

The Power of Words: Exploring Consumers' Perceptions of Words Commonly Associated with Agriculture

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Abstract

Individuals interpret words differently according to the experiences that have shaped their lives. As agricultural communicators, it is important to understand how individuals perceive certain words and if these perceptions influence their attitudes toward the agricultural industry. To better understand consumers' perceptions, this study used focus group methodology to present words commonly associated with agriculture to consumer participants. Four focus groups were conducted over a period of two weeks. A total of 36 individuals participated in the focus groups. The results indicated some words activated participants' attitudes and elicited a richer discussion. Divergent attitudes and perceptions were observed in the discussion of some words, while participants perceived other words similarly. For the agricultural industry to improve communications with consumer audiences, it is important to understand consumers' existing perceptions of such commonly used descriptors.

Key Words

Framing, individual frames, focus groups, perceptions, qualitative research

Introduction

Farm worker. Organic. Locally grown. Green industry. When a consumer hears these words, what do they think of? Are their thoughts positive or negative? Would their thoughts about these words be the same as their friends or family members? Words can be linked to certain perceptions or preconceived ideas that an individual has for a specific word (Aldrich, 1980). This perception is based on the context in which the words were presented (Aldrich, 1980).

Words are the most basic of communications elements. While researchers typically study frames or themes consisting of a phrase or several words strung together, words themselves have the ability to convey meaning. Consumers are inundated with words from a variety of sources. Advertising and marketing specialists have used a number of sources to try to push ideas or messages to consumers. "The primary function of advertising is ... to support the free market economy, but this is not its only role; over the years it has become more and more involved in the manipulation of social values and attitudes" (Dyer, 1982, p. 1). As communicators, it is important to understand how individuals perceive certain words and if these perceptions influence their attitudes toward the agricultural industry. An audience may not always perceive words commonly associated with agriculture exactly as the communicator intended (Stevenson, 1997). "Today's consumers have a low level of understanding

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of the agricultural production process. We often fear what we do not know” (Cannon & Irani, 2011, p. 18). Research that seeks to understand how these perceptions of the agricultural industry impact consumers’ decisions and overall attitude toward the field as a whole is important for both communication researchers and practitioners. Thus, the purpose of this research was to understand consumers’ perceptions of words commonly used to communicate about the agricultural industry.

Literature Review

Words often generate a visual representation within the mind. When individuals hear or see a word, they often visualize the word so it fits into a known context (Aldrich, 1980). Aldrich (1980) stated when individuals hear a word they create a pictorial representation of the word in their mind to better connect with the word and the concept it evokes. These representations of words may or may not be accurate in terms of understanding the word.

Words, within the agricultural industry, can have double meanings for consumers, based on their perceptions of the industry (Glen, 2004). These double meanings can lead to confusion among consumers and can result in distrust (Crony, 2010). Crony (2010) advises those in the agricultural industry to be transparent in messages delivered to the public to maintain trust with consumers.

In an industry commentary, Kapetanovic (2010), a marketing expert, identified the negative connotation associated with the word “sustainability.” However, in a discussion of context and target audiences, Kapetanovic (2010) discussed the opportunity for the word sustainability to be used and perceived favorably. The target audience of a planned communication effort determines how a word like sustainability should be used and the resulting connotation that the audience will associate with the word (Kapetanovic, 2010). Kapetanovic (2010) identified that the word sustainability could be used strategically by the agricultural industry and presented an “opportunity for growth” in the industry (p. 44).

In a study that tested agricultural messages with consumers, Goodwin, Chiarelli, and Irani (2011) found consumers perceived six of 10 agricultural messages as unfavorable. Previous experiences, media influence, association with other industries, and lack of supporting information played a large role in the perceived favorability of the messages. Goodwin et al. (2011) observed requests for examples and explanations about the messages from the participants, indicating the perceptions required more information before forming a perception or an attitude.

