

Food

Ag advocate encourages dedicating 15 minutes daily to telling ag's story.

for Thought

by Kindra Gordon

Talking with consumers about agriculture is not something we can wait to do “when we have time,” according to Michelle Payn-Knoper, founder of Cause Matters Corp. Nor is the approach we need to ‘educate the stupid consumer’ effective.

Rather, this ag advocate suggests a continuing conversation is needed between agriculture and the public and says communication with consumers must become part of every farm’s business plan.

Payn-Knoper has been a leader in farm and food advocacy efforts over the past decade. She believes a conversation is not educating or preaching; it is about being authentic and making emotional connections.

Payn-Knoper points out with 1.5% of the U.S. population involved in agriculture, taking the defensive approach will never win over the other 98% of the population. With the

misconceptions consumers have toward agriculture and food production, Payn-Knoper says, “When we respond [to consumers] with science and data — or suggest ‘I’m right and you are wrong’ — we will fail. It’s not about bottom line, it’s about emotion.”

To that, she suggests agricultural producers devote at least 15 minutes each day either face-to-face or using at least one social media tool to give the public insight into their farm or ranch operation. She suggests, “Talk about why you do what you do. Share with consumers why you use antibiotics and hormones on your farm and why you castrate calves.”

Payn-Knoper notes currently ag opponents are leading the conversation about food — and that needs to change. Real producers need to be telling their stories about food production, she says, and encourages farmers and ranchers to “lead the conversation.”

Family focus

Payn-Knoper emphasizes that building emotional connections through shared information is key to building understanding. To illustrate this, she tells of a short video featuring a young dairy farmer talking about her family’s fourth generation, 1,000-head

dairy farm in Michigan that was shown to a consumer panel. The first question consumers had after seeing the video was “Where can we buy that family farm’s milk?”

When the consumers were asked if they would still buy the farm’s milk if the operation grew to 2,000 head to add another family member to the business, the consumers indicated they would because the growth helped support the family business.

Of this example, Payn-Knoper says it illustrates that when agriculture shares its story and makes an emotional connection with consumers, support and understanding for agriculture can be established.

She points to the Maya Angelou quote: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Payn-Knoper recognizes most farmers and ranchers are modest and private, but she says with the changing world, such as Chipotle videos against farming and even the increasing trend of anthropomorphism (making an animal human like), agriculture must speak up and build better connections and understanding with consumers.

Payn-Knoper points to dog weddings and pet dating services, as well as science illiteracy, and says, “These things are issues shaping the future.”

As a result, she emphasizes the leadership of everyone in agriculture is needed for the future. She cautions, “Don’t throw other types of agriculture under the bus. We need all agriculture — organic, local, grass-fed, commercial. We are all in this

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together. United we stand, divided we fall.”

To be successful in sharing your ag story on social media, Payn-Knoper suggests three key steps: know your purpose; build a community around that purpose; and be a resource to that community.

She notes social media should be a fun and engaging conversation. She also emphasizes that the efforts each person in ag takes in his/her own local community, can ultimately have a global impact. (For tips on using social media venues, visit causmatters.com and click on the Resources tab.)

Lastly, to underscore the importance of building relationships with people, Payn-Knoper shares this Chinese proverb: “If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees. If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people.” **HW**

Editor’s note: Payn-Knoper addressed attendees at the 24th Range Beef Cow Symposium in November 2015 in Loveland, Colo. She has authored the book “No More Food Fights,” and her newest book is titled “Food Truths from Farm to Table.” Learn more at causmatters.com.



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