Talking Agriculture

A study of communication techniques and approaches to crisis communication

A report for

by David Cussons

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Foreword

I started working for the ABC Radio Rural Department full-time in 2000 through until 2005 at which time I started presenting a morning show current affairs program in north Queensland. During my time in the rural department I hosted rural reports in Bunbury, Albany, Esperance, Burnie and Toowoomba, National Rural News from Melbourne and the WA Country Hour. Whilst working in this range of positions, it was my responsibility to report fairly and in a balanced manner on all the agricultural news happening in my region. Stories I covered were diverse, from the deregulation of the WA milk industry to droughts, crop failures and disease outbreaks right through to the good news, like record commodity prices and improvements in landcare and machine technology.

My observations though were that negative stories almost always received the most coverage across Australia and all too often I would have a defensive and uptight agriculture company CEO or farmer's group representative dodging bullets on my program about why things weren't going well for their sector or what they were doing about a particular incident or crisis. As a journalist it was relatively easy to identify the "hot-button" questions to ask these cornered (and often unwilling!) spokespeople and those without media knowledge were particularly vulnerable.

Since returning to the family farm in Kojonup, Western Australia, the poor image of farmers and increasing disconnect between city and country, has become even more apparent to me. As a farmer rather than a journalist you certainly look at things from a different perspective!

With so many recent events around the world like disease outbreaks and animal rights groups activities damaging the image of agriculture, it is becoming increasingly important for agriculture to embrace a positive and proactive approach to public relations. My travels have allowed me to tap into overseas experience and industry contacts which have helped me construct this report documenting how to contact and use the media effectively, why it's best

to be proactive with your public message, how to positively portray the image of agriculture in the public eye and who should do what in the midst of a crisis.

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Abbreviations

AFB	American Farm Bureau
AWI	Australian Wool Innovation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CAFB	Californian Farm Bureau
CCF	Centre for Consumer Freedom
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CUESA	Centre for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture
FMD	Foot and Mouth Disease
LEAF	Linking Environment and Farming
MLA	Meat and Livestock Australia
NFU	National Farmers Union
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
PR	Public Relations
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
TFB	Texas Farm Bureau

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Executive Summary

Background

This study has arisen from concern about the apparent lack of good stories about agriculture in non-trade media within Australia. The sparse coverage of Australian agriculture tends to revolve around negative or quirky stories, which do little to promote farmers for the caring, passionate, hardworking and savvy people they are. In doing this research I have travelled to similar media markets around the world to learn about the latest approaches and techniques being used to spread the word about agriculture. In addition I have compiled communication lessons learnt during crises overseas, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States.

The report is essentially targeted at all involved in Australian agriculture as we all have an investment in the future wellbeing of our sector and prominence in the media is intrinsically intertwined with that future. In particular I believe state and national agricultural lobby groups would benefit from the recommendations as they do much of the work in promoting agriculture in Australia and inevitably are used as media sources by agricultural and non-agricultural journalists alike.

Aims

The aim of the report is to build a ‘toolbox’ of media skills and knowledge which can be utilised by stakeholders in industry promotion and crisis management. It includes understanding the demographics of the public and what they want from agriculture, deciding who should deliver the message, the medium through which they should be delivered, how to pitch the message, interview techniques and how to connect with the media.

I have also included a chapter on crisis communication, an area in which there is much we can learn from overseas experiences. This section looks at why crisis communication plans are important, what should be considered in implementing a plan, who should be included in the crisis response team and why even if you can’t predict the exact nature of a future crisis, you can and should still plan effectively.

Method

My approach was to visit media marketplaces around the world which could be considered similar in nature to Australia so that lessons learnt would have optimum relevance. As such, I visited Japan, England, Sweden, USA, Canada and New Zealand. An interview-style technique was adopted during meetings with a range of lobby groups, journalists, interest groups, agri-politicians, universities and public relations professionals.

Recommendations

- Understand the demographics of the public to enable effective public relations
- Improve our selection and training of agriculture spokespeople
- Embrace the latest social media techniques
- Use electronic traceability for consumer education
- Use sports personalities to promote agriculture
- Consider launching a country-themed lifestyle magazine
- Formalise a written crisis communications plan, no matter how simple it may be

Introduction

Communication is critical to us all, but do we understand enough about how to do it well? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'communication' as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour". That is common sense. It also goes on to tell us however that communication is "a technique for expressing ideas *effectively*". It is this latter definition which is most telling, and perhaps damning, for Australian agriculture. It could be argued the sector is not being as effective as it should be in its communication efforts.

Even casual monitoring of Australia's press would uncover a trend of negative stories about agriculture – stories often tell the tale of hardships arising from drought, frost, hail or poor commodity prices. Other articles concerning agriculture revolve around quirky stories about the biggest watermelon ever grown, or a beer drinking cow.

While these stories are inevitable and should indeed be part of the spectrum of media coverage about agriculture, they do not by any stretch of the imagination do the agricultural industry justice. They do not tell the full story!

My individual Nuffield travels have taken me through Japan, Europe, USA and New Zealand in a comprehensive study of agricultural communication methods. I wanted to find out who is using the most progressive techniques across an ever increasing range of mediums to sell the story of agriculture to the world. In addition I also wanted to learn about crisis communications from those who know it best – professionals such as those who guided the UK livestock sectors through FMD and BSE crises.

The journey took me to meet politicians, journalists, lobby groups representatives, farmers, newspaper editors, company executives and more. One of the biggest things I learnt is that while there are many excellent exponents of agricultural public relations and crisis communication across the world, the problems faced in Australia in trying to increase the awareness of agriculture to the public are shared in the countries I visited.

Objectives

Frustration with the growing disconnect between agriculture and the general public led me to this study of agricultural communication techniques. The way in which the world is communicating is evolving at a rapid rate – who would have thought 'Twitter' would be ruling the world now, or that one of America's most significant farmers markets now looks to bloggers as their preferred media outlet?

I worry that Australian agriculture is not keeping up with these trends and so wanted to find out what the best practitioners were doing around the world, so I could bring these techniques home. In doing this, I have put the best methods used into a 'toolbox' for our industry to use in shaping their communication policies – from what the media and public want from us, media spokesperson training, key message construction through to the most effective forums through which to deliver our messages.

Hand in hand with improving the perception and awareness of agriculture in non-farming circles is crisis communication. Techniques learnt as a result of the high pressure furnace of a significant disease outbreak like those experienced in European and North American livestock industries earlier this decade will add valuable knowledge to our bank of information on crisis communication here in Australia. Again, I will outline these methods in a toolbox approach which can be adopted for use by local farming organisations and others.

Increasing general public awareness of, and appreciation for, agriculture is essential to ensure Australian agriculture remains a bedrock of our nation.

Chapter 1: What does the world think of agriculture?

Much like the question, the answer is broad and difficult to neatly fit into a box. What can be said however is that in all of the countries visited, farming was not well understood within the general public and the appreciation for farmers seems to be diminishing.

There are many reasons why agriculture has become disconnected from the general population and depending on where you live and what you believe in, any one reason could carry more weight than any other. Historically it is said 'everyone had a relative living on a farm who could provide a link to agriculture'. Now it seems more likely that in a highly urbanised country like Australia, many people are at least a generation removed from having that direct family link to the farm. While this is a generally accepted theory, it is difficult to quantify this causal relationship between time and an urban family's diminishing relationship with agriculture.

What we can say with confidence however is that society has become more fast-paced, with its need for instant gratification becoming insatiable. This has been increasingly so in the last decade as electronic communications have evolved at an astonishing rate. Even the role of the latest 'big thing', Twitter, which Wikipedia defines as a 'free social networking and micro-blogging service' ("*Twitter"* n.d.), has changed rapidly since its birth in 2006. In fact "unique visitors to Twitter increased 1,382 percent year-over-year, from 475,000 unique visitors in February 2008 to 7 million in February 2009" (McGiboney, 2009).

