

6 Steps to Championing Agriculture

by Michele Payn-Knoper,
Cause Matters Corp.

Are you frustrated by the lack of understanding about agriculture? Consumers don't appreciate where their food comes from. Politicians can't fully grasp what's needed to help the agrifood business. The media seems to add to the onslaught with sensationalism from activist groups.

I understand your frustration. As a matter of fact, my goal as a professional speaker is to help the agricultural industry "champion our cause." Yes, I know your inbox is overflowing and chores are always waiting. But the reality is that we have to make time to champion agriculture now because we are losing in the courtroom of public opinion. Whether you're elevator manager, a feed salesman, or a farmer – YOU are the best spokesperson there is because of your personal involvement in the agrifood business!

Greenpeace, PETA, Friends of the Earth, and other activists will gladly 'tell agriculture's story' if you don't make the time or find the courage to speak up. Take a look at what happened in Zambia when activists created emotions that over-ruled the reality of three million starving people. European-funded environmental organizations recently admitted to stirring up anti-biotech hysteria in Sub-Saharan Africa. The result was Zambia's rejection of U.S. food aid - grain that could have reduced starvation.

When people are allowed to starve because of activist rhetoric, it's pretty clear these extreme interest groups have done more than make inroads - they've invaded our territory! What's more, our opportunity to educate consumers based upon the facts is dwindling. Consumers are forming more opinions about farming and food production techniques, according to a recent study sponsored by American Farm Bureau (AFBF) and Altria Group (formerly Philip Morris). That same study showed that 75% of consumers believe agriculture does only a fair or poor job in communicating about our industry.

YOU can change that perception by actively championing agriculture. Here are 6 easy-to-remember steps to help you:

"Who: Identify your target audience. Who can make a difference for the cause of agriculture? Look at it the same way as you do hunting or playing a game of darts; you want to hit the bull's eye. Who do you need to help understand where their food comes from in your local area? Teachers, kids, media, consumers, and elected officials are all examples of groups with key influence.

What: Find your target audience's hot buttons. What's important to them? A hot button is an area of personal passion or pursuit – something that will really get them excited! Don't assume that you know; ask some questions to find out what they really care about. A hot button may seem unrelated to your cause and you may not agree with what you hear, but listen carefully.

Why: Determine how agriculture connects with the target audience’s hot buttons. For example, the AFBF/Altria Group study showed that 91% of consumers surveyed were concerned about protecting groundwater from contaminants. If you’re targeting consumers, take the time to explain how biotechnology or modern farming practices actually reduce the chemicals needed.

How: Follow a proven process to develop long-lasting relationships. Do you “buy” an idea from somebody you don’t trust? A process that works in a variety of situations: build rapport, identify needs by asking questions, offer a solution for their needs, motivate to action, overcome objections, and then get their commitment.

Where: Strategize where you can reach your target audience. It may be at the county fair, your grocery store, or simply having a discussion at church. For example, you’re targeting local media and decide to host a press tour that includes stops at your facilities and a local farm. Focus on educating them about food production/processing techniques, give them facts and a hands-on experience. You’ll generate positive press and become a source of expertise for future stories.

When: One hour – once a week. Add “championing agriculture” to your checklist for each season. Consider it your opportunity to plant seeds for the future of our industry! And if you don’t make a point to start investing one hour/week this season, what will your harvest be?

Helping people understand our industry doesn’t have to be complicated. The good news is that farming consistently ranks as one of the top three most highly respected occupations in the country. We need to leverage that respect into an understanding of what happens from the farm gate to the consumer plate. Turn your frustration into positive energy by using these six steps to champion agriculture!

“Selling” Agriculture

Michele Payn-Knoper, www.mpk.info
Cause Matters Corp.

Salesmanship? As an agriculturist, selling may not be on your list of favorites. Yet reality is that we all have to sell in today’s competitive business...whether it’s an idea, your products, or a service. Before you frown on having to sell; erase the picture of a “high pressure used car salesman.” Rather, consider how you can build a relationship and connect the other person’s hot buttons.

For example, let’s take a look at how selling is a part of speaking out for agriculture. After all, why should those outside the industry care about the agrifood business? The country isn’t facing starvation and until BSE hit, food safety wasn’t a huge concern to many North American consumers. The fact of the matter is that people won’t care about agriculture until we give them a reason to; in other words “sell” the industry to them. I’m not talking about “selling out” what’s important to us, but relating on their terms.

“Communicating strictly facts to consumers when trying to explain technology is a recipe to fail” according to an Iowa State University sociological study conducted about animal agriculture in 2002. All of us in agriculture know how critical the trust factor is within our business; we like to buy from people we know and respect. It’s no different when trying to connect our cause with people who are generations removed from the farm. The same study mentioned above found “The person who says food is safe is at least as important as the facts being communicated. Consumers rank farmers as the most credible on animal care issues.”

Perhaps you’re not on a farm or ranch, so you don’t feel like you should have to “sell” agriculture. As food moves from the farm gate to the consumer plate, each business along the way needs to shoulder the responsibility of educating the end user. After all, where would you be if there was neither a consumer purchasing that food product or a farmer working with animals?

Help put a face on the business by actively “selling” agriculture to the people who are buying our products. Here's a seven-step sales process you can use to build their trust and understanding of our industry.

- **Build rapport:** Spend some time getting to know the target audience.
- **Establish interest:** Use the majority of your time with the target audience listening and give enough info to grab their attention.
- **Identify needs:** Look for hot buttons you can push!
- **Offer Solutions:** Connect agriculture to those hot buttons - relate from their perspective, not yours. Try offering a solution.
- **Motivate into action:** Give them a reason to react quickly to what you're proposing.
- **Overcome objections:** Remember, 'no' won't hurt you. It simply means you have to ask some more questions to identify what needs they still have.
- **Gain a commitment:** Don't forget to close the deal by confirming what you've agreed on and any action points.

This sales process can really help you develop relationships and, in turn, credibility for agriculture. Successful business today has to include some element of selling, whether we like it or not. Rather than looking upon selling as high pressure, consider it as the art of persuasion.

You might even be able to protect your place in agriculture in the future by successfully “selling.” After all, Forbes just reported Vegetarian food sales doubled since 1998 in the U.S., hitting \$1.6 billion in 2003. The market is forecast to grow another 61% by 2008. The activists have obviously been successful in selling their ideas...have we? If that fact concerns you, now is the time to begin selling!

Michele Payn-Knoper founded Cause Matters to help give a voice to the people who feed the world. E-mail newsletter@mpk.info to receive her monthly “MPK Connections” e-newsletter for tools on speaking out for agriculture, selling solutions, and grassroots marketing. See www.mpk.info or call 765.427.4426 for more information.