

Stopping The Food Fight

U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance strives to build conversations — and understanding — between producers and consumers about food.

by **KINDRA GORDON**

Arguments tend to be commonplace in today's society — from the political arena to the food aisle at the grocery store.

Of the latter topic, Melissa Kinch, a public relations specialist, notes, "Everyone is talking about food, but it has almost turned into a food war between consumers and producers."

She points out that the problem with a war mentality — on any topic — is that it becomes a fight over facts, and there are winners and losers.

"You can't build or restore trust if you can't have a conversation," Kinch observes.

Recognizing that the fight over food needs to stop — and real conversations and connections need to occur, an alliance of prominent farmer- and rancher-led organizations and agricultural partners was created in 2011.

Called the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA), the group's purpose is to lead the dialogue and answer Americans' questions about how farmers and ranchers raise food, while also emphasizing that farmers and ranchers are stewards of the environment, responsibly care for animals and maintain strong businesses and communities.

The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB) are among the more than 50 partners supporting USFRA's efforts.

Starting a dialogue

The USFRA has focused on opening a dialogue with consumers. Kinch, who is a

senior vice president of Ketchum Communications and member of the USFRA's communications team, describes it as a roundtable approach and says the goal is to create a means for real producers to join the conversation about the food they produce — and even lead those conversations.

Already, USFRA has established the Food Dialogues (online at www.fooddialogues.com/) where an online, town-hall style meeting was convened last September to foster those conversations between ag and urban communities. The website also provides a forum for farmers and ranchers to share information and for consumers to ask questions.

Additionally, USFRA has conducted extensive research to learn more about consumers and how they interpret the messages they hear about agriculture. The research was done employing the same methods used to gauge gut reactions to words in political ads and speeches.

Surprisingly, many of the words that farmers and ranchers use to describe food products — such as safe, affordable and abundant — do not resonate well with consumers.

Instead, Keith Yazmir, who is with the public relations firm maslansky luntz + partners, which also works with the USFRA communications team, says, "Much of the language we (agriculture) use today worries consumers."

He calls these "language land mines" and gives the following examples:

When the ag industry cites science and says, "Our methods are proven safe," consumers translate that to "Your methods tamper with nature."

Yazmir says, "They think it's unnatural,

and they fear putting those food products in their child's mouth."

When the ag industry says, "We need a secure, domestic food supply," consumers turn that into "You want subsidies and tax regulation. You want to produce more to sell more."

When the ag industry says, "We keep food affordable," consumers ask, "At what expense to quality?"

When the ag industry says, "We care about our land and animals," consumers relate that to "You will take profitable short cuts when and if you can."

Yazmir says the bottom line is there is a huge credibility gap, and he adds, "Facts don't really matter very much in these debates. Ag's facts vs. their facts really gets the conversation nowhere."

A new approach

Recognizing this, Kinch and Yazmir emphasize that is why a conversation — instead of a war of facts — is needed.

Yazmir notes that consumer research has shown that consumers do have an affinity for family farms.

"They like you, but not your industry because they believe big business controls most of the farms and ranches in the U.S. When the truth is that most farms are family farms," he tells farmers and ranchers.

So, how can farmers and ranchers convey messages to get beyond consumer doubts?

Yazmir says the key is to acknowledge consumer concerns, acknowledge there is always room for improvement and talk about using less — less land, water and resources to raise your crops and livestock because of today's technology and research.

"Food is personal. A lot of people just don't know the answers. They didn't grow up on farms. They don't ask questions to attack. They ask because they want information."

— *Melissa Kinch*

He adds, "What doesn't work? Don't communicate as if everything all farmers and ranchers do is 100% perfect. Don't talk about producing more."

Kinch adds, "Food is personal. A lot of people just don't know the answers. They didn't grow up on farms. They don't ask questions to attack. They ask because they want information. So, when you approach it that way, you realize their questions are reasonable and it becomes less combative."

She concludes, "Conversation is a powerful tool. It can change opinions and enlighten and inspire more conversation. With politics so polarized and in a combative mode these days, the more we (the agricultural industry) can get away from that and have conversations the better."

For more information visit <http://usfraonline.org/> or www.fooddialogues.com. You can also find the USFRA on Facebook and Twitter.



Join the conversation with E.A.S.E

E.A.S.E. is the acronym the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) has created to help farmers and ranchers join the conversation about the food they grow. Public relations specialist Keith Yazmir suggests that farmers and ranchers find opportunities to start a constructive conversation about what they do and why they do it with consumers at the grocery store, at the coffee shop or on a plane using these tips:

E = Engage a consumer. "Look for a connection to start a conversation about how you raise and grow food," says Yazmir. He emphasizes that opening the conversation at a personal level — over something you have in common — gets people to listen.

"If you lead with facts, people put up a wall," he says.

A = Acknowledge concerns. "Rather than debate the concerns, acknowledge that you hear their questions and concerns. Don't be defensive about that, and don't take on the persona of a professor whose task is to educate," says Yazmir. "Statements like, 'I can understand why you are concerned about that,' go a long way."

S = Share your story. "A farmer's and rancher's job is to answer those legitimate questions with truthful, transparent answers," says communications specialist Melissa Kinch. Tell how you are continually improving what you do on your farm or ranch, such as using less water or turning waste into energy. Yazmir and Kinch report that the term "improving" resonates in a positive way with consumers — even better than words like innovation and progress.

E = Earn trust. Addressing consumers' real concerns will go a long way in earning their trust, says Kinch. She concludes, "This is about trust. If you don't trust someone, you don't trust their facts."

As a final piece of advice, Yazmir says, "We need to move away from the language of our industry and toward the language of the benefits of what we're doing." He points out that consumers are worried about science and technology when it comes to food. Instead, they want wholesome and natural. To help bridge that gap, he suggests rather than using the term "GMOs," talk about seeds that grow stronger, are more resilient and produce better-tasting crops.