What this love affair with electronic communications has done is to widen the gulf between agriculture and greater society. This is because agriculture firstly is not perceived as being savvy and modern, making the sector seem irrelevant to a fast-paced society, and secondly agriculture has not always used modern techniques to communicate itself to the outside world – talking in the language and forums the modern world is using.

So what does the public actually think of farmers?

The ‘good bloke’ syndrome

Rather than being a malaise, the ‘good bloke’ syndrome is something the industry can use to its advantage - according to Anthony Gibson, who was director of communications for the UK’s primary agricultural lobby group for two years from 2006, people get a warm glow when they hear “British farmer” - they think things like “good bloke” and “they’re growing our food”, the latter growing in importance as world population increases and food security declines.

The UK’s National Farmers Union (NFU), like many lobby groups around the world, often represents the public face of the sector and Anthony Gibson says he became the organisations director of communications during an era of surpluses and oversupplied markets in the UK. Farmers became the target of criticism, and coupled with the well documented disease issues the agricultural sector faced, the situation lead to economic decline and a lack of self respect in the industry. Anthony’s brief as the new director of communications was to increase morale and “sort things out” with a new strategic direction.

He said the organisation was keen to restore both the farmers and the NFU’s role, so they launched a campaign called “Why Farming Matters”. This was intended though to strike a chord with farmers, rather than with the public – the NFU wanted to campaign about the role of industry.

The next move of course was to move the campaign from farmers to the public sector, so the NFU looked at what kind of message would gain traction with the public.

Highlighting how food security increases when farmers are doing well was considered too complicated to strike a chord with the public. A campaign based on showing how farmers manage the countryside wasn’t considered believable by the public, so the organisation settled

on a social message - farmers are good members of the community, let's appreciate that they grow food. Therefore the NFU ran a 'farmers are good blokes' campaign, something which resonated well with the public.

Does your shopping trolley reflect what you think of farmers?

So what about consumer purchasing trends? Do they provide any indication of what people think about and want from agriculture? Many consumers will say they buy based on animal welfare and environmental concerns, but in reality that's not always the case – an example is free range versus battery egg consumer trends. While consumers may say they will buy free range eggs and will pay more for them, free range eggs only accounted for 40 per cent of the UK's total retail egg sales for the year to 6th September 2009 according to the British Egg Information Service ("*Two Billion Free Range Eggs*" n.d.) – in other words, they don't always put their money where their mouth is.

To be fair, the global financial downturn may have played a part in people being less willing to part with extra money for organic or locally grown food, although people's opinions on this seem to differ around the world. For example, Anthony Gibson says he believes there has been a big downturn in sales of organic/locally grown food as the economy underperforms, telling me that as times are tough, value for money is important - people don't lose principles but what they are prepared to pay for those principles goes down in economic hardships. As Terry Jones from the London office of the NFU put it, 'ethical consumerism may not be dead but it is on a budget'!

However, I heard a different story on the west coast of California, in San Francisco. Dave Stockdale, the manager of the wildly popular Ferry Markets says the effect of the recession in his city has been that people are not eating out at restaurants as much. San Francisco people are very much 'foodies' – that is, they enjoy, appreciate and seek out good food, but tightened budgets have meant staying home to eat good food with good ingredients bought from his markets. Dave says this trend is evident in most US metro areas, but especially in the north-west cities of San Francisco, Seattle and Portland.

Picture 1: From farmers to consumers at the UN Plaza Farmers Markets in San Francisco

So it seems it's difficult to say for certain what has happened to consumer trends in the face of the global recession, but for the average urban consumer, it's fair to say affordability is a big factor and much of the time it really is all about value for money and quality.

What does the public want from agriculture?

Nuffield Scholar and founder of the UK's Open Farm Sunday program Ian Pigott, says as a sector we need to endear ourselves to the public – a good way to do this is to understand what the public wants from agriculture. Ian believes consumers want agriculture to provide:

- Good wholesome food
- A production system which doesn't impact on environment
- Animals living outside
- Farmers looking after soil/habitats
- Not too much fertiliser/pesticides used
- Sustainable agricultural systems

For Ian, education in schools is critical – he says 40-60 year olds are a generation who think farmers pillage the land, while 70 year olds understand farming. However getting to kids at school can help shape a whole new generations understanding of the importance of agriculture. I certainly concur with Ian that education at school is a major pillar of spreading the message about agriculture.

Caroline Drummond is from the LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) organisation in the UK, the organisers of Open Farm Sunday, and she stresses the point that consumers need to have confidence in the way farmers produce food. She says twenty years ago farmers were thought of as hardworking, caring and honest, but as society becomes increasingly more urban, its' understanding of where our food comes from is becomingly increasingly remote - she agrees with Ian about the need for education to fix this. Certain interest groups tell kids that farmers do bad things, so farmers need to take control of their own message and image. Importantly, she says information provided to schools needs to be linked to the curriculum or teachers won't use it.

BBC Radio's 'Farming Today' program has a large metro audience and so is in an excellent position to identify what urban dwellers think about agriculture. Incidentally they have a large metro audience as the number of potential listeners to a pure farming program in the UK wouldn't justify funding, so they've had to appeal to the urban population also. The metro audience means they have a focus on food and where it comes from as well as the environment. Producer Chris Impey says the things consumers want to know about agriculture include:

- Food provenance
- Wildlife
- Safety/labelling
- Power of supermarkets
- Food miles (how far product travels to get to your plate)

Maybe one of the best measures of what the public likes about the environment and agriculture can be highlighted by the spectacular success of the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in gathering members.

The RSPB is an organisation with over one million members – the society's Jim Densham isn't sure why the RSPB has captured the public's imagination in the UK so well but not in other countries. One theory is simply that the English public loves birds - they are evocative, brightly coloured, communicate in song and are visible. He says members trust the RSPB to do a good job of protecting birds and thinks the RSPB makes members feel good about the environment – and by extension, no doubt feel good about themselves. He says people primarily want agriculture to provide them with food on their plate.

In a similar vein, the hit BBC TV series 'Jimmy's Farm' was set up to tell people about food and where it comes from. Jimmy Doherty set up the farm without any real farming knowledge and this may be the secret to why it was so popular - like the viewers, he didn't know much about farming, but liked the farm, animals, being outside and producing his own food. Visitors to the farm always ask:

- Where are his famous pigs? (as they've seen them on TV)
- Is the farm still in crisis? (one of the TV shows covered the farms shaky finances)
- Is it viable?
- Where is Jim? (Jim is the brand)
- The farm has changed a lot/what is the future/when is he getting married?

Picture 2: With Jimmy Doherty (L) at his farm in Suffolk

The learning point from this of course is the importance of telling a story people can relate to – the public will be receptive to an interesting farmer with a story to tell, particularly one starring in the very popular reality TV genre!

At the other end of the spectrum from farmers being viewed as trustworthy custodians of the land and good contributors to society is the stereotype of corporate farms. Some people believe many farms are run by faceless corporations who are involved purely for the money

Sam Succop from the Washington DC-based organisation 'The Hand That Feeds U.S.' says that while the perception of agriculture is of giant corporate agri-businesses, the reality is that 98 per cent of US farms are family run. There is also a perception of "wealthy welfare farmers" – in July 2006 *The Washington Post* published a comprehensive article outlining how rich farmers, or in some cases rich landowners who don't farm, are getting large amounts of money in farm payments from the federal government (Morgan, Gaul & Cohen, 2006). President Obama has also said he will try to eliminate money going to millionaire farmers ("*Obama Says Farm Bill Benefits Should Be Targeted,"* 2007).

Along with farm subsidies, the public is also interested in food safety, especially in Japan and these issues are building up. This photo shows the concern over Swine Flu and Chinese meat in a Tokyo supermarket.

