

Truth in Food

The Warriors: When it comes to dealing with criticism, what can modern farming and food learn from a cheesy 1970s gang movie?

Commentary by
KEVIN MURPHY

Paramount Pictures' 1979 film *The Warriors* told the story of a small Coney Island street gang who, along with all the other street gangs of New York City, was summoned to a meeting by a visionary warlord named Cyrus. Cyrus preached collaboration between the gangs in order to overtake and rule the city. His magnetism capturing the 20,000 assembled gangsters who, in one accord, cheer him, Cyrus raises his hands in triumph and poses the cool 1970s question, "Can you dig it? *Can you dig it? Camnn youuuu diggg itttt???*"

When a lone gang member who doesn't seem to enjoy Cyrus' adulation and momentum shoots him dead, chaos ensues. In the confusion, the guilty gang member manages to place the blame on the Warriors. With every gang in New York City looking to avenge Cyrus' murder, the movie chronicles the Warriors' treacherous 27-mile journey home.

What does a cheesy 30-year-old, B-rated movie have to teach us about food and agriculture? Although it's not a direct correlation, hidden within the movie we can find some useful similarities and war strategies.

First, *The Warriors* demonstrates what can result when numerous gangs each concentrate on protecting their own turf. With each step toward home, the Warriors encounter a new gang and a new obstacle. There are The Furies, The High Hats, The Orphans, The Boppers, The Turnbull AC's, The Grammer C Riffs — the list goes on and on.

The same could be said about food. Instead of gangs, we have numerous associations, each carefully guarding its own turf, putting up obstacles to intruders into their individual

segments of the food chain. There are beef associations, dairy associations, pork associations, veterinary associations, corn associations, soybean associations, produce associations, grocery associations, quick-service restaurant associations — the list goes on and on.

The proliferation of these associations was further exacerbated in the 1990s when, through legislation, some were forced to split into two parts — a lobbying arm and a promotional arm. As is often the case when you separate something that was once joined, the two associations can reserve a particular streak of venom for each other when, in theory, they share a common goal and a much more dangerous enemy than each other.

A single sworn enemy emerges

Once news spreads that the Warriors had snuffed out Cyrus' life, they quickly become arch enemy No. 1. Whereas each individual gang would normally oppose the other, they momentarily center their attention on the Warriors. The cumulative power and reach of the gangs succeeds in shutting down city transportation, so the Warriors are forced to maneuver by foot through the gang-infested patchwork of the city. It's a sure death sentence for a small gang of 10 hunted by a gang of up to 100,000.

Then an interesting thing happens. The pursuing gangs make a predictable mistake. They retreat into their own territories. Abiding by the old code of protecting their individual turf first, they settle in to await the chance that the Warriors would dare saunter into their portion of the city. This mistake unwittingly gives the Warriors breathing room — and hope. Suddenly, taking on the unimaginable task of taking on

If the Humane Society of the United States has not infringed upon your territory yet, it will. Its goal leaves no option but to trespass on your turf.

100,000 becomes a manageable task of taking on each gang individually.

When Cyrus preached collaboration, all were in accord because they saw a vision bigger than their own. Yet, shortly after Cyrus' life was taken, the gangs retreated back to their own territories and attempted to pick off the Warriors individually, clamoring for the individual credit. Everyone knew the Warriors had limited travel options, yet many chose to wait and be directly infringed upon before acting.

Others lay in wait, preparing for the Warriors by devising grandiose schemes. My favorite is the Baseball Furies. One eye blacked, wielding Louisville Sluggers, silently twirling their bats like nunchucks as they appear one-by-one out of the night, the Furies' carefully choreographed pursuit and attack is chilling in its evil precision. Yet, when ultimately forced into a head-to-head (or should I say head-to-bat) fight, the Furies' grim menace turns out to be little more than grandiose costuming, big on appearance but presenting little meaningful substance that in the end accomplishes little to meet the real goal, which is to stop the Warriors' progress. The Warriors in fact end up defeating them by turning their own weapons back against them.

In the case of food and agriculture, numerous, well-funded activist organizations are fighting their way through the defenders of modern day

food production, especially modern day food-animal production.

