

Facts Not Fear

Adrian Rae Schunk

Michigan FFA Association

We were traveling north through central Michigan, headed to our annual family holiday party. Tired of looking out the car window at endless fields of corn and soybeans, I pulled out my cell phone. As I scrolled through Facebook, I saw a video that caught my eye; it was originally posted by the company Hunt's Tomatoes, a division of Conagra, and had been shared by FFA members, industry professionals and agricultural educators. Wanting to know what all the fuss was about, I clicked "play." It was a simple, 13-second panorama of a tomato field; above the field hung the words "No GMOs in Sight".

No big deal, right? One would think so, but here's the catch: you can't even purchase a GMO tomato from a grocery store here in the United States. It's impossible! There are no GMO tomatoes for commercial sale in the U.S. ("There Are No 'GMO' Tomatoes," 2016). So, here is the big deal: this Hunt's commercial leaves consumers convinced otherwise.

You see, we walk into dozens of labels at the grocery store- local, organic, non-GMO, fresh, hormone free, cage free- the list goes on and on. It's overwhelming, it's intimidating, and frankly, it's misleading.

Let's take a closer look at the Hunt's commercial by Conagra, the global food giant that not only owns Hunt's, but also 44 other brands including Slim Jim, Orville Redenbacher's, and Chef Boyardee ("Brands," n.d.). In this commercial, fear-based marketing is used to deliberately imply that genetically modified tomatoes are, in fact, available to the public, therefore, misleading consumers to believe that other brands may be genetically modified. These assumptions then concern the misled consumers, influencing them to buy the product with the label "non-GMO". Another example is the "Hormone Free" label on poultry. While hormones are naturally-occurring chemicals in all animals, the USDA prohibits artificial growth hormones in poultry ("Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms," n.d.). Search grocery stores high and low, you

will not find one GMO tomato or chicken breast with artificial hormones. As agriculturalists, we understand these marketing claims are misleading- but the food labels don't tell that side of the story.

However, the labels *do* tell the company's tactic to reach consumers: fear. The challenge we're facing is called "fear-based marketing" or "fearmongering". Fearmongering is defined by Oxford Dictionary as, "The action of deliberately arousing public fear or alarm about a particular issue." ("Fearmongering," n.d.). Sound familiar?

So, why does Conagra, and many other companies, use fear-based marketing in order to sway consumers to buy their products? They are opting out of the science-backed labeling and hopping on the fear-based bandwagon because, honestly, it is the easiest path to profit.

This path has been created in large part by one of the agriculture industry's most helpful tools and largest challenges: social media. Activist groups promote propaganda, poorly-supported arguments, and non-factual articles regarding the industry. These articles often specifically pertain to GMOs, pesticide use, and hormones which misled consumers are convinced are "unhealthy". Companies market their products "non-GMO", "hormone-free", or "antibiotic free" because consumers are looking for those products, but they're far too misinformed to understand that there are no GMOs in tomatoes, no hormones in chickens, and no antibiotics in meat.

How has this method of marketing become so effective? First, consumers are disconnected from agriculture. Consumers, on average, are at least 3 generations removed from the farm. ("Our Food Link," n.d.). This means the majority of information they receive about their food is found online.

Second, consumers have two main priorities when purchasing food: nutrition and price. (“Navigating the Grocery Store,” n.d.). The abundance of options and jargon labels create blurred lines when it comes to nutrition, not to mention leaving consumers questioning the best bang for their buck.

Third, consumer time crunch. In 61 percent of families, both parents are employed (“Employment Characteristics of Families,” n.d.). In other words: the confused mother in aisle 3 simply does not have time to sort through labels before she races off to soccer practice, meets with a client, and cleans the house.

All of these factors contribute to the most concerning aspect of fearmongering: consumers have misled assumptions about the food they are purchasing, thus misled assumptions about the agriculture industry as a whole. While companies strive to increase revenue through fear-based marketing, they are also misleading consumers about the safety of our country’s food supply.

So, here’s the question I have for you: How do we, the agriculture industry, educate consumers before they are easily swayed by social media, activist groups, and fear-based marketing?

Here’s the plan, with 3 simple strategies. Train our spokespeople, connect with influencers, and meet consumers where they already are. Let’s start with training our spokespeople. The U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance has outlined an incredible model for having every day conversations with consumers, called “Conversations with E.A.S.E.”. E: Engage in conversation, A: acknowledge concerns, S: share your personal story, and E: earn trust. (“Conversations with E.A.S.E.,” 2012). We will build a better name for our industry by starting conversations built on trust and transparency.

Next, connecting with influencers means connecting with what The Center for Food Integrity has coined “Consumer Food Connectors”. This demographic is 21-65 years old, well educated, and engaged in food advocacy activities. They are shaping conversations and effecting our industry on a grassroots level; every other consumer demographic is looking to them for information.

Lastly, we influence consumers most by going where they already are, every day of their lives: the internet. Using video and images, we must be authentic, transparent, and tell our stories rather than spew facts (“United States Farmers & Ranchers Alliance,” 2016). As an example, the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance is introducing consumers to farmers virtually through their “Faces of Farming” program, farm tours, and blogs about the everyday life of our industry (“Faces of Farming and Ranching,” n.d.). Outlets such as these are helping share our story with consumers, turning fear tactics into factual information about food safety, quality, and transparency.

The reality is this: fear-based marketing is influencing consumers, misrepresenting our industry in the process. If we, as agriculturalists, don’t build trust and transparency to inform consumers that there is health, safety, and practicality behind modern agricultural methods, a misleading commercial like Hunt’s will easily convince them otherwise.

References

- Brands. (n.d.). *Conagra Brands*. Retrieved from: <http://www.conagrabrands.com/>
- Conversations with EASE. (2012, October 29). *National Milk Producers Association, United States Farmers & Ranchers Alliance*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nmpf.org/>
- Employment Characteristics of Families. (2017, April 20). *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/>
- Faces of Farming and Ranching. (n.d.) *The Food Dialogues*. Retrieved from: <http://www.fooddialogues.com/>
- Fearmongering. (n.d.). *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>
- Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms. (n.d.). *United States Department of Agriculture*. Retrieved from: <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/>
- Navigating the Grocery Store: Obstacles, Influences, and Consumer Choice. (n.d.). *Oakland University*. Retrieved from: <https://www.oakland.edu/>
- Our Food Link. (n.d.). *American Farm Bureau Federation*. Retrieved from: <https://www.fb.org/>
- There Are No “GMO” Tomatoes: Backlash Erupts After Hunt’s Marketing Blunder. (2016, December 28). *Forbes Media*. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/>
- U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance Shares Consumer Research, a Good Road Map Forward. (2016, May 25). *USA Rice*. <https://www.usarice.com/>