Picture 3: Food safety concerns in Tokyo

Rob Sivak from the Voice of America in Washington DC says 20 years ago people trusted food supplies more, now that trust isn't as evident and the public is more likely to ask questions about the supply chain. He says people are more aware of food, where it's coming from, but don't understand the day-to-day of farming. Interestingly, Rob says people don't really want to be in a harvester cab or other farm equipment - their interest is as much as 'that's wheat, that's nice' – they don't want to know realities. Technology can catch people's attention though – especially the geek population!

Perhaps some encouraging words come from well respected agricultural journalist Scott Kilman, who is based in Chicago with the Wall St Journal. He believes in the US people worry about farmers in good times and bad, which is good to know farmers are in the public consciousness. However it gets tricky when the public is told too much about agriculture - Scott believes the public wants agricultural production to be like a nursery rhyme - they have a

romantic idea of agricultural production with happy animals and green rolling hills, which is also the image shown in advertising. However there is an obvious identity clash, with a tension existing between how consumers think/want their food to be produced and the reality. As for the idea of corporate farms, as properties get larger, it goes against the same romantic notions.

A final group to consider are legislators and what they think of agriculture – important of course when it comes to getting our point of view across to those in the seat of power. Terry Jones from the London office of the NFU says politicians tend to fit into a range of groups when it comes to agriculture:

- Enthusiasts
- Those who deal with agriculture now and again
- Agriculture is not on their radar
- Actively dislike agriculture

Terry says they will only brief/send press releases to the first two groups, and sometimes may look to bring the third group in. They take this approach because it isn't cost effective to always send information to the third group, while the final group will never be converted, no matter what information is provided.

Shifting public opinion about agriculture could be a costly and time consuming exercise. However issues like climate change and the impact of increasing populations on food security will push agriculture to a more prominent position in the public consciousness. One thing we know for sure is that people don't like being told what to do and what's good for them. Any good communication strategy will be about showing rather than telling the public why agriculture is critical to their lives.

So what does the public think about agriculture? A range of things depended on where you live around the world, your upbringing, beliefs and values, and financial status. We can surmise that farmers are generally trusted and valued members of society, even if they aren't well understood and fully appreciated. People generally like good wholesome food produced

locally, but don’t want to pay too much for it. Lastly the public wants farmers to be conscientious keepers of the land and environment and will always be attracted to good stories about interesting farmers.

Chapter 2: What makes a good agricultural communicator?

While it is important to understand what the world thinks of agriculture, as outlined in Chapter One, choosing and training the right people to take the message to the public is critical – the skills of an agricultural communicator can make or break the success of a campaign!

So what makes a good agricultural communicator?

It may sound simple, but a good start is to use someone who actually wants to be a spokesperson – this will mean they are naturally enthusiastic, passionate and hopefully positive about agriculture.

Farmers need to answer the call to the microphone!

Don Lipton of the American Farm Bureau in Washington DC says in the USA there's a critical shortage of people willing to be spokespeople and much of this unwillingness comes from a distrust of the media. Perhaps farmers have seen the negative media about their industry build up over time, or maybe they have personally had a bad experience with a journalist and don't want to be put in that situation again.

However farmers need to answer this call to step up – the media almost always want to talk to a 'real' farmer. This is because to the media, talking to a farmer rather than a 'suit' makes them feel as though they are getting the real story from the grassroots with no spin. If we only train bureaucrats to be spokespeople we will not stop the media from talking to farmers – journalists are resourceful and will dig someone up to give them the headline they want. The NFU's Terry Jones says nine times out of ten his organisation will put farmers up in front of the media rather than so-called 'suits' - mainly those farmers are already NFU office bearers,

but not always. Farmers are often invisible to the public – they don't know or get the opportunity to meet farmers, so there's no reason to not believe bad media reports! Farmers need to do a better job of selling themselves in the media – you could think of being in the media as a cost of doing business as no-one understands or even considers your point of view if you sit on the sidelines. Not only that, but if you don't get your own information out there, the media 'beast' will suck other, possibly worse, information in.

Dave Kranz from the California Farm Bureau says the goal in responding to media questions is to consider it an opportunity – think of the audience and what they want to hear, don't think of yourself. Remain honest and open but think of how the message would be received; even think about how you'd explain to an urban outsider what you do.

Any situation in which an untrained farmer is sought out by the media for comment could potentially be dangerous for the industry. As Don Lipton told me, it would be nice if the public could discount the lone voice popping up in the media with left-field ideas, but unfortunately that one voice can be powerful. Therefore the ideal would be to get a pool of willing and trained farmer spokespeople to speak on behalf of their industries.

Selecting and training the right spokespeople

While those spokespeople need to be willing, they also need to be able. Head of the Communications Department at Kansas State University, Dr Kris Boone, says selection of the right people is critical, as throwing out the right perceptions to the public play a very important role in deciding who you're going to use as your spokesman. Backing this view up is Sir Ben Gill, former president of the UK's NFU, who believes you can't teach charisma, but you can teach media skills given some sort of base level of knowledge. Therefore finding charismatic farmers with a story to tell and some natural bent towards performing for the media are all good ingredients.

LEAF CEO Caroline Drummond agrees, saying you need a good story and a good communicator to have success. Her organisation runs two day courses for farmers on being a

good communicator, although selection for the course was important – you want to avoid the grumpy farmers with an axe to grind!

One of the critical things a pool of media trained-farmers would achieve is to get a consistent message coming from industry, an element of successful agricultural communications reiterated time and again by those I visited overseas. A mixed message from industry is a negative one as far as the public is concerned!

Sir Ben Gill, former president of the NFU is well versed in performing in front of the media, being a key spokesman for farmers during the 2001 Foot and Mouth (FMD) outbreak in the UK. He says you achieve a consistent message by consistently telling the truth - too many people say what the audience wants to hear, or a variation, and get tripped up. Establish a set of base criteria early on and stick to them. Along the same lines, Anthony Gibson, who worked with Sir Gill at the NFU, stresses the importance of simply saying reasonable things to the media and also placing emphasis on striking a chord with non-farmers. It's dangerous to play to your own gallery as it will literally turn off 98 per cent of the population – having said that, you can't tell a pack of lies just to appeal to the public.

Sir Gill places a large emphasis on doing your homework before interviews to understand the details of the subject – this of course was critical for him in discussing the science of FMD, remembering of course he also had the difficult job of pitching his answers to respect the emotion involved with the situation also – this sort of juggling act can only be performed following a commitment to interview technique and training!

Sir Gill says short answers of 20-25 seconds are effective, which I believe is an excellent technique when being interviewed by news journalists as it fits the 'grab' length they would want for their bulletins. However when being interviewed for a longer feature story, shorter answers will tend to frustrate interviewers and rob you of the opportunity to both control the interview and provide a more rounded story. He also says answering questions by starting with a question is an effective technique, giving you six seconds to think – again I believe in some situations this works well but is not an approach to be used constantly – the listeners will tire of the pattern. One very clever technique an experienced practitioner like Sir Gill also uses is

to leave something unanswered in the question which will prompt the journalist to follow a line of questioning to get that answer from you. This in an indirect way gives you control over the interview.

Perhaps taking that a step further is USA communications specialist Kevin Roark who Dr Kris Boone from Kansas State University says told her about a technique involving 'planting' key words into sentences to encourage journalists to use a particular quote– for example, using a strong word like 'fortress' will attract journalists to use that line for their story. This enables you to control which of your sentences they use as quotes in the story simply through the language you use.

One of the things which make communicating agriculture difficult is the scientific and technical nature of the industry. Many of the terms used by and about the agricultural industries can sound like a foreign language to outsiders. The American Press Institute's Carol Ann Riordan stresses the importance of using articulate people with no agenda who have lots of experience in a range of topics to explain technical issues to journalists. This is particularly important for smaller markets without specialist agriculture reporters - briefings for journalists and education on a regular basis with no pressure are probably all welcomed by some, but the reality is a proportion of journalists will remain unwilling to commit the time and effort to become more familiar with agriculture. AFB's Don Lipton adds that journalists generally aren't in the job of covering agriculture for very long, so offering background information is even more critical.