The clear and emerging enemy of that sector, for instance, is the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Often appearing to the general public as a harmless sponsor of pet rescue and adoption shelters, it turns its \$205 million in net assets toward public relations and legislative attacks on modern animal farming. If HSUS has not infringed upon your territory yet, it will. Its goal leaves no option but to trespass on your turf.

Yet many in agriculture sit idly by, watching as HSUS comes and goes through a neighboring gang's turf, breathing a sigh of relief that HSUS has not been spotted in their domain. They recline in a false sense of security, saying:

"It's not my problem."

"They're not attacking me directly."

A good example of this is Posilac, the recombinant somatotropin developed to help increase milk production in dairy cows. Love 'em or hate 'em, you have to credit the former owner of the product, Monsanto, for pouring more money into research and development for that product than any product in agricultural history! The product held the hopes of the entire biotechnology category in its hands. Its safety to both cow and human was unquestionable by any objective evaluation of the science.

Five reasons the Warriors succeeded

How did a handful of misfits make it past such a throng of opposition?

1. The gangs didn't pool resources against them.
2. The gangs didn't take the threat seriously enough to develop a strategic response.
3. When it came to crunch time, the gangs reverted back to trying to take them out individually, which in the end, was highly inefficient and actually bolstered the Warriors' confidence.
4. Some didn't act until the Warriors were on their doorstep. By then, it was too late. The seasoned Warriors easily evaded them.
5. The pride of the gangs debilitated their response.

Product vs. process: Who does it right?

Who has succeeded by promoting not just the product but the process? Starbucks.

Although Starbucks isn't growing at the rate it once did (not many are in this economy), the brand transitioned the coffee category by backing up claims of a great end product with exceptional product process — the way the beans were grown, its business agreement with farmers, its reinvestment into the farming communities that produced its product and its commitment to responsible growing practices.

Starbucks realized that by highlighting the brand at all phases of development it was able to tell a more complete and compelling brand story. This is the same opportunity available to agriculture.

To read more, visit <http://starbucks.com/SHAREDPLANET/ethicalSourcing.aspx>

Yet few, if any, rushed to Monsanto's aid when rejecting milk produced from cows treated with Posilac became a fashionable — and let's not forget, profitable — statement. Instead, most in food and agriculture were content — even relieved — to stand by and watch as Posilac risked failure, threatening to take an entire category of technology down with it, grateful that it wasn't their product that was under attack — this time.

Doing things the same old way

Agricultural groups, like the gangs pursuing the Warriors, are responding to the HSUS threat in the same way they have responded to obstacles in the past — by recoiling into their own market segment and attempting to focus on driving product demand.

While attempting to drive product demand is a legitimate practice and should continue, as a marketing person and fellow agricultural “gang member,” I have to soberly assess the ultimate effectiveness of this strategy in the light of our environment.

Agriculture continues to spend heavily to promote products, while HSUS has honed in on promoting against the process. HSUS wisely recognized that it was having difficulty gaining a foothold by attacking end products of modern animal farming, like the Big Mac, since millions of people buy the product every day (and thus express trust in the most tangible form — with their own money). So, HSUS successfully refocused its efforts by raising doubts not about the qualities of the Big Mac itself, but about the process the Big Mac went through on its way to your local golden arches.

While I am indeed a fan of advertising campaigns like “Beef: It's what's for dinner,” “Pork: The other white meat,” or “Got Milk?” I would like to propose a new strategic direction. Agriculture as a whole must similarly learn to refocus its promotion to reduce the dollars allocated to the end product and divert dollars to the promotion of the process that brings those products to market. Before I get shot like Cyrus, let me share a few facts.

Many are fond of looking back and relishing creative advertising campaigns that promote agriculture's end product. But, even past “successful” advertising campaigns produced mixed results. “Beef: It's what's for dinner” is one of the most recognizable taglines in advertising history. Yet, during its flight, beef consumption per person per year continued to decline. And, beef is not alone. Throughout its “The Other White Meat” campaign, pork simply maintained market share, neither increasing nor decreasing the amount of pork consumed per person per year. Milk, too, suffers from the same dilemma. Despite having more than 250 celebrities don a milk mustache and ask the question, “Got Milk?,” milk consumption, amidst a sea of competing drink options, continued its decline.

