** Develop a web site about your operation. Like a brochure, this can provide information about your business, but you can also include links to other web sites that provide useful information about your industry.

**5.** Host farm tours. This could be for local school children, college students, business professionals, or community groups. Moenning stresses that different approaches will be needed for different audiences, but farm tours can be a great way to teach others about agriculture.

That said, she also emphasizes that not everyone feels comfortable hosting farm tours, so if you aren’t, find other ways to share your story. For instance, maybe you prefer to go to the classroom and make a presentation or share photos and products from your farm. Moenning says that can be equally as effective.

**6.** Host on-farm events to build neighbor/community relations. Moenning suggests hosting a winter chili supper for your neighbors or a summer picnic for local businesses and their employees as a way to bring people to your farm to teach them about what you do.

Gordon points out that open-house events, such as these, demonstrate an open-

## Connecting with moms

When it comes to building confidence about food safety and agriculture with consumers, research has shown that moms are key decision-makers.

“She drives most of the household decisions on what products they purchase for their family,” explains Donna Moenning with the Midwest Dairy Association.

Moenning’s organization has conducted focus group research with moms to learn what information and messages they want to know about farm operations. Here’s what they found:

- ▶ **It has to be relevant.** Moenning says that mothers in the research group didn’t want to know everything that happens on the farm, but they are interested in being assured that products are produced safely for their family’s health.
- ▶ **They trust producers.** The research indicated that mothers showed more respect and trust for producers than messages from the government. Thus, Moenning says, this adds emphasis to the fact that consumers want to hear from real farmers.
- ▶ **Honest, simple answers.** If consumers have a concern, they want it addressed with an honest, but simple, answer. “Tell it

straight, but don’t tell too much that it causes confusion,” Moenning says. She also suggests only addressing concerns if specific questions are asked.

- ▶ **No gimmicks.** They want the information straight up rather than through a gimmicky analogy. For instance, if a question is asked about why calves are weaned from their mother, Moenning says moms do not want an analogy made to their child being weaned or separated from her. Or if a question is asked about ear tags, they don’t like to have that compared to earrings.

Instead, Moenning suggests giving a brief answer as to why this practice is done, relating it back to the fact that it helps the farm achieve its goals in producing a safe, wholesome beef or dairy product.

She emphasizes that each answer to questions will need to be tailored to the specific audience you are addressing. If you are visiting with a group of school children, be aware those kids will go home and share your stories with their parents. So, be effective in the messages you share.

door policy to neighbors and the community so they can see the environment where animals are raised and satisfy their curiosities.

Or, if you prefer to take agriculture to them, put together a basket of beef and cheese sticks — along with industry brochures or recipes — and take them to a local business during your state’s beef or dairy month.

“Neighbor relations a decade ago were less of a concern, but today many nonfarm families live in the country and know little about agriculture. So it’s important to do these things,” Moenning suggests.

In her rural Minnesota community, she takes chili to her neighbors in the winter to promote her family’s involvement in the beef industry.

Other ideas she suggests would be to take a special basket with beef or dairy products and industry fact sheets to neighbors on Earth Day or May Day. Or take such items to serve as snacks at your church or school.

**7.** Include a mention about your industry in Christmas cards. Moenning suggests including a short paragraph about your industry in your annual Christmas letter to friends and relatives — maybe it’s a unique fact or maybe you direct them to a beef web site with recipes.

“This is just another simple way to make every conversation count,” Moenning says.

Additionally, she says, you can promote

your industry through gifts that you give — be it for graduation, birthdays or weddings. She suggests beef cookbooks, steak knives and beef certificates. “Think out of the box and promote your product every chance you get,” she says.

**8.** Become a member of your local Chamber of Commerce. “You are a local business in your community, and this is a great way to network and share your industry information,” Moenning says.

Likewise, consider making informative presentations about your industry to local community groups such as Lions Clubs, Kiwanis or the Chamber of Commerce. “They want to hear from you,” Moenning says.

**9.** Enter local parades. “This is a simple way to be involved. It’s not about self-promotion; it’s about self-preservation of your industry and creating awareness,” Moenning adds.

**10.** Combine efforts with other industries to promote agriculture. For instance, Moenning suggests donating milk to the Girl Scouts for a “milk and cookies” event. Or, partner with local dairy producers to provide cheese and beef sticks at special community activities.

**11.** Host an “ag” story hour at the library. Moenning suggests selecting a book about farm life and reading it to preschool children

at the local library. She says this can be a great way to educate moms, too.

**12.** Adopt a classroom at the local school. You may go in and make presentations about your farm or industry a couple times a year. Or, perhaps you are an e-mail pen pal to the class and tell them about what’s happening on your farm each month through the school year and then host an on-farm tour in May.

**13.** Work with the news media. Moenning suggests being proactive and contacting your local media to let them know you are willing to be a source for interviews about agriculture. She suggests working with your industry organization to help you prepare and feel comfortable for such a role — and many of them will provide talking points about specific industry issues. Writing letters to the editor can also be an effective way to share your message through the media, she adds.

Lastly, you don’t have to do every item on the list to be an advocate for ag, but Moenning encourages producers to take time to identify a few things that they feel comfortable doing to promote their industry and then “do them well,” she says.

She reminds producers, “If you don’t tell your story, someone else will.”