Ongoing training and reinforcement is important for continuing quality of spokesperson performance. Sam Succop, who works for the Washington-based organisation 'The Hand That Feeds U.S.' says to maintain the quality of their message she briefs her spokesmen every week. They want them to be genuine and an important part of their success is educating their spokespeople about how the media works.

An important element of successful agricultural communications is to use farmers only for relaying positive messages where possible – the community tires very quickly of hearing from the stereotypical 'whinging' farmer. This doesn't mean however that you can't be negative in

campaigning – it may be more effective though to use a third party to provide that negative element rather than doing it yourself.

There is a very strong and committed community of agricultural communicators in Ontario, Canada from who much can be learnt. Toronto-based communication specialist Wallace Pidgeon provides the interesting viewpoint that ‘men don’t matter’ as the consumer market is driven by women. In fact Wallace asserts that more women are currently in the Canadian workforce across Canada than at any time since WWII and are in charge of agricultural storytelling now – they are better communicators. In Japan, housewives are very trusting of women, and Greg Hanes from the American Meat Export Federation says they have used women involved in US farming to inform Japanese consumers about US meat products.

Along the same lines Wallace Pidgeon from Ontario suggests when selecting a spokesperson you shouldn’t go for the obvious high flying businessman on your board to be your spokesman - consider the young mother whose words will strike a real chord with much of the community when she delivers your company’s message into the community. Wallace also puts forward the question ‘do you want a 25 year old heart surgeon or a 50 year old heart surgeon operating on you? The latter obviously as they have more experience! Therefore don’t put out an 18 year old farmer to be a spokesperson, use a more experienced spokesperson. As in many things, I believe the answer lies in the middle ground – a spokesperson with a youthful enthusiasm and energy but also an experience and knowledge which brings credibility is the optimal mix. A person fitting this mould beautifully is the current NFU president Peter Kendall. Nuffield Scholar Guy Smith says of Kendall in his book A History of the NFU “As a speaker he is relentlessly positive and forcefully upbeat, which is something farming audiences find refreshing and uplifting. Having said this, farmers also recognise he is aware of their problems, and his members trust him to fight in their corner with government” (Smith, 2008).

Finally, if inevitably the majority of farmers don’t want to be involved with the media, and it should be recognised not all people are born to speak to the press, then there are still a range of other ways they can contribute to spreading the word about agriculture. For example farmers may commit to speaking to community groups about their farms, or agree to participate in programs like ‘Open Farm Sunday’ as described in the following Chapter.

In summary agricultural spokespeople need to be both willing and able to participate in media events. They need solid initial and ongoing media training which covers media basics such as preparing key messages, sticking to talking points, and for more advanced practitioners, controlling the interview to swing the outcome in your favour. Perhaps the best advice as a whole to remember is that when farmers portray themselves as backward, it doesn't help any of us – it is impossible to sell a bad product to the community and the media! If we aren't even positive amongst ourselves, what chance do we have of portraying a positive image of agriculture to the broader community?

Chapter 3: Taking the message to the world

The way in which information is consumed by the public has evolved greatly over time and is changing at a faster rate now than ever before. The advent of electronic communications (e-comms) has revolutionised delivery of information around the world - as Don Lipton from the American Farm Bureau aptly put it, if there ever was one way to approach media relations, there's not any more! The positive is that if multinationals like McDonalds and various beer companies are successfully using images of farmers to sell product, we at least know as a sector we have a winning story to sell – we just have to do it right.

Agricultural organisations like lobby groups in particular have a very difficult balancing act to negotiate. The average farmer member is likely to prefer receiving his or her information in a more traditional method, via fax, post or email. However the modern trends of communication are leading us in the direction of highly responsive websites and social media tools like blogs, Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. This means organisations like the National Farmers Federation has the resource-consuming task of catering to the needs of all stakeholders.

Rather than use this report to outline some of the traditional methods used by PR professionals such as holding press conferences and writing releases, I will instead look at some of the other approaches around the world to deliver the message of agriculture to the public.

Electronic Communications

To discuss e-comms there is perhaps no better place to start than Japan, which is a society obsessed with electronic gadgets! The New Zealand Merino Company developed the 'ZQue' system for traceability, launching it in the Japanese marketplace in September 2008. It uses an ID number on the garment which purchasers enter into the NZ Merino website, bringing up the photos and details of the farm(s) where the wool came from.

The NZ Merino Company's Ikuo Aisaka says the ZQue system is all about sustainable wool growing, social responsibility and safety for users. He says ZQue is being well received, especially now as safety is so important – interestingly on the website zque.co.nz it specifically says 'no mulesing of ZQ fibres'.

Where the technique of electronic traceability takes an interesting turn however, is when you consider it as an alternative advertising tool to the prohibitively expensive mass advertising approach in a marketplace like Japan. The concept is to have consumers follow the story of their purchased product through typing in a code on the website, scanning a bar code or other such technique, and then learn more about the industry and agriculture in general by the information which comes up. This technique satisfies consumers who want the security of knowing where their jumper came from, but also helps wool producers and agriculture in general by educating the consumer with the subsequent information he or she consumes.

The criticism of the ZQue system is that firstly it is very expensive to implement and secondly that the wool which goes into making one garment can come from a number of farms. As an AWI Tokyo employee put it, the information provided by the ZQue system may not be accurate, but it's hard to prove either way. It certainly seems to be serving its purpose for the NZ wool industry.

The topic of Japan leads me to touch on the importance of adjusting public relations strategies to suit the marketplace in which you are operating. Sam Jamieson, formerly based in Tokyo with Meat and Livestock Australia, illustrates this by describing how the USA didn't seem to take Japanese sensitivities into account following the 2003 BSE outbreak in America and their subsequent banning from the market. In one media conference they essentially told the Japanese that "BSE is not a major food safety problem, you've got more chance of being hit by a bus than getting BSE".

Samantha Jamieson says this approach was not received well by the Japanese public, and NZ didn't align their domestic and international communication strategies as they announced the

US lockout was a big opportunity for them – they were seen to be taking advantage of others misfortune. The point here is to tailor your message and remember the media is global – you can't tell Australian producers it's a big opportunity and then tell Japanese media it's not good.

Opinion Leaders –celebrities endorsing agriculture

One very effective technique in the Japanese market is to get so-called 'opinion leaders' on board to convey your message to the public. In what is a very hierarchal society, public opinion can be swayed by a celebrity product endorsement. Meat and Livestock Australia have actually had some success in this technique by getting some chefs who were using US beef to switch to Aussie beef. Twenty years ago Aussie beef was considered tough and a discount product, but the events of 2001 forced many chefs to turn to Aussie beef and so opinion is changing. Of course choosing your opinion leader is critical as illustrated by president of the NFU Peter Kendall, who says former English cricketers Alan Lamb and Ian Botham are being used in the UK as opinion leaders to sell beef and lamb, but they are celebrities who mean nothing to many 30 year old women who make many household buying decisions.

