

Practicing Strategic Social Media and Media Engagement in Agriculture: Controlling the Narrative

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Consumers are interested in understanding where their food comes from. Unfortunately, they seek this information on the internet, and while some quality information may reside there, false and misleading information is abundant, frequently discovered with better search engine placement and persuasive with aesthetically pleasing websites.
- ▶ Social media is rife with pseudo-celebrities pushing messages that malign dairy and other agricultural industries. Sadly, the sources of misinformation are compelling, and reinforce preconceived biases that misrepresent agricultural industries and products.
- ▶ The push-back solution is to actively shape consumer sentiment by controlling the narrative. Contrary to popular opinion, facts, statistics, and information rarely change minds. Controlling the narrative means presenting values-based messaging and earning consumer trust before basic information can flow.
- ▶ Producers and industry together must be present in social media space, sharing perspectives and realities of agricultural production—but doing it correctly. Consumers are asking questions—are you answering them, or is someone else with an anti-ag agenda answering for you?

■ Biting the Hand that Feeds

Efficiencies in animal and crop agriculture have ensured an abundant, affordable, and safe food supply in North America. While we always can find examples of rural and inner-city areas that are underserved and food choice is limited, these issues are almost always a function of distribution rather than production. Innovation in genetics and production technology has created crop and animal varieties that produce more with fewer inputs, lower costs, and less environmental impact. It is the very definition of sustainability.

But social media is predominantly a wall of outrage against agriculture and shapes a negative public perception. Why? Affordable access to diverse foods is a privilege and a reason to be grateful for agricultural producers and the technologies that allow today's efficiencies. Yet the frequent message in social media is that modern agriculture produces an adulterated (if not poison) product that enriches a couple of multinational companies and the greedy farmers that do their bidding.

What is the chasm between reality and the public face on social media? How much does it influence consumer behaviours?

We have innovations that allow sustainable intensification on one hand, and a public that frequently rejects the innovations that allow sustainable intensification on the other. So why isn't the public excited about the technologies that feed them?

We can blame a vigorous disinformation stream. According to a 2023 Pew Research Poll, 50% of North Americans get their news from social media at least 'sometimes', and most messages are rarely originating from legitimate news sources. Motivated misinformation or patently false information is distributed with the glitz and pizzaz of real news, providing the viewer with a sense of legitimacy to just about any claim. Most

people seek out information that confirms what they already believe, and resist content that challenges their worldview. This self-reinforcing echo chamber ensures that information-seeking web surfers only bolster their views, reaffirming beliefs that may not be consistent with the preponderance of evidence.

This situation presents a ripe ecosystem for false information to flow. Over the last several decades the internet has become the festering conduit for false information about many topics, but agriculture is a model target. Whether it is animal agriculture, crop genetics, herbicides or livestock vaccines, the internet's 'experts' are in visible, impactful space educating others about what you do.

And where are you?

This article underscores the necessity for agricultural concerns to control the narrative, with an emphasis on dairy production. The fundamental principles of public communication are shared between the dairy industry and other agricultural industries, and lessons learned and strategies employed translate well across disciplines.

The bottom line is that agricultural industries and their constituents must control the narrative. We need to tell the story of our discipline, or someone else will be happy to tell our stories for us. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, this means effective engagement in social media. The challenge is engaging correctly, because connecting with a skeptical public requires a special strategy that is not always intuitive.

▪ **The Perfect False Information Storm**

Dairy is well positioned for derision from activist groups. Animal agriculture has its haters, vegans and others oppose milk products, and anti-biotech interests will argue against cattle feed that is predominantly produced on genetically engineered (GE) crops. Many of the internet's self-appointed experts certainly have opinions on dairy as a part of the diet. All these interests use the pipeline of the internet to push a narrative that may or may not be in line with actual evidence.

We know from the COVID-19 pandemic that most of the false information arises from a small number of sources. The Center for Countering Digital Hate has identified that 65% of false information about the pandemic arose from just 12 social media accounts. A quick Google search about the dangers of dairy reveals a suite of websites that speak to consumers with a patina of medical authority.

Malevolent interests are controlling the narrative, breeding consumer skepticism, and possibly earning consumer trust—all with false or misleading information.

▪ **How Do We Take Control of the Narrative?**

Harness the Power of Networks

The interests opposed to science and reason are masters of exploiting networks. From GE crops to climate to vaccines, there is a connected web of science rejectionists that build substantial followings with expanding networks.

