

Nuffield report: 2016 scholar Willem van der Schans

My scholarship is sponsored by Rabobank

Study: 'How to reduce the gap between consumers and farmers, to keep the license to produce'

Summary

- The initial research question was 'how to link consumers and farmers through farmers' products'. During my travels, I soon learned that the gap cannot (only) be bridged by the physical products farmers produce. The aim was therefore to look for solutions for Dutch agriculture in general, with a focus on the dairy sector.
- Dutch research shows that there is a deeply rooted trust issue between farmers and consumers. On the one hand farmers are held responsible for food safety/food production, on the other hand they are not considered as very reliable and transparent. This negative image is fed by critical media publications and high Dutch production standards.
- Abroad however, the Dutch agricultural sector is considered as a forerunner, due to our high productivity, efficiency, knowledge, technological advanced processes and high-quality infrastructure.
- There is a discrepancy between these views. I therefore believe that the Dutch sector should take advantage of their advanced position.
- The use of data driven technology and the data collected on the farm could play a larger role in this. In addition to the original purpose of making business decisions. The sector could use this data to make transparent; what we do, how we do it and why we do the things we do.
- This will allow for more transparency and participation between consumers and farmers!

The start

There is a gap between Dutch farmers and Dutch consumers. The initially research topic was, 'how to link consumers and farmers through the products that farmers produce, to maintain a license to produce'. As the products are the physical link between the two. This model however, offers only a limited perspective on reality. Dutch farmers produce a vast amount of food, that is only limitedly consumed by the Dutch population. Roughly 75% of Dutch agricultural products is exported. Products are therefore only on a small scale the link between Dutch farmers and consumers. Hence the reason I decided to look for the deeper cause of the gap between consumers and farmers. By answering the question; 'How to reduce the gap between consumers and farmers, to keep the license to produce'.

The analysis

There is a discrepancy between how Dutch citizens/consumers view the Dutch agricultural sector and how the international sector considers the Dutch agricultural sector. Dutch research shows that the agricultural sector is hold responsible, by consumers, for many aspects our food chain; from food production, and subsequently food safety, to soil quality, methane emissions and energy use. Contrary to this, is that the sector is not considered transparent or trustworthy (research done by FNLI and Nieuwe Oogst).

This image is fed by critical media publications, such as the Fipronil affair, stable fires and recent publications on 'manure conspiracy'. Abroad however, the Dutch agricultural sector is considered as a forerunner, due to our high productivity, efficiency, knowledge, technological advanced processes and high-quality infrastructure.

On the other hand, the Netherlands are a prosperous, small and densely populated country. This is, in my opinion, one of the underlying reasons for the high Dutch social and political demands. The production standards are high, sustainable goals ambitious and the regulations are strict.

The Netherlands have relatively a high ratio of farmers, which makes the sector very visible in Dutch society. Especially when considering that the Dutch agricultural sector only contributes for a small portion to the total GDP. This makes the Dutch situation quite unique in comparison to the rest of the world.

Finding the gap abroad

Nevertheless, consumers and farmers live together. So how do they deal with these issues abroad? To a certain extent the agricultural sector is also under some pressure in the countries I visited:

- Brazil: The ratio citizens and square meters of land in Brazil is for example of a radically different scale than in Europe and especially the Netherlands. Farmers in Brazil are more remote and less in sight of the majority of the population.
- United States: The general mind-set about farming is completely different in the United States compared to the Dutch setting. I believe the main driver behind this is a strong mentality that still is very awake in US culture: 'The US is built on cheap food and cheap fuel'. Because of this, consumers are prouder and have a stronger belief in their farmers.
- Kenia: Farmers are far more interwoven with society, almost everyone I met has a relative or neighbour that is a farmer or working in that sector. Off course this also has to do with the prosperity of Kenia, which is still much more in development compared to the Netherlands.
- Ireland: After the crisis in 2008, the Irish government, companies and NGO's prioritised the sustainable production of Irish food; called Origin Green. This makes that the Irish agricultural sector is considered as something to be proud of.

Mutual trust in a relationship

In the Netherlands, we are ahead in the discussions. We are unique, because of our high standards, innovatively as a sector and the number of stakeholders and interests involved. The sector is, compared to the countries I visited, under a magnifying glass. However, a relationship involves two parties. If a relationship is not built on mutual trust, then there will always be a gap. Transparency is in my opinion key in this. On my trips, I saw some great examples of companies that use transparency as a tool to build a better relationship with their customers.

To translate these examples to the Dutch agricultural sector, I believe, we should learn from how others perceive us; as highly skilled professionals. One of the key ingredients for this proposition is the data driven technology we use.

Exploit data driven technology

The technology used by the sector has increasingly become data driven, and it is expected that this will only play a more prominent role in the future. The large amount of information available through the use of these technologies, is at the moment mainly used for internal business decisions. However, it could also be the key in the relationship with citizens and consumers. Use the available data to show what we do, how we do it and why we make certain decisions. This could lead to more transparency; share data on platforms.

Accessibility; make information better accessible for interested citizens and consumers to take part in the discussions or collaborations. Participation; make citizens and consumers part of the conversation and make visible that they are an important part of the food chain. Good example topics are: soil quality, animal welfare, methane emissions, feed/mineral cycle or energy use.

I am deeply convinced that a broadened use of farm data, is key to become more transparent and to make the next step in building a trustworthy relationship with consumers alike. As farmers, we should prioritise building this relationship to maintain our license to operate!

If you are interested in my research topic or if you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me. (for more information about my project: www.boervsconsument.nl)

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