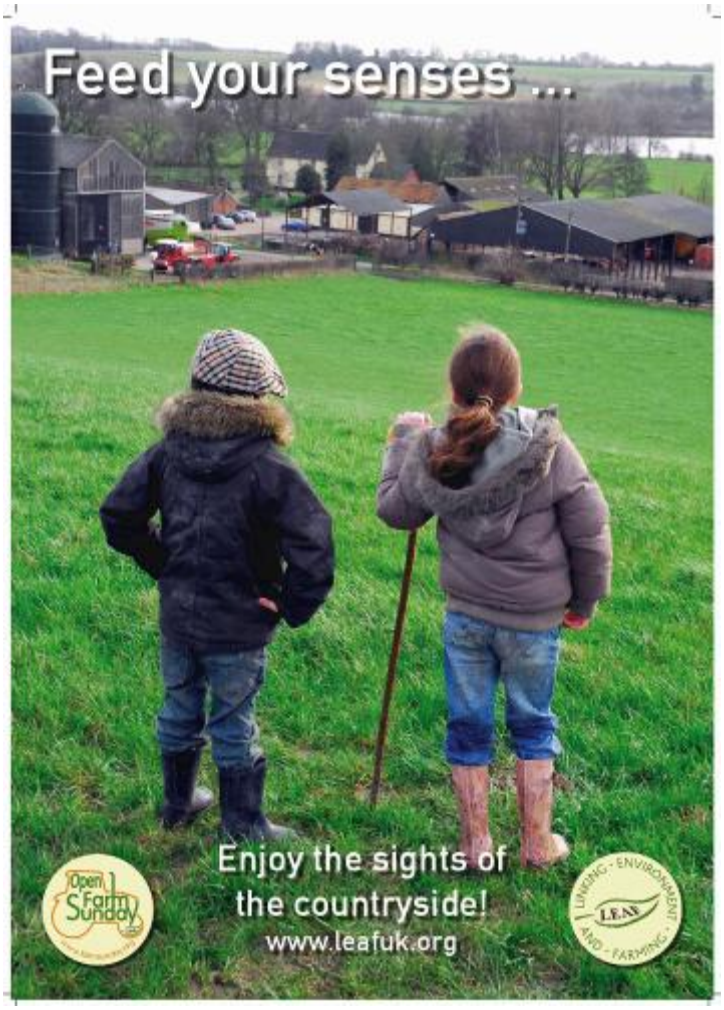
Another example of using sports celebrities to promote agricultural product is former US football star Emmitt Smith, who is currently the face of a pork industry contest, asking people to submit recipes for the chance to meet Emmitt and win tickets to a game. In a sports-mad country like Australia, perhaps more use could be made of sports stars with country roots promoting agriculture – consider Glenn McGrath and his relationship with the company Elders as an example.

Gemma Fitzpatrick, who runs campaigns for the NFU, says they find it hard to get celebrity chefs as they inevitably want fees. However if you can get a personality like Jamie Oliver, who did a chicken and pig campaign with Jimmy Doherty from 'Jimmy's Farm', you can create awareness. Gemma says the NFU definitely watches what chefs are doing and what products they are using.

While getting celebrities to promote product can be expensive, Mattias Bengtsson, who runs PR for the Australian Embassy in Stockholm, says using opinion leaders can actually be cost-effective relative to paying for mass advertisements. Mattias admits however it can be difficult to have a big discussion with the general public because with mass communication, the quality of the message being relayed tends to deteriorate!

An alternative to getting a celebrity on board is to employ a charismatic staff member to travel the length and breadth of the country spreading the word on agriculture as Johnny Ball does for the NFU in England, who runs the organisation's 'Changing Attitudes' roadshow van. Johnny is now in his 11th year of travelling around the UK promoting agriculture at country shows – this year he will appear at more than 60!

Rather than taking agriculture to the masses, UK Nuffield scholar Ian Pigott has invited the masses to agriculture through his Open Farm Sunday project, a version of which is run in Australia. The concept is a simple one in which city families visit a participating farm for a day to learn about agriculture. They had 200 farms in the pilot year of 2006, with this number growing to an impressive 450 farms and 6000 farmers involved in 2009, with 140,000 members of the public taking advantage of the opportunity – quite a powerful tool to spread the word about agriculture. Criticism of the event however is that you are potentially preaching to the converted in that those participating in Open Farm Sunday are likely to already have a bent towards agriculture or the environment anyway. This argument backed by LEAF CEO Caroline Drummond, whose organisation is a partner in Open Farm Sunday. She says they didn't do tube train advertisements about the event in London as that audience would be unlikely to attend Open Farm Sunday and so it wouldn't be a cost-effective tactic.



Picture 4: Open Farm Sunday and LEAF, promoting UK agriculture

'Countryside' magazines in the city

One area with real potential is agricultural 'lifestyle' magazines for the public. This may seem at odds with the notion of a fast-paced society abandoning traditional methods of communicating, but while daily newspapers may be in danger of being pushed into extinction, magazines retain a niche appeal. This is because lifestyle magazines fill a different void to a daily news service – they sit on coffee tables and are something to browse through in leisure time with feature articles or beautiful photos providing a talking point for visitors.

As Martin Stanhope, publications editor for the NFU asserts, their magazines can't contain the latest news as they are monthly. They can however be used for features on news which has been broken in other forums– for example a magazine feature might be used for explaining

genetic modification technology in-depth following recent news about a GM decision by legislators.

Countryside is an NFU magazine with a range of articles of interest to the non-farming public, such as gardening and touring. I believe these sorts of publications could prove to be popular as the clean fresh living of the countryside is often considered trendy by urbanites. If the articles are aimed at issues which resonate with non-farming readers, such as gardening, environment, food security and plenty of landscape photos of the beautiful countryside, then agricultural lifestyle magazines could be a valuable education tool. This is backed by Carol Ann Riordan of the American Press Institute, who claims the general public is so divorced from where food comes, we need to connect with them through stories about lifestyle. A similar publication on the other side of the Atlantic, *California Country* is a lifestyle magazine produced by the California Farm Bureau (CAFB) and head of CAFB communications, Roseanna Westmoreland says recipes are one of the most popular parts of the magazine. She believes a big part of the success of the publication is great photography and, interestingly, paper quality.

Relationships with the media and public

Much can be learned from the ability of interest groups like the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to connect with the public (and thus attract members). The society's Jim Densham acknowledges while it is difficult to get members to understand all the issues, the RSPB does place great importance on understanding the public. They conduct surveys on membership demographics and identify those most receptive to the aims of the RSPB and then try to expand that group. One tactic the RSPB used with success in 2006 was to invite Londoners to see a pair of Peregrine Falcons nesting in the chimney of the Tait Modern art gallery. It may sound simple, but setting up an information booth and providing telescopes to see a very unique sight for city dwellers was an extremely smart way of getting people to understand and subsequently support the RSPB.

Relationships with the media are critical for agricultural organisations looking to implement successful public relations campaigns. Highlighting this point is Greg Hanes from the US Meat Export Federation, who says Japanese consumers don't have a pre-conceived idea on issues like food consumption and the environment – they normally follow the medias lead, meaning educating the media about agriculture is critical, as is establishing a strong relationship. The US Meat Export Federation has taken Japanese media to the US to see the whole production system to expand their understanding of and appreciation for where their imported food has come from. This will be particularly valuable if (or when) the next disease incursion threatens to shake Japanese consumer confidence in US product. If there is a disease incursion affecting product in the Japanese food supply chain, consumers will wait to hear from the US and Japanese governments and also, importantly, for opinion leaders and producers to tell them it's safe.

Interestingly, during the BSE crisis the US had posters in the metro system and point of sale information to educate the public about what the situation was and what was being done. Not too many facts were used – green, natural pictures were more effective at portraying a clean green environment which is disease free. It's fair to say perception is everything with fickle consumers around the world!

Social media

Social media perhaps represents one of the most challenging, but possibly rewarding, methods of spreading the word about agriculture. As discussed previously, agricultural organisations have an ageing membership base who wants to receive communications in traditional forms, but those same organisations simply cannot afford to ignore social media trends.

Media expert Carol Ann Riordan from the American Press Institute says there is real concern about the role of traditional newspaper and radio. Social media means you don't need a big studio or printing press to reach a large audience – spreading news these days is as simple as turning on your mobile phone and within minutes a 'tweet' or uploaded photo/video is accessible for millions. In fact many of the big stories over the last year were broken by

civilians with cell phones. If this trend was to continue, we may see journalists in the future reduced to a role of providing in-depth analysis on news that has been broken by the public or maybe being a sentinel authenticating government.