Unfortunately, our communication within agriculture is farmer to farmer, scientist to scientist, farmer to advocate. All of us, from producers to industry employees to academics, need to build networks of individuals excited to share our work within their networks.

This means establishing an online presence. As painful as it may seem to many, this is where the conversations are taking place, and if the plan is to control the narrative, there must be participation in that space. The development of networks in social media space can provide a powerful means to transmit your own information as well as share good content others create.

Build Trust

One of the uphill battles that agriculture faces is a deficit in trust. It is not an agriculture-specific problem, but instead a systemic skepticism of professions and institutions manufactured from internet claims. Agriculture's critics come across as advocates for the consumer, with 'clean food' movements and other disinformation that implies health risk from products derived from conventional agricultural production. Purveyors of dairy alternatives will generate narratives around animal agriculture.

The new reality is that many consumers are curious about their food and how it is produced. The result is a perfect storm for false claims to grab hold, as consumers have a hard time discerning legitimate information from the copious misinformation on the internet and in social media space. What do consumers believe?

When affluent consumers in the industrialized world are faced with conflicting information, they tend to make conservative, precautionary decisions. If they are told that milk is loaded with hormones and antibiotics by a trusted (yet misinformation laden) wellness website, and an industry website explains that there are no added hormones and livestock are not used in production when being treated with antibiotics, the average person will choose to accept the precautionary information and assume the wellness website is likely correct.

So how does the industry become more trusted than Goop, The Food Babe and faux health news websites? It is a question of earning trust.

Trust is the key word in online engagement. In the book, *The Trusted Advisor*, the authors introduce the trust equation (Maister et al., 2021). The concept illustrates the elements of trust and provides a roadmap to which elements may be controlled to influence consumer behaviour. At this same time, the trust equation clearly shows how special interests manipulate the consumer by becoming the trusted sources of information. The trust equation has taken on many forms in recent years, but the basic equation is:

$$\text{trust} = \frac{\text{competency} + \text{reliability} + \text{intimacy}}{\text{self motivation}}$$

The equation shows the relationship between several attributes that influence consumer behaviour. Competency addresses the question of expertise, why should anyone be considered a trusted expert. This is where farmers and professionals in agricultural industries excel. Leading with personal stories that illustrate expertise, time in profession, involvement in professional organizations, or commitment to generational agriculture builds trust by demonstrating competence and expertise.

The second component is reliability. Whereas competence defines if you can do it, reliability asks if you are willing to do it. In this case trust may be built by providing examples of stepping up to solve a problem, being proactive in a sustainability campaign, or displaying the products of volunteer efforts.

The third element is typically a stumbling block for agricultural professionals, intimacy, or the question of 'do you care?' From the consumer's point of view agricultural industries are like any other, concerned with the financial bottom line, even if that means inflicting harm on people or planet. Such claims have become dominant in social media and on 'health oriented' websites. Warm warnings from a recognized celebrity are perceived with more intimacy than the real statistics of safety presented by academic, industry or government websites.

The numerator of the trust equation simply builds a sense of who you are—are you an expert that cares and wishes to improve a situation?

The denominator is self-motivation, why do you do what you do? Consumers perceive agricultural industries like any other, sterile, uncaring, and willing to do anything for a higher profit.

Building trust during public engagement relies on controlling several elements, defining who you are and why you do what you do.

Create the Narrative

Professionals in agriculture are too close to production to appreciate it from the consumer's lens. While the consumer is curious, farmers generally feel that their activities are of little interest to the public. After all, how can connecting an automatic milking system have any impact off the farm? However, it does. There is a newfound interest in where food comes from as well as animal stewardship. Producers need to lean into that opportunity with enthusiasm, but rarely do.

It must be stated that there are agricultural professionals that are outstanding content creators in internet space. However, as a broader industry we must do better. The paucity of individuals in social media space is unfortunate because farmers and ranchers are among the most trusted sources of information. The creation of simple content for curious audiences has never been better, as resources like X (Twitter), Instagram and TikTok provide immediate, rapid dissemination of the realities of milk production. A simple photo, a ten-second video, or an online written explanation provides material for the rest of us to share through our networks.

But are these opportunities used? Unfortunately, for the most part these are squandered opportunities to connect the curious consumer with the expert in agricultural production. While a few operations are present online (and have magnificent audiences) the critics massively outnumber the experts.

