

Taking Control

Colorado FFA Association

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It's 5:30 a.m. A rancher wakes up, climbs out of bed, and walks to the kitchen for his first cup of coffee and a look at the morning news. When he switches on the TV, he hears the top story for the day. "American consumers outraged over pink slime in beef." After years of ranching, he knows that the price of his spring calves is about to hit a new low - a low that will cost him and his neighbors. All because in a network newsroom thousands of miles away, someone decided that "pink slime" was just scary enough to bump ratings.

Media dominates our culture. In our world of constant access to information, agriculture has little, or in most cases no control over the message that Americans hear. Taking control of American agriculture's image will require an understanding of the media's influence, a look into the damages done in the past, and a positive campaign to reverse the negative stigmas surrounding our industry.

The first step in finding American agriculture's voice is to understand the media's control of information in our country. The media is one of the most influential tools on earth. The question is, who controls its power? Is it the general public? Is it the government? In reality, it is six companies who have a lock on 90% of America's media, shaping the lives of over 300 million people (Lutz, 2012). The annual revenue of these media giants is about 276 billion dollars, which is enough to buy every NFL football team 12 times (Lutz, 2012). The big six is made up of Viacom, News Corp, G.E., Time Warner, CBS, and Disney (Lutz, 2012). In a world of American Idol, professional sports, and Mickey Mouse, agriculture's voice is lost in the noise.

As an industry, we are not only misrepresented in mainstream media but also in advertising and on the internet. One recent example of deceptive advertising comes from Applegate Farms, a natural and organic hotdog company. They are currently using TV commercials and massively popular YouTube videos to attack conventional farming in order to grow their own market sector. One of their most detrimental commercials shows a man dressed as a steer speaking about the perils of living on a “factory farm.” The steer claims that he enjoys a daily injection of antibiotics. In speaking with a feedlot owner in my area, I learned that this statement is completely false. Bret McEndaffer of McEndaffer Feedyard said, “This practice would be uneconomical and useless. No feedlot does this or would do this” (McEndaffer, 2013). In this commercial, Applegate also portrays all other feedlots as overcrowded corporate farms. Does this false publicity even make sense when we consider that 98% of farms in the United States are owned and operated by American families? (America’s Farmers, 2012) These are families like mine, and maybe yours.

Extreme cases of misinformation have destroyed America’s perception of agriculture and cost our industry billions of dollars. Take the listeria outbreak in Colorado for example. In 2011, cantaloupes from eastern Colorado were infected with the deadly bacteria that caused a national fear of the fruit. News stations ran with the headline of poisoned Rocky Ford cantaloupe. In less than five months, the national industry saw a price drop of 33.6 percent (Bottemiller, 2011). In truth, every case of listeria in this outbreak was caused by the contamination of a packing shed on a single Colorado farm (Bottemiller, 2011). Even though Colorado only accounts for 2% of the national market, the entire cantaloupe industry was devastated (Bottemiller, 2011). With

a shelf life of only two weeks, American cantaloupes were completely safe by the end of October 2011 (Neuman, 2011). But without the follow up reporting to emphasize the fruit's safety to the consumer, the industry struggled to recover.

A classic example of misinformation occurred in April of 1996 when Oprah Winfrey hosted a show about the dangers of the American food supply. She interviewed a number of people about bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly called "mad cow disease." The editing for television resulted in a show less about the fact that there were no known accounts of mad cow in the United States, and more about the assumption that this disease was on its way. When Oprah said that she would not be eating a hamburger for a long time (Mad Cow Spotlight, 1996), fear spread instantly. Even though the claims were proven false, the damage to the beef industry was already done.

It is time we take control. Beef Products Incorporated (BPI) is setting a good example for the rest of the agricultural community by standing up to the media induced damage done to their company. They are in the process of filing a defamation suit against ABC News for over one billion dollars. ABC, owned by Walt Disney, published and released over 200 negative and inaccurate statements about products produced by BPI. Lean, finely-textured beef with a media catching nickname "pink slime" was the target of these reports. BPI reported an 80% loss in business in less than 30 days. The director of food safety and quality assurance for BPI said, "This is not tied to a food safety outbreak. This is not tied to a public health risk. This is not tied to a quality issue. This is tied to a misinformation campaign that was waged against our company" (Shaffer, 2012).

Beyond holding mainstream media accountable for inaccurate reporting, our industry must share its story through social media and on the internet. Facebook has over 1.11 billion active users per month (Yahoo News, 2013). That is a group of people nearly four times the size of the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and blogs with facts about agriculture are the best ways to start educating the public about the truth.

Social media cannot do it alone. TV, print media, and radio must follow along and show the truth. Commercials like last year's Super Bowl Ad "God Made a Farmer," and Campaigns like "Got Milk" have been extremely successful in associating agriculture with mainstream people and events. On the local level, Colorado-based King Soopers grocery stores use "Farm Family" commercials connect the consumer's plate to the farmer's gate, giving people in Colorado a reason to connect with agriculturalists.

Malcolm X once said (1960), "The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power." As an industry, we must take back that power by understanding the media's influence, learning from the past, and educating our consumers. Sharing positive facts about agriculture is not a one-person job. It is a job for all of us.

The final paragraph of the FFA creed states, "I can exert an influence in my home and community..." Imagine the impact if over half-a-million FFA members made one post on Facebook or one tweet on Twitter about the positive truth in agriculture! It is our obligation to reshape the perceptions of millions of people. With the help of every person that has worn or is wearing this blue jacket, we will take control of American agriculture's image.

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