Downsides of social media like Twitter however are that there is no quality control over what is written, and indeed you may not even know that the person writing the 'tweet' is who they are claiming to be. In addition, Max Molloy, web communications manager at Texas A&M Agrilife stresses the importance of keeping your social media outlets up to date - if you're not going to do your online presence well, then don't do it at all.

Having said that, while it is quite possible any or all of Twitter, MySpace and Facebook will become irrelevant in the coming years, I firmly believe the world has very quickly become addicted to the immediacy that social media provides in that anyone, anywhere with access to a simple mobile phone can break news, and that this addiction will not wane.

It is important to understand however how difficult the logistics of setting up social media outlets in an agricultural organisation. Texas Farm Bureau's (TFB) Mike Barnett says upper management at his organisation understands the need for social media but have had to come to grips with the fact they can't control the conversation about the story as well. Six months ago TFB didn't do any social media, whereas now they are fully committed. Mike says you need to know what you want to say and say it without waiting for approval – inevitably though there will be slip-ups but he says there is a real opportunity to make connections with a vast amount of people globally who can be swayed on agriculture concerns.

Barack Obama's election campaign perhaps is one of the best examples of the power of social media, with his team utilising the full range of social media outlets. Mike Barnett says one of Obama's PR staff did a conference in Dallas and he was asked the question 'Who approved social media messages from the campaign?' He replied 'No-one did!' The lesson of course is that if social media tactics are to be successful, you need to be immediate and prepared to accept that messages going out can't be approved by management – there just isn't time.

An excellent example of commitment to social media and e-comms in general can be found at agribusiness giant Monsanto, headquartered in St Louis. Two years ago the company's online presence was just a basic website, a 'head in the sand' approach which can be attributed to the amount of criticism the company received in cyberspace. They have now realised the value of e-comms to the extent that last year Monsanto doubled the size of its total PR staff in St Louis to 52, with half that increase in electronic media.

Interestingly, the company claims its e-comms push has to a certain extent been able to turn around the negativity which put it off earlier attempts to fully engage online. Director of Employee and Electronic Communications Glynn Young says previously 99 per cent of people online might have hated Monsanto, and the remaining 1 per cent thought they should. In the last 8 to 9 months, while a lot still disagree with Monsanto practices, Glynn believes there's a begrudging respect and acknowledgement of the company's direction, no doubt because of the more open online policy. The employee blogs are also a good example of Monsanto appearing to 'open its doors' to the public, be humanised and allow more engagement.

A final example to give on successful social media comes from High Plains Journal editor Holly Martin, based in Kansas. Her newspaper has been using a couple of young women working in a contract harvesting team who agreed to write about their experiences in a blog for the paper. It has been hugely popular, in part because the accessible manner in which they write the blog allows penetration into farming circles. Taking it a step further, they have also taken their work to Facebook and Twitter.

Given sufficient resources, ideally the agriculture sector in Australia would look to prioritise market research so PR can be better targeted. Kelly Daynard from the Ontario Farm Animal Council says they have used focus group testing to work out 'top of mind' concerns with success. This allows public relations campaigns to be aimed more effectively at the topics the community cares about. A similar approach but a different target is taken by the National Cattleman's Association. Jacque Matsen from the organisation says they research the reporters themselves to find out what news they tend to report on, allowing a more customised

approach. She admits this sort of backgrounding is intensive, but says you need one on one contact with journalists now as press releases aren't as effective.

Farmers Markets

An excellent interface between agriculture and the community can be found at the Ferry Markets in San Francisco, a known 'foodie' city – that is, a population who have heightened awareness of, and appreciation for good food. In fact in the last 12 months the number of farmers markets held in the city has doubled, from 11 to 22 according to Dave Stockdale, executive director of the Centre for Urban Education of Sustainable Agriculture (CUESA), an organisation which perhaps is the city's focal point of their love affair with food. CUESA runs the Ferry Markets three days a week and has proven to be so popular that stall holders have to wait for a CUESA invitation to participate in the markets. You may immediately think the distances in Australia are too prohibitive to replicate the success of the Ferry Markets here, however it is interesting to note that the average distance Ferry Market stallholders travel to San Francisco to participate is 110 miles.

Picture 5: The Ferry Markets in San Francisco are very successful at bringing farmers and the public together (source www.cuesa.org/)

Some of the keys to success for the markets include the requirement that stall holders play an active role in the marketing and messaging of the markets, including doing media interviews if required, as well as the popularity of the markets with local chefs - they are the only ones who can park prominently in front of the market! Chefs promote the source of their produce on their menus which helps spread the word on the markets, farmers and agriculture.

In addition the markets run 'market-to-table' promotions, starting with a farmer talking to the public about food and answering questions, before a chef uses that farmer's product for cooking/samples. CUESA also runs monthly celebrations of seasonal bounty, with samples, information displays and cooking contests – these sorts of things are key to getting the media in, which they have been successful at achieving. Dave Stockdale says social media bloggers give CUESA some of their best promotion as they are well followed and have integrity – bloggers matter! In fact Dave says bloggers are now CUESA's preferred choice of media as they wield the most power.

They do still put out press releases, but there is inconsistent placement in newspapers. He says blogs, Facebook and Twitter and other social media outlets are the most effective means of reaching the consumer as you can't rely on the traditional media to carry your message.

A warning on this comes though from chair of New Zealand's Ravensdown Cooperative, Bill McLeod, who says to not let electronic communications stop you doing face-to-face meetings – companies still need to have a face. However given the face-to-face nature of farmers markets, it appears CUESA is balancing e-comms and a personable presence well in the San Francisco community.

Chapter 4: Crisis communications

The merits of investing time and resources into crisis communication may be questioned by some given it's possible an organisation may never face a crisis and not need to enact such plans. However if this is the case then you are in the minority – good crisis communication plans will pay off for those who need them and for those that don't at least they have peace of mind that they have them prepared.

Essentially crisis communication is the process of preparing for and subsequently managing the public face of a company/organisation/industry during a time of crisis, and there are many ways of going about it, but there are certainly some key approaches which have proven successful.

Many lessons have been learnt overseas in the agricultural sector about crisis management, with disease incursions and pressure from interest groups forcing many organisations to enact their plans or, less optimally, learn on the run.

The key to good crisis management is preparation, which allows you to "harden the target" – in other words make your organisation less susceptible to attacks through proper crisis communication planning by;

- Predicting potential scenarios
- Identifying who is in your crisis management team
- Ensuring proper training for spokespeople
- Writing generic press releases, key messages and talking points
- Identifying key contacts

Once the crisis hits it's too late to start having these conversations.

Identifying the team early on is particularly important as it allows for proper training time and establishment of roles. Ideally the team would consist of your public relations manager, CEO, president, organisation's lawyer (reduces time in the event your actions require legal review) and perhaps a couple of senior staff or board members who may be used as spokespeople. As Dr Kris Boone from Kansas State University points out, the public's perception of spokesperson importance may be (in order) Chief Financial Officer, then CEO, then PR manager while the lowest/most suspicious spokesperson you could use is your lawyer. You need people to associate responsibility with the spokesperson.

Next, a statement should be crafted quickly and released so the organisation looks like it's on top of the situation. This statement may be simply an acknowledgement of the crisis or incident, and an assurance the organisation is taking the situation seriously and will release more details as they become available. Sam Jamieson, who ran MLA's Tokyo office for 8 years until September 2009, says in her crisis communication model, the communications manager is responsible for writing the issues brief, talking points and identifying key contacts.

In fact, during a crisis such as a disease outbreak which affects a whole sector, doing as much media as you can early on can be beneficial as it paints your organisation as the experts who the media can rely on during the crisis. It also gives you a better chance of controlling the message and image in the media if you are the one being interviewed, as evidenced by NFU's former director of communications, Anthony Gibson who last thing on the day Foot and Mouth was confirmed in Devon County in 2001 told the BBC what had happened and said they should call him for whatever they needed. This approach meant Anthony was subsequently on live TV at lunch and in the evening everyday for 2½ months, enabling him to control the message.

