

# How to Communicate with the Public



**IT ONLY TAKES  
A FEW SECONDS TO  
MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION,  
AND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE  
TO UNDO IT... IF IT WAS  
A NEGATIVE ONE**

## **How do I communicate effectively?**

- Be a good listener.
- Be positive.
- Be yourself.
- Be understandable.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Make it relevant.
- Make it interesting.
- Be sincere and honest when answering.

## **Why should I communicate with the public?**

The average Canadian is more than your customer; as citizens they can affect how you do business. The average Canadian is also more than one generation removed from farming and food production. Most people give little thought to where our food comes from and even fewer people have an accurate understanding of our modern food production system. Recent polls show that Canadians generally view farmers very positively as an important part of Canadian life. However, those same polls show that their concerns about food safety, agriculture's impact on the environment, and animal care are all rising. This erosion in the public's image of farmers and food producers is most pronounced in young people — our future.

Surveys show that spokespersons with the highest credibility ratings include farmers themselves, and third party experts like livestock specialists and food scientists. Agriculture has done a tremendous job of producing food, but we can start to a better job of explaining how food is grown. If you don't tell your story, who will?

## **What Can I Expect?**

Most of the people you will talk to will be genuinely surprised and curious about farming and food production. In a recent poll by Ipsos Reid, 94% of non farming Canadians admitted they knew little or nothing about agriculture. When asked if they wanted to know more about food and farming, more than two thirds of respondents said yes.

Some Canadians may have inaccurate perceptions of farmers and farming. Most people have genuine questions or concerns.



## **How Do I Communicate With the Public?**

**Speak Urban.** Most people you will meet, whether media or politicians, consumers attending your local fair or children in the classroom, will have little or no knowledge of agriculture and will not understand industry jargon. It is important to always talk in their language not ours. This may mean substituting words they'll understand (ie. birthing instead of farrowing) or as it sounds. You will have to make a conscious effort to use words and phrases which are familiar and understandable to non-farmers.

**Bring It Home.** Many people cannot relate very well to farming animals, so it helps to make things personal. Show people what it means for them, in terms of their food, or jobs, or our environment. Use "every day" comparisons that non-farmers can relate to and are familiar with.

**Catch Their Interest.** Because people limit their attention to what is interesting or important, packaging and presentation are crucial. Make it fun with trivia games or "hands-on" activities; make it interesting with props (i.e. animals, feed samples, byproducts displays or farm tools) or interesting facts and figures; make it important with catchy slogans or eye appealing graphics and photos.

**Keep it Short and Simple.** Avoid technical detailed explanations. Keep your presentations/explanations short and simple. People who want to know more will keep the questions coming.

**Be Specific.** It is important to point out every farm or business may do things a little different. Not better or worse, just different. Talk about what **YOU** do on **YOUR** farm or business. Whenever possible, leave generalized "industry" statements to industry groups and governments. When making general statements, never talk absolutes and always quote your source. (i.e. "According to xxx, most Canadian farms. . .")

**Be Yourself.** Talk about what you know and stick to the subject matter that you are comfortable with. If someone asks a question you're unsure or uncomfortable about answering, refer them to someone qualified to answer, or offer to find the answer for them. It's always better to admit that you don't have an answer than to give the wrong information. Be sure that you do follow up on questions you cannot answer.

**Stick to the Facts.** Agricultural awareness begins at home, so do your homework and stay on top of changing trends in your industry. We all have personal opinions, but it's best to leave yours at home so others can make their opinions based on facts.

**Be Prepared.** Keep a record of common and not so common questions. Spend time researching and refining your answers.



**Resist Pointing Fingers.** Avoid deflecting criticism or criticizing someone else to make you or your sector look good. A negative approach only reflects badly on you and hurts everyone in the industry.

**Broaden Understanding.** Always explain **WHY** things are done (or not done), not just **HOW**. Explain what would/could happen if things were done differently, or not done at all.

**Put Things Into Perspective.** Comparing past and present, alternative methods, costs and benefits (trade-offs), or drawing parallels to everyday life all help people see a more complete picture.

