

Maintaining Agriculture's Public Image: An Opinion Survey of Agricultural Communications Leaders

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Most officers of professional agricultural communications organizations believe their organizations have a responsibility to promote favorable public attitudes toward agriculture. That is one result from a recent survey of the leaders of eight of these organizations.

Historically, the American public has held favorable attitudes and opinions toward agriculture. Both rural and urban populations, as studies have shown, hold images of agriculture that are quite favorable. Such images, attitudes, and opinions are due, in part, to parents who fondly remember visits to Uncle Jake's farm. But as the population matures, and farm numbers dwindle, such remembrances also must dim.

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Many studies have been conducted to measure the public's attitude toward agriculture. In 1973, a PACER study found the public's image of the average farmer as a person was quite favorable. Compared with the average non-farm person, farmers were seen as harder working, more friendly, and more productive per man hour.

A study by the American Dairy Association in 1966 found that the public actually has a better image of farmers as being efficient, progressive businessmen than farmers themselves do. In 1970, the **Minneapolis Tribune's** Minnesota Poll found, that in five of six statements measured, the public sided with agriculture and the farmer.

The question we can ask is: Who is responsible for maintaining such a favorable public image toward agriculture? Certainly farmers share part of the responsibility and they have risen to the challenge. The Grange movement, the National Farm Organization, National Farmers Union, and Farm Bureau are examples of collective efforts by farmers to tell their own story. Agribusiness also has taken on a share of the responsibility through corporate communications and public relations efforts. Agricultural communicators also have accepted a share of the responsibility by choosing to work in this field.

Indirectly or directly, intentionally or unintentionally, the professional organizations to which many of these communicators belong play some role in the maintenance of favorable public attitudes toward agriculture. Promotions such as Agriculture Day and Farm-City week are actively supported by professional organizations of agricultural communicators.

In an attempt to determine if these professional organizations consider the maintenance of favorable attitudes toward agriculture an important function of their organization, a mail survey was conducted of all the active officers (1980) of eight professional agricultural communications organizations. The organizations included: Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE), National Agricultural Marketing Association (NAMA), Agricultural Relations Council (ARC), Newspaper Farm Editor's Association (NFEA), American Agricultural Editors Association (AAEA), National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB), and Communications Officers of State Departments of Agriculture (COSDA).

The orientation of these officers toward maintaining favorable public attitudes toward agriculture can not be generalized as representing the collective thought of all members of

their respective organizations. However, their orientations may provide some indication of how their particular organizations may view this topic.

Forty-six officers were mailed questionnaires during the week of May 5, 1980. A total of 44 completed questionnaires were returned for a response of 96 percent.

Findings

OUR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROMOTE FAVORABLE PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD AGRICULTURE.

Ninety percent of all respondents agreed or somewhat agreed with this statement. Of the officers of the eight organizations, only leaders of the Newspaper Farm Editors disagreed. Their disagreement was based on adherence to the journalistic principle of objectivity.

The Farm Broadcasters, however, were in 100 percent agreement with the statement. Also in 100 percent agreement were leaders of NAMA, COSDA, ARC, and AAEA. Ninety percent of ACE leaders either agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PROMOTING FAVORABLE PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD AGRICULTURE MAINLY BELONGS TO THOSE INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR EMPLOYERS INVOLVED IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS.

Only 65 percent of all respondents agreed with this statement. Thirty-five percent disagreed. Trying to interpret such a response is risky but it might be safe to assume that those disagreeing with the statement believe such a responsibility belongs to everyone in agriculture.

Thirty-six percent of ACE leaders somewhat disagreed with the statement while one in 11 disagreed. Twenty-seven percent agreed and 27 percent somewhat agreed. Sixty percent of COSDA leaders agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement while ARC leaders were split evenly with one agreeing, one somewhat agreeing, one somewhat disagreeing, and one disagreeing.

Newspaper Farm Editors were the only group generally

disagreeing with the statement. They did not feel such promotion was any part of their business.

LAND-GRAND COLLEGES AND GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES (and their staffs) HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROMOTING FAVORABLE PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD AGRICULTURE.