Selecting the right people to use as spokespeople is critical - if you have a weak leader, don't presume he or she should be the spokesperson, get someone else to do the talking! Throwing out the right perceptions to the public plays a very important role in deciding who you're going to use as your spokesperson. Generally a small number of spokespeople works best as it's easier to ensure they are highly trained and stay with the agreed message. However, as Anthony Gibson points out, the approach depends on the crisis - for example, his south-west

NFU region wasn't too bothered about choice of spokesman during the UK's BSE outbreak as the message was simple – 'beef is safe'. However during the 2001 FMD outbreak, they decided early on to be careful in selecting a spokesman as there was a danger the wrong people would get on TV with the wrong messages to the public.

This leads into one of the most critical parts of successful crisis communication - consistency in the message. This was in fact one of the most common pieces of advice apparent when talking to people about crisis communication around the world. If you have a large number of people all saying different things about the situation on behalf of your industry, the public will get confused and not know what to believe. In fact mixed messages can make an industry seem untrustworthy as far as the public's concerned, so the key is to decide on your key message early on and stick to it.

Jacque Matsen from the National Cattlemen's Association says organisations should have five position statements/common possible scenarios ready at a generic level should a crisis evolve – for example it could be preparing for a livestock disease from either an introduced, natural or unknown source. She says you should have skeleton press statements ready, which just require a customised message to be plugged in.

Mattias Bengtsson from the Australian Embassy in Stockholm points out that normally the scandal itself isn't the issue, it's the reaction which can subsequently become the big issue, so if you don't get media relations right from beginning, it can cause problems. With international situations such as animal welfare or the AWB's Middle East grain export controversy it can be even more difficult to manage - it's easier to create a sensation/play up story from another country as there's a disconnect and lack of information for consumer. Sam Jamieson, formerly based in Tokyo with MLA, reinforces the difficulties of international PR by pointing out that when you are writing press releases for the world you need to be aware that the meaning of words or carefully written phrases can be lost in translation.

Mattias says while the difficult road is a full defence of your organisation and the easier road is to follow what people want, the problem comes that if you start accepting demands, then where does it end? He says there can be instances where it's better to remain quiet, especially

if you don't know the direction. Sometimes though staying quiet can draw attention or a presumption of guilt. In the majority of situations there are more benefits to be gained from talking to the media rather than staying quiet, but it should be recognised there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Another approach to consider during a crisis is the idea of leveraging the heightened media awareness to your advantage by promoting your industry/company – the silver lining in the dark cloud. It may be the only time where you get a string of front pages in the local paper so try and take advantage. The idea is during interviews or in press releases to acknowledge the crisis/situation and then move on as quickly as possible to more positive aspects of the company's work and future direction rather than dwelling on the crisis at hand. It should not be used during the initial stages of the crisis when you need to be seen to be devoting your full attention to the situation, but once the initial frenzy is over, it is a tactic which can be rewarding. However it is an approach which also needs to be treated with caution and is not recommended during any crisis involving food and public safety, which need to be approached with a great level of sensitivity.

Dave Kranz form the Californian Farm Bureau says three years ago there was an outbreak of *E.coli* and there were some deaths and many illnesses traced to spinach from the central coast of California. It became a huge story nationally and shut down the industry, which is still trying to recover.

In California there are many organisations to represent farmers but the Californian Farm Bureau is the largest, so they tend to receive most media attention. All groups have varying interests so when *E.Coli* happened they brought all the groups together to form a common message. The message to consumers was that agriculture cares about them and agriculture wants answers and the situation resolved ASAP. Consumers want to know what you're doing for them and that you are on the case.

The centralised response meant there were only a couple of places for reporters to go and they encouraged farmers not to talk for the first couple of days due to concerns the farmers might

say how they're losing dollars and then the media would put up an image of a sick person which would make farmers seem uncaring.

The crisis communication lessons from the Californian spinach *E.coli* incidents were:

- Have a message that relates to the consumer and shows you care. However make sure farmers/members understand why you're saying this otherwise they'll get agitated and maybe talk to the media as a result.
- Funnel your media response through as few people as possible and ensure those people are co-ordinated to keep control of the message.

Monsanto seems to be well resourced and highly effective at crisis management – or perhaps 'issues management' would be a more appropriate term as Issues Management Manager Garrett Kaspar's title suggests. He runs a 'fast reaction cell' at the company, which is distinct from the general media. The division gets engaged with the community and nips problems in the bud – Garrett says he prefers his work to be about fire-prevention rather than fire-fighting. Their work also includes studying activists, just as the activists are no doubt studying Monsanto, and general monitoring of issues.

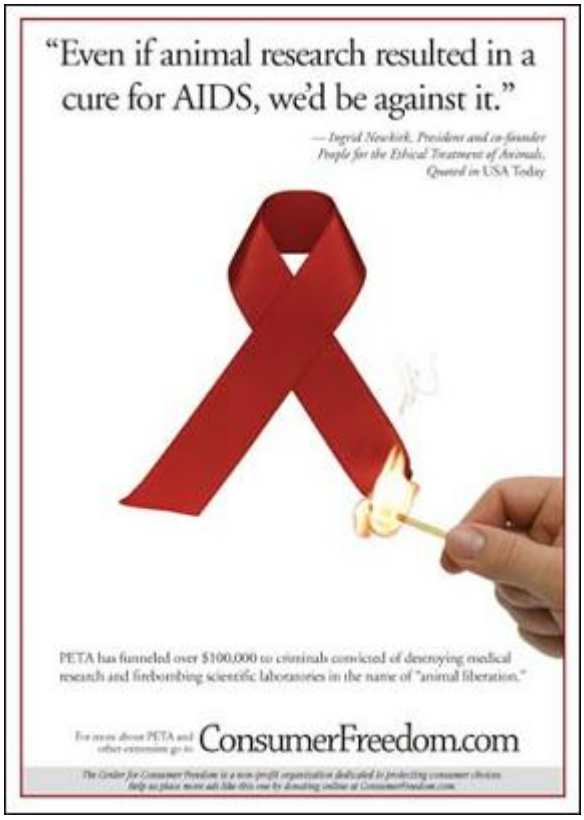
Garrett says his approach to spreading the company's message effectively is one message and many voices – but it's critical to make sure the message is correct! If there is a crisis, he says you should be able to see the issue as it's evolving and prepare accordingly - these issues generally don't happen overnight. An example is the response to the 'Food Inc' movie – Monsanto had three months to develop a communications plan, micro-website and blogs. Garrett says often issues are old, just newly sensationalised meaning they now have a data base of talking points and are not constantly reinventing the wheel.

Garrett Kaspar says his approach to his PR work is to PROMOTE - INFLUENCE – RESPOND. Perhaps the Australian agricultural sector could take a leaf out of his book as it seems many organisations struggle to get past the first part of that motto. Monsanto isn't the only company doing effective proactive PR however.

“In crisis communications, someone’s always playing offence and someone’s always playing defence – like a war”. So sums up David Martosko’s work with the Centre for Consumer Freedom (CCF) in Washington DC. He says his organisation is one of the only ones playing offence on behalf of agriculture – to go out and marginalise interest groups. He says they are aggressive as if left unchecked, non-governmental organisations (like certain interest goups) can become too powerful and change consumer patterns etc. petakillsanimals.com is an example of CCF’s work - a website set up to marginalise PETA.

Interestingly, David says issues doesn’t exist in a vacuum either, with someone always trying to make the crisis bigger – whether that person is from an anti-trade group, an animal rights activist or some other organisation. The key though is consumer opinion – they’re at the top of the stream, and you can prevent problems by ‘inoculating/vaccinating’ the public with good messaging from your side. You have to be smart however – David gave the example of PETA producing a bumper sticker saying ‘Meat is Murder’, which the industry combated by putting out big information packs – David says with that approach, that’s a battle you’ve lost already!