**Tap Into Youngsters.** Children can provide great access to adults. Since children are naturally less inhibited than adults, encourage youngsters to ask questions. Be prepared, children can also ask tougher questions. Provide answers that both they and the adults can understand. Mentioning your own children or grandchildren is a great opener with parents and is an easy way to introduce the family farm concept. In classrooms, develop messages for parents in materials or assignments that children can take home. Since youngsters are more willing to listen to their peers, let young farmers deliver the message for you. There are many willing spokespeople in 4-H and Junior Farmers, or even within your own family.

### **How Do I Deal With Sensitive Issues**

Food, from the way we produce it to the way we prepare it is coming under increasing public scrutiny. Issues surrounding food safety, environmental quality, biotechnology and animal "rights" are being debated in classrooms, legislatures and newspapers across the country. Only by addressing these issues with the public can we in agriculture be part of the debate.

**Be a Good Listener.** Before we can address issues and concerns, we have to understand what they are and identify the basis of the information.

**Ask Questions First.** Use questions of your own to find out what a person knows and understands about their issue or concern. Use critical questions to get people to think about other aspects of the issue, implications of their solution, or to analyze their own information.

**Respect Others' Opinion.** Avoid preaching at people or showing a lack of respect for their opinions even if they differ greatly from yours. We are all entitled to our views.

**Encourage Informed Decisions.** Resist the urge to "convert" people to your way of thinking. The goal isn't to "sell" your product or way of life, but rather the information needed for people to make their own decisions.



**Be Understanding.** Respect people's level of knowledge, even when it seems far less than what you think it should be. We want to increase people's level of understanding, not insult it.

**Correct False Assumptions.** All too often, people's concerns are based around a false premise or assumption. It is more important to correct the premise, than the details. For example, to debate the amount of water used to produce a pound of beef is to miss the point. Go to the heart of the matter – which is water isn't "used up" at all, rather it is recycled.

**Show You Share the Same Concerns.** Find the common ground and work from there. For example, if someone thinks a certain practice is "cruel", begin by explaining that you care about animals too, then go on to explain why that practice is in the best interest of the animal (and ultimately the consumer too). If someone is concerned about food safety, begin by explaining you eat the same food they do and you care about the well-being of your family just as much as they care about theirs, then go on to explain the rules and regulations that you follow.

**Be Positive.** Always explain the benefits first; to the consumer, to the animals, to the environment, to the economy/society and finally to the farmer. Talk about how the agriculture and food industry has changed and look to the future for more positive changes for the industry.

**Be Proud.** Canadian farmers and food producers should be proud of what they do. Although no industry is perfect, the agriculture and food sector has little to apologize for. Always remember to point out that change is a part of life and like other industries the agriculture industry is always looking for better ways to do things.

**Be Patient.** Old beliefs die hard and for many people this may be the first time they've heard agriculture's side of the story. Take as much time as necessary to explain important issues and address any concerns they may have.

**Stay Calm, Cool and Collected.** Avoid arguments. Allow people to express their opinions first. Then respond calmly and positively. Correct misinformation with facts. Point out contradictions or inconsistencies. Help them to see the bigger picture by pointing out things they may not have considered. Always be prepared to agree to disagree.



**Beware of Traps.** Recognize special interest crusaders for what they are: a vocal minority often with extreme or rigid beliefs. While they don't represent the average Canadian, the publicity they generate can and will have an impact on other's views. If confronted by activists, protesters or a hostile individual, don't waste time trying to communicate with them. Politely answer their question then ignore them or move on to someone else. Never give them the attention and credibility they crave by confronting or debating them.

**Three Simple Messages to Communicate to Everyone:**

1) The proper care and treatment of animals is important to me. I have an obligation to make sure that the animals on my farm are well cared for.

2) Canadians have a food supply that is safe, abundant and affordable thanks to advanced technologies and responsible practices used in today's food system.

3) As farmers with a way of life that is very close to the land, we understand the importance of healthy soil, water and air. We live on our farms with our families and depend on the environment to create a healthy place to live and provide the right conditions to grow crops and raise livestock.

**Be an Agricultural Ambassador:**

For many people, this may be the first time they have met a farmer or food producer. Remember you are representing the entire agri-food industry. The impression you leave will be a lasting one.

*If you would like more information on communicating with the public, please contact us.*

