

Advice from Trent Loos:

Tell Your Story, and Tell it Often

Story & photo by
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As a frequent flyer, Trent Loos spends a lot of time in airports. Fascinated by human beings of all stripes, he uses that time to observe people. In turn, many people in airports are fascinated by Loos. Perhaps it's the bushy moustache; the black, flat-brimmed hat; the vest; and the ever-present wild rag knotted about his neck that make him stand out in a crowded airport terminal.

"Some people think I must be a Wyatt Earp impersonator traveling to a gunfight reenactment," grins Loos.

He doesn't mind the double-takes and curious stares. He's tickled when a brave soul approaches to ask about his attire. It's an opportunity for discourse on his favorite subject. Loos can explain that he is traveling to a conference to talk about the importance of agriculture.

That usually prompts more questions that Loos is happy to answer. He relishes the opportunity to dispel misconceptions about production agriculture and to explain how adoption of modern technologies make agriculture sustainable.

Loos takes advantage of every opportunity to interact directly with consumers, explaining that he is a sixth-generation farmer and rancher raising cattle, hogs and kids near Litchfield, Neb. His mission, however, is to make other producers better prepared to tell their own stories and present agriculture in a true and favorable light.

Like a Bible apologist who believes followers must be prepared to defend their faith, Loos believes agricultural producers must prepare themselves against detractors. He encourages and motivates rural listeners through radio programs, like "Loos Tales," heard on more than 100 stations. Loos also travels the United States, addressing a variety of conventions, conferences and meetings.

"Today, in general, the public's perception of agriculture is not good. When a consumer has a question about animal production, for example, they 'Google' it. But Internet search results include so much false or misleading information, and now it spreads rapidly through social media. Misinformation is abundant, and we, as producers, don't fare well," explains Loos.

"Actually, consumers want to trust



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producers. Surveys indicate that family farmers and ranchers have just as much credibility as a medical doctor, but the consumer's image of farmers and ranchers is something like that pictured in 'American Gothic.' It's an image that doesn't exist," Loos adds.

"Consumers need to hear the real story from real producers. They need to hear how raising crops and livestock is environmentally sustainable — that it can help improve the planet and improve human health. That's the message we need to share over and over again."

Be prepared

Loos says beef producers can prepare themselves by making sure they have a reasonable understanding of basic science — something that many consumers lack. Producers can arm themselves for busting myths by ferreting out the latest scientific information from reputable sources. They should be ready to repel attacks on multiple fronts, including:

Nutrition — It is well-recognized that beef is a valuable source of dietary protein, iron and zinc. However, Loos advises beef myth busters to remind consumers of the benefits of saturated fat in beef, particularly in facilitating absorption of fat-soluble vitamins A, D and E. He cites the flurry of recent articles revealing flaws in the decades-

old research that incorrectly linked consumption of saturated fat with an increased likelihood of heart disease. He specifically cites a May 2014 story in the *Wall Street Journal* in which author Nina Teicholtz noted how reviews of studies dating back some 60 years show that saturated fat has been unjustly maligned.

Growth-promoting implants — According to Loos, misinformation and misunderstanding have perpetuated concern about hormones. Producers, he says, should be prepared to explain that the levels of estrogen found in beef from a non-implanted steer are not significantly different from levels found in beef from a steer that was implanted twice with an estrogen-based growth promotant. Beef from intact males fed in Europe contains hormone levels far higher than beef from implanted U.S. steers. Furthermore, plant estrogen levels in soy, peas and cabbage are much greater than levels in beef from implanted beef animals.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) — Loos says producers should know that genetic engineering of plants and animals is backed by strong science, while opponents to the technology are driven by emotion and politics. However, those citing concern for the environment should be encouraged by the fact that genetically modified crops reduce the need for pesticide use. GMO crops allow for

conservation tillage practices that reduce soil erosion. Less pesticide use and less tillage translates to reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

"As I travel the country and visit with people involved in beef production, I find that increasing numbers of them harbor some level of guilt. They wonder if raising cattle and producing beef actually might be harming the planet. No, it does not," states Loos.

Sources of high-quality protein are needed now, he adds, noting how 11 million children worldwide die each year due to pathogenic diseases, but 20 million children die annually from protein deficiency.

"The U.S. beef industry produces three times as much protein today as it did in 1951, with the same number of cattle and using less land. Because of the various technologies used today, beef production is more efficient, and its environmental footprint is smaller," states Loos, adding, "Do not apologize for being profitable. An industry is not sustainable without profitability."

While there are many claims regarding consumer preferences, Loos believes consumers most want their food supply to be affordable, safe and abundant. He sees ample evidence, however, of a growing disconnect between the average consumer and agriculture. Many don't really understand the cycle of life and death. Their only connection to animals is through pets.

"Some people now worry more about their pets than their own children. They want to buy health and accident insurance for their pets. They seek out canine oncologists who specialize in treating dogs with cancer. They buy 'neuticles' (prosthetic testicles) for neutered dogs, in order to enhance the animals' self-esteem. People that do these kinds of things represent a growing segment of consumers," says Loos.

Many of these same people and others also share 'chemophobia' and hold to the ideal of a chemical-free life. Unfortunately, Loos fears that some agricultural producers are just as susceptible. As an example, he tells about a petition that was circulated among rural folk attending a farm show. The petition warned that high levels of a chemical called dihydrogen monoxide had been found in the local water supply.

"Forty-one percent of the people present signed the petition calling for a ban on H₂O, and these were agricultural people," says Loos. "We all need to have an understanding of basic science. That's the first step in preparing to communicate with others about who we are and what we do."

"While our opponents never stop talking, we have failed to exercise our right of free speech like we ought to. We need to tell consumers that agriculture provides food, fiber, pharmaceuticals and fuel. Tell as many people as you can, and remind them often."



Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.