CCF also uses ‘earned media’ to push their messages – in other words, stories which appear in the media about one advertisement you run. For your advertisement to attract media stories it has to be clever and/or outrageous - you have to be willing to shock. An advertisement for the aforementioned website petakillsanimals.org was shown only once, just before the State of the Union address, which meant a huge number of people saw it and it generated ‘earned media’. Public opinions can be shifted with clever PR.



Picture 6: Ad campaign run by the Centre for Consumer Freedom (source www.petakillsanimals.com)

David says agricultural industries are so busy telling 'their story', which only gets you so far – he says you need to also take your enemies down a notch. David continues by saying you should tell an equal amount of good things about yourself and bad things about your opponent (it's advisable to use a third party to spread the bad information). He says the earlier any campaign is started the better - begin the campaign against your opponents before they begin an earnest campaign against you. At the very least, it may pay to heed advice from Greg Hanes, based in Tokyo with the US Meat Export Federation, who says you should try to shift the debate from the emotion many activist groups will introduce, to a science-based argument. He concedes that sometimes you need to initially counter emotion with emotion, but then move to a science-based debate as soon as possible.

Rather than targeting consumers directly, the Washington DC-based organisation 'The Hand That Feeds U.S.', which was launched in May 2009, is aimed at building better relationships with the media. In May they took farmers to New York City to meet with reporters who are responsible for agricultural stories but who have no agricultural experience. The whole

concept is to take the face of agriculture to meet city journalists, with visits to other cities planned. The organisation places importance on transparency and to aid this, they also have an ‘ag opponents’ section on their website which tracks opponents of agriculture and watches who funds them so everyone’s motives are clear.

Finally on crisis communication, when all is lost we can perhaps find some solace in advice from Swede Gosta Clark, who works for AWI in the Nordic countries. He says the wool industry was in a way saved by the banks – the financial recession took the news agenda away from animal welfare. The message here is that when all is lost in your crisis communication efforts, perhaps the rough and tumble of the daily news cycle will sweep away your problems with another target replacing you on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper...

Recommendations

So where to from here for public relations in Australian agriculture? To start with I would suggest these recommendations be considered constructive advice rather than any attempt to criticize those who work very hard promoting Australian agriculture on behalf of farmers.

I have met some excellent exponents of agricultural public relations around the world, and others who weren't quite as impressive. The main factor limiting Australian agriculture's capacity to replicate the very best PR work is probably resources – lobby groups in the UK and the US in particular would appear to have more funding at their disposal for promoting agriculture, whether that be for advertising campaigns or simply hiring more PR staff.

Having said that, there are definitely basic 'rules of engagement' outlined in this report which Australian agriculture should consider implementing to improve their PR efforts.

1. Understand the demographics of the public, what is important to them and what they want from Australian agriculture. You may think the public doesn't know or care about farming, but we can change that by making the connection for them about how supermarket trips wouldn't happen without farmers, or the benefits of taking their kids to the countryside to pat a lamb or watch a harvester work. If we can raise awareness of agriculture and then ask the public what they want from farmers, we can tailor our PR efforts to highlight how we are meeting those needs. This may simply be in the form of focus groups, telephone surveys or even getting feedback by setting up stands in shopping malls around the country where we can ask city dwellers what they like and dislike about farming in Australia.
2. Improve our selection and training of agriculture spokespeople. The major difficulty here is convincing suitable farmers it's worth their while investing the time and effort required to become a good and available spokesperson. However I believe there are many people in Australian agriculture who are immensely proud of their industry and would be willing to step up to help spread the message. Perhaps there should be a more structured approach to training young to middle-aged spokespeople at a state or national level. For example, no doubt many would be enthused and honoured by an approach from the National Farmers Federation to go to Canberra for a long weekend of media training, incorporating also the chance to visit Parliament House and learn about the political lobbying process. By making this an annual

program, over time enough people would be trained in each state such that the media workload could be shared by enough people that it wouldn't be too much of a burden. While this would of course cost money in airfares accommodation and training costs, sharing the financial burden across all industry lobby groups and representative organisations would make it more viable. Besides, it is too important an issue not too happen. Another option may be to include this intensive training in currently established rural leadership or managerial courses.

3. Consider launching a country-themed lifestyle magazine which would be 'trendy' to display on city coffee tables. Quality photos and paper composition are critical in the success of any magazine in this genre. The success of the RM Williams magazine and ABC's Delicious publication show how elements like cooking, farming/countryside photos, articles on the environment and scientific pieces about climate, genetic modification or machinery could appeal to a wide range of the Australian population.

4. Making every effort to both utilise, and importantly, embrace the latest social media techniques. I say embrace, because anyone can easily create a Twitter account or Facebook page, but those who are most successful and get the most exposure are those who fully embrace it. They are constantly using their website or Twitter feed to push out regular and relevant information – if you don't regularly update social media outlets then you are doing more damage to your reputation than not having one at all! Also, understand that the key to good social media is being very timely and reactionary – there is no time for board decisions on what can or cannot be released through an organisations blog or MySpace page. There must be complete trust in the manager responsible for social media to be able to post information as they see fit.

5. Develop a crisis communications plan, however simple it may be. You may think you don't need one, or you'll cross that bridge when you come to it, but you can lower stress levels of employees, managers and industry significantly by knowing you are prepared should a crisis hit. Some companies have the resources to develop 'dark websites', ready to be made live should a crisis hit, and write full crisis management action plans. Other smaller agricultural organisations may simply ensure they have well trained spokespeople, a crisis management team identified and have thought through the possible scenarios which could affect them and have written generic press release templates which they can plug customised messages into.

6. Consider using electronic traceability as a consumer education tool about agriculture. If consumers around the world continue to push for increasing levels of traceability, industry will have to pay for the required systems anyway, so we may as well put them to good use in agricultural promotion as well.

7. I believe there is some real scope in Australia for using opinion leaders more effectively in promoting agriculture. In such a sports-obsessed society we should be looking to use sports stars with country roots (and there are many of them!) to help promote agriculture and educate the public about farming.

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Plain English Compendium Summary

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Objectives	To investigate effective methods of promoting agriculture in order to increase the general public's awareness of the sector. Creating and executing a crisis communication plan.
Background	The poor image of farmers and negative media about agriculture has added to the growing disconnect between the industry and the general public. A renewed attempt to reach out to the non-farming population and tell them about agriculture is required. To achieve this, an understanding of the latest successful public relations approaches is required. In addition, without effective crisis communications plans there is a significant risk our agricultural industries will be caught out should a crisis occur.
Research	The research was carried out over a nine month period starting in February 2009. The individual study was conducted in Japan, England, Sweden, USA, Canada and New Zealand, with a focus on lobby group leaders and their public relations staff, commodity organisations, journalists, universities and media experts.
Outcomes	The world faces similar problems as Australia in trying to promote agriculture to the non-farming public. The agricultural sector needs to understand the demographics of modern society in Australia so effective and relevant public relations strategies can be implemented. We also need to keep up with the latest media techniques being used around the world, in particular in social media, allowing us to reach out effectively to the younger generation and tell them about farming. To carry the message to the world, there needs to be good selection and training of spokespeople who receive on-going support. There needs to be incentives such as national training programs to convince suitable candidates they should commit the time and resources required to being a good and available agricultural communicator.
Implications	Agriculture needs to ensure it is keeping up to date with the very latest in public relations techniques from around the world. This report contains the best methods I found to shape communication policies – what the media and public want from farmers, media spokesperson training, key message construction through to the most effective forums through which to deliver our messages. In addition the agricultural sector needs to ensure it has constructed and can execute crisis communication plans.