The reason I raise these facts is not

to disparage past great work, but to loosen the grip agriculture has on these past campaigns as though they represent the good ol' days, high water marks never to be achieved again. By loosening the grip on past work of clever creative (www.monsanto.com/americasfarmers/default.asp) designed to promote a product, we'll be free to grasp a new rung, the clever creative designed to promote the

process — the devotion, toil and tears that go into producing our world's food.

It is the process that is charged with emotion, the daily drama of life in food production. And it is that human drama that can effectively immunize the average consumer against the drama so often presented to them by HSUS and others working to vilify modern farming and food production.

How do you go about making this change happen?

Each stakeholder in the chain could start by taking a percentage of the funds normally attributed to building individual product demand and begin promoting the collective “process” of food production, instead. Perhaps this is only a small portion

(Continued on page 118)

Truth in Food *(from page 117)*

(say, 15%). But the mission must be clear: Reacquaint the consumer with farmers and a shared process of growing, processing, delivering and providing food, which has become all too vague.

Ultimately, such collaborative sharing of the drama of food production will show that, like the individual gangs of the movie,

despite the wide disparity in their products, pig farmers share a common story with chicken farmers, produce packers with corn growers, milk farmers with soybean farmers. A story that unites all in sharing the daily miracle that process renders in feeding the world would ultimately protect all against the one-by-one victorious

attacks HSUS and others are winning every day.

I recognize it won't be an easy change for the individual agriculture groups to make, any more than it was easy for the gangs of *The Warriors*. I can't count the number of times I've heard the sentiment from within agriculture (repeated again to

me just this week, in fact) that getting commodity groups to overcome the old impulse to compete against one another and instead to work together to support all of farming will never happen through free association. At the same time, those outside agriculture actively foster the division; such as, for instance, philosopher and animal-rights advocate Bernie Rollin, who just two weeks ago was helpfully counseling Dakota beef farmers that they need to distance themselves from the ugliness of their (competing) fellow pork and chicken farmers.

"... The beef industry should see what is going on with California's Proposition 2 on poultry and pork production as an opportunity, not a threat," Rollin told the cattlemen. "A big mistake is to team up in agriculture. Don't. Fight dirty to stay alive. You aren't like the others." (Coming from the man who apparently sympathizes with the notion that a calf's ability to graze isn't a decision that should be left to the farmer, but instead is an inalienable right of the animal, you can't help but wonder whether his picture of the ideal beef process comports remotely with that of the cattle feeders in attendance.)

Challenge though it may be, until the disjointed members of modern agriculture as a whole find the means to connect and defend jointly, the risk that we all lose ground daily to small gangs like HSUS will continue, to everyone's disadvantage. Remember Henry Ford, who said, "I saw great businesses become but a ghost of a name because someone thought they could be managed just as they were always managed ... though management may have been most excellent in its day, its excellence consisted in its alertness to its day, and not its slavish followings of its yesterdays."

Can you dig it?



Author's Note: *For those lucky few who have seen The Warriors, you may wonder why I portray agriculture as the other gangs and not the Warriors themselves. After all, the Warriors are the underdog, the little guy, the small heroic gang wrongfully targeted, for whom the viewer ends up pulling. The reason is agriculture is not the underdog. You may feel wrongfully indicted and that your ranks are thinning (fewer farmers producing food on fewer acres), but the reach and power of agriculture's cumulative effect remains staggering. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) may have \$100 million in annual revenues and \$205 million in net assets, but it's a pittance compared to what farmers produce every single day. Agriculture is not the underdog. Total the annual revenues of the associations listed at www.angusbeefbulletin.com/extra/2010/01jan10/0110fp_truth_in_food.html — themselves only a fraction of the total — and you'll find that agriculture outpaces HSUS by more than 5-to-1. This doesn't even include separate state-run organizations, companies with a vested interest and others omitted or overlooked in the equation. The difference is that HSUS is focusing in on the process, while farmers, rightfully so, have been focused in on the product. However, it is time to dispatch a small part of our gang to double back and close the ranks!*