And if farmers and ranchers are not explaining the realities of agriculture, the daily successes and failures of farming, and the fundamentals of food production, then some guy in a cubicle in Oakland, CA is glad to tell that story. And this is where we are. Whole industries, dependent on the immense efforts of farmers and ranchers are out breaking ice in water troughs at 4 AM and -20°C lay silent, while the voices of opposition are stewing in ways to malign an industry via social media.

▪ **The Power of Values-Based Content**

If you don't like the media, become the media, and that sentiment has never been more real than today. Every industry understands the power of promoting its message through social media, and these conduits are more powerful and reaching than ever. Effective dissemination in this space must happen on two levels, on the industry level and on the personal level.

Professional organizations, trade groups or other producer organizations must use proactive values-based messaging in social media space. Referring back to the trust equation, how do you demonstrate competence and reliability, show that you care, and are doing what you do for the right reasons? Information presented can't be about the number of gallons produced or the supply chain, it must be personal stories of creating a nutritious, safe, and affordable product, while cognizant of minimizing environmental impacts.

On the personal level individual producers need to understand the power of a simple, five-minute effort to create content. Explaining a process, why you do it, what is important to you as a producer—these are all values-based proclamations that align with consumer values and counter the doom and gloom messaging by the websites and resources that poison public perception about agriculture.

▪ **Application: Navigating Plant-Based or Synthetic 'Milk'**

A communication strategy may be gleaned from the foibles of the plant-based meat industry, and the response from animal agriculture. As Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods ramped up their campaigns, there

was a strange and significant response by the associated meat industries. State legislatures passed laws seeking to protect animal agriculture industries, such as laws that made it illegal to refer to a plant-based patty as a burger or sausage when not generated from livestock. But how do these lobbying efforts appear to the consumer?

The natural first response is to ridicule the alternative, as a milk or meat substitute is clearly discernable from the original product it seeks to emulate. But comments against these new technologies appear petty and defensive, especially if they come from industry that stands to lose market share if alternatives rise in popularity. When these efforts reach policy change, they appear to be protectionist and defensive, which is a turn-off to consumers.

So what is the appropriate response? As in the response to fake meat, the solution to milk alternatives is not to criticize them, but instead use them as a communications opportunity to build a values-based, trust-building explanation of the benefits of the dairy product. The philosophy is simple. Criticizing the competition is easy, it's what every industry does when they sense a threat to market share. Unfortunately, today's competitive product environment is not perceived an appeal to consumer values as much as a positioning to be the lesser of two evils. But be mindful that the consumer perceives marketing-driven criticism of competitors as a sign of weakness, the machinations of an industry in the throes of decline, clamoring to retain custody of dying market share.

The way to define a positive narrative is values-based communication that extols the positives of the product, in this case dairy. What are the benefits of the animal-derived product that resonate with the consumer? Consumers seek nutrition from sources that are safe and reasonably priced. Dairy-based products, which contain a rare combination of nutrient factors that can be difficult to harness with non-dairy alternatives, can satisfy these consumer needs, as milk is a source of protein, calcium, B vitamins, phosphorus, potassium, and vitamin D. Safety is regulated at many levels from production to retail, and price fluctuations for the consumer are minor relative to the significant wholesale swings experienced by producers. Safety, nutrition, affordability, and availability are all points that align well with consumer expectations and allow messages to resonate about dairy products.

Consumers also want choices and variety. Milk products enable the production of yogurt and many cheeses that may provide bacteria that supplement digestion. Dairy products offer flavors and aromas that supplement meals, such as sour cream, ice cream and other products. Consumers in the industrialized world want choices, and dairy offers real choice above alternative 'milk' products.

This is where communications efforts need to initiate, especially in social media. The campaign should not be, "Here's what's wrong with fake milk!" and it should be, "What do we understand about consumer values and how does dairy-based milk satisfy them?" This latter question defines effective messaging, essentially defining a need and showing how the product fills it better than imposter alternatives.

Directly addressing the consumer need and ignoring the competition is a position of strength. The philosophy isn't, "Here's why the competition is bad," it is, "Here's how our products fit the needs of you and your family." Remember, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Milk alternatives are liquids that seek to emulate the original product, and they attempt to do this because of its sensory and nutritional qualities. Communicate that. There is a reason mimics have been spawned, and it is because the original product satisfies consumer needs.

Moreover, the original dairy product generally achieves the goals with higher quality and potentially greater sustainability. These are messages that need to propagate in social media.

What are some of the positives that may be presented in social media?

- Dairy products have been part of the human diet for over 8000 years.
- Consumption of dairy products provides a significant portion of the dietary reference intake for protein and calcium (Vissers et al., 2011).