Eighty-seven percent of all respondents agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement. Only six of the 44 respondents (13 percent) disagreed. Among ACE leaders, 64 percent agreed and 27 percent somewhat agreed. Only one of the 11 ACE respondents somewhat disagreed with the statement. Similarly, 60 percent of COSDA leaders agreed and 20 percent somewhat agreed. Only one of five COSDA respondents somewhat disagreed.

In 100 percent agreement were leaders of ARC, NAMA, and AAEA. The only group to disagree with the statement was NFEA.

Public concern for the threat to our environment from chemical pollution is of major interest to agricultural communications leaders. When asked to identify aspects of agriculture that today need greater public understanding, 77 percent (34 of 44) indicated the use of pesticides and herbicides. An older problem, farm income, was the second most common subject indicated by leaders as needing greater public understanding.

DOES YOUR PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION SPONSOR OR SUPPORT ANY PROMOTIONS TO INCREASE THE PUBLIC'S AWARENESS OF AGRICULTURE?

Fifty-nine percent of all respondents said their organization sponsored or supported promotions while 41 percent said their organization did not. However, 83 percent of all respondents said their organization should support or sponsor promotions. The 17 percent who said their organization should not, serve as officers for organizations that do not support or sponsor promotions.

Some differences of opinion appeared within organizations. Six of 11 ACE leaders indicated their organization did and should sponsor or support promotions. Three said the

organization did not but should. Two said the organization did not and should not.

COSDA officers were also divided on this question. Two of the five respondents said yes and should, two said no but should, and one said no and should not.

The different responses could be attributed to the possibility that the question was interpreted on a personal or local level. However, NAMA and NAFB officers agreed 100 percent that their organizations do and should sponsor and support promotions. NAMA supports Agriculture Day and NAFB supports Farm-City Week among others.

Statements

Roughly half of the total population for the study responded regarding how their professional organization, company, agency, or governmental unit might do a better job of promoting agriculture in the future. Responses generally centered on a need for improved communications with the public. Following is a collection of some comments given by communications leaders:

ACE

"Learn to communicate more effectively with the general public who should better understand the needs, problems, and unique contributions of agriculture to our American economy."

"Direct more effective mass media to the urban citizens as to their stake in agriculture."

"Work with community groups and state departments of agriculture."

"To retain our professionalism, we cannot be fully advocates for the 'image' cause of agriculture. We will lose our credibility rapidly if we become identified as agricultural image advocates."

COSDA

"Our organization is intended to service individual state departments of agriculture and, therefore, helps agriculture as a whole through the department's work."

"It is difficult for any regional or national organization to promote agriculture because of the many regional differences in production systems, crops, geography. However, a regional approach may have definite benefits."

ARC

"Start where you are--never miss an opportunity to straighten out a misinformed friend."

"It is my feeling that is not a function of ARC to promote agriculture but it may be a function of our members through their own corporate activities....ARC certainly does not discourage such activity."

NAMA

"We can always do a better job with more time and money."

"As a PR agency, we can counsel our clients on opportunities for promoting agriculture through their activities."

NAFB

"We all should be more active."

"Get production agriculture more involved in promoting their own industry."

NFEA

"It isn't our job to promote anything except readership which could lead to a better understanding of what's going on out on the farms and ranches. Our job is news and timely information presented clearly and concisely about farmers, farming and food production. It isn't being a farm chamber of commerce."

"My organization represents professional newspaper journalists. I would resign if it started promoting anything."

Summary

The results of this survey indicate that the majority of officers of professional agricultural communications organizations believe their organization has a responsibility to promote favorable public attitudes toward agriculture. The majority also agree that the responsibility for promoting favorable attitudes mainly belongs to those individuals and their employers involved in agricultural communications.

A large majority also believe that land-grant colleges and governmental agencies have a responsibility for promoting favorable public attitudes. Also, the majority of officers are of the opinion that their professional organization should sponsor or support promotions to increase the public's awareness of agriculture.

Many questions remain, however. Does one group of com-

municators, for example, bear a greater responsibility in the maintenance of agriculture's image than another? How much of a role should the farmer play in the promotion of his image? Should professional organizations combine efforts in promoting agriculture in hopes of achieving greater effect? Such questions remain for further study.

