

The Future of Agriculture Communications and Communicators

The need for those in the Agriculture Communications sector will be imperative in the future.

With the convergence of technology and agriculture, someone needs to disseminate that information and convey it to farmers and the general public. Our role as Agriculture Communicators is part-scientist, part tech-guru, part dietician, and part-teacher and we impart that information to communicate it to our audience.

It wasn't that long ago that the primary means to communicate advances in agriculture was in print or radio. Audiences for agriculture information were rural based or farmers, and they were looking for information and education on techniques to improve their agriculture practices. With the advent of technology, agriculture communicators have progressed from a mostly journalism-based craft to media production, web design, strategic communications, and social media. With the emergence of technology, agriculture communicators can reach a bigger audience. The problem with technology is that it has created an echo chamber of farmers and consumers, who sometimes don't see eye to eye.

I created this blog with the aspiration of connecting agriculture and the urbanite, and I am not alone in this endeavor. As more generations of urbanites become less connected to where their food comes from, it has created what some term as a "green divide." Being born and raised in Los Angeles and other urban areas throughout California, we have a romantic notion of the farmer's market as a place to get a bouquet of flowers, a cup of coffee, and vegetables from small family farmers. Godfrey and Wood wrote, "Shoppers' perceptions of agriculture are largely based on clouded childhood memories, second-hand information and the occasional

horror story in the media” (2003). Consumer perception reported by the media include dangers with GMOs, the contribution of livestock to greenhouse gases, environmental degradation, and animal welfare issues.

Forty-four percent of consumers stated that their primary source of animal welfare concerns was from the Humane Society for the United States (HSUS) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and that information provided from the industry were the least sourced information.

Despite numerous studies from scientists and the EPA stating that agriculture in the United States contributes about 9 percent to greenhouse gases, articles and news stories report studies that call for a three-fold increase in the consumption of beans and pulses and a 75 percent reduction in the consumption of meat. Consumers are under the perception that feedlots are how beef is raised and that grass-fed is a superior product. Until I became involved in agriculture, I was one of those people. Despite efforts from the beef industry, the message is not getting across to the consumer.

If consumers are responding to HSUS and PETA, what is it about their organizations that their message is able to persuade them? Why is it that people who spread misinformation have more followers than the people involved in the industry?

The problem is a general mistrust of the scientific community. As Shanto Iyengar and Douglas Massey (2018) note, “shifts have enabled unscrupulous actors with ulterior motives increasingly to circulate fake news, misinformation, and disinformation with the help of trolls, bots, and respondent-driven algorithms.” Media outlets will have non-scientific people like Food Babe to

explain the e. coli infection in romaine lettuce. People will stay within their echo chamber because they do not want to create any dissonance.

What can agriculture communicators learn from this, and how can they craft a persuasive message that conveys what the industry is doing today? There are so many studies, glossy reports, and great graphics that address some of these issues and it is up to agriculture communicators in the future to deliver it.

Agriculture communicators need to be proactive to consumers and technology can assist. In addition to blogs, social media channels, such as YouTube, and vlogs (video logs) could connect farmers with consumers. We need to work within our echo chamber to find a solution to bridge that divide between consumers and agriculture. This involves the cooperation of dieticians, scientists, teachers, farmers and ranchers to work on this cause using technology to create a common ground. It shouldn't be an us versus them philosophy when it comes to organic versus conventional farming practices; agriculture communicators should use both viewpoints to convey the truths when it comes to farming and ranching. Technology can create a dialogue, and agriculture communicators can be the moderators of that discussion.