- Dairy products provide a mixture of nutrients that are difficult to obtain from other sources (Rozenberg et al., 2016).
- Modern genetics and production technologies allow more production with fewer animals (Capper et al., 2009).
- Maximizing bone mass with adequate dietary calcium can be a key factor in staving off consequences in mineral loss later in life (Rizzoli, 2014).

▪ **Conclusion: Be the Solution**

Dairy, like all facets of agriculture, must understand the power of influencing consumer decisions, and participate shaping them. Clearly there are efforts being made in this realm and the industry does a fine job promoting its work through websites and other advertisements. The problem is that consumers need to find them. A more proactive statement of values, building trust and shaping consumer sentiment is necessary, and that needs to happen in social media space, not just on passive websites. More importantly, individual producers need to shoulder more of the burden in controlling consumer perception, simply because they are trusted experts, and their experiences weigh heavily in shaping consumer sentiment.

Going forward, industry efforts should center on training producers in elements of trust building and content creation. Producers and other industry professionals alike must also participate in sharing good information with their networks, amplifying trust-building messages, and controlling public perception of agriculture.

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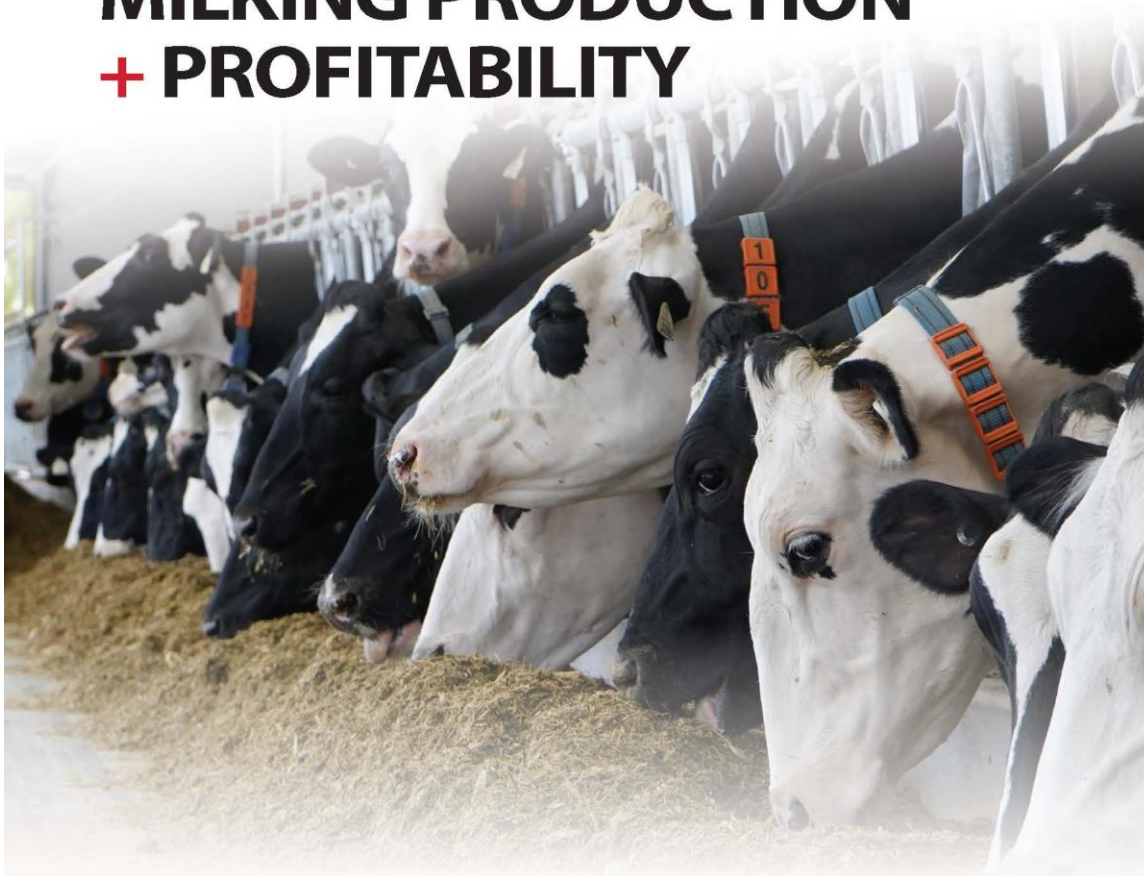
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