When a topic is more salient, the chance of individuals seeing and digesting the information increases (Entman, 1993). Words and text can become highly salient when used repetitively, especially in the form of headlines and advertisements (Entman, 1991; Entman, 1993). Entman (1993) mentioned that if an individual already holds a belief linked to the specific word, then that individual may only need one exposure to the message before raising the level of salience for that individual. Also, the frame in which the word or phrase is presented, “determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it” (Entman, 1993, p. 54). Individuals create frames of reference for issues relevant to their lives. These “issue-related frames of reference can have a significant impact on perceiving, organizing, and interpreting incoming information and on drawing inferences from that information” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107).

Goffman (1959) first introduced the idea of frames in his book, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.” He fleshed out the idea of individuals organizing information about the world and the surrounding society to create their personal image and identity (Goffman, 1959). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in

such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, more evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993).

“Because frames have to be considered schemes for both presenting and comprehending information, two concepts of framing can be specified: media frames and individual frames” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106). Based on an individual’s experience, frames can differ from one individual to the next, and those frames can affect the decision-making choices of an individual (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). However, the way an issue is framed, based on its projected outcome, can often impact the decision of an individual.

When an individual has repeated exposure to information, framed in a specific way, that individual will digest that information within the context of that frame, and in turn, this will impact how that individual views that information within society in general, not just within that frame (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). Media frames serve to inform society about events happening around and to them on a daily basis (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1991). News reporters may, consciously or unconsciously, include their thoughts about the information being presented to individuals (Gameson & Modigliani, 1989; Scheufele, 1999). The media are responsible for defining and creating the way in which the public perceives social issues and events (Tuchman, 1978). The media have the ability to, “frame issues in ways that favor a particular side without showing an explicit bias” (Tankard, 2001, p. 96).

Methods

Qualitative research, by nature, focuses on understanding the qualities of the studied materials and how those qualities come together in reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critics of qualitative research contend no researcher can be completely objective in their observations for data collection; therefore, researchers should take measures to record objective data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To ensure the robustness of the study, the researchers referred to Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig’s (2007) Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ).

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research that relies on group interaction during a group interview (Morgan, 1988). Focus groups are commonly used to understand consumer opinions about information to increase communication effectiveness (Greenbaum, 1998). Group discussions allow researchers insight into group dynamics and opinions on topics presented to them (Greenbaum, 1998). Since the intent of this research was to understand consumers’ perceptions of certain words used to describe the agricultural industry, focus groups were a viable option for collecting data.

An external market research firm was hired to recruit participants for the focus groups. The market research firm utilized Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) telephone random digit dialing (RDD) sampling to qualify potential participants. Using demographic variables, such as age, gender, education, and race, a sampling frame was established to determine representativeness among the participants. The target participants were representative consumers of the two urban locations where the focus groups were conducted. These participants were of interest because the researchers were interested in exploring general consumers’ perceptions in urban populations of Florida. The market research firm was directed to recruit eight to 10 participants for each focus group as suggested by Greenbaum (1998).

As Krueger (1998) advised, a protocol was designed to stimulate conversation among the focus group participants in a clear, organized, and consistent manner. The protocol for this study examined 12 different words commonly used to describe the agricultural industry. To minimize participant fatigue during the focus groups, the words were matched into five categorized sets (see Table 1).

Table 1
Word sets tested

Set	Category	Words
1	People in agriculture	Farmer, Farm Worker
2	General agriculture	Agri-business, Agriculture
3	Animal ethics	Animal welfare, Animal rights
4	Food attributes	Family-owned, locally grown, food safety
5	Environmentally beneficial	Green industry, sustainable agriculture, organic

The protocol was consistent for each set of words. The moderator presented the first set of words, then asked participants if they had ever heard the word(s) before, where they heard the word(s), how the word(s) made them feel, and if they had positive or negative feelings about the word(s). The same questions were asked in relation to each set of words.

A panel of researchers compiled a large list of potential words for testing in this research. The final five sets of words and final protocol was determined through a pilot test with graduate students in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at southeastern university. The pilot test was administered via an online survey hosted by the survey software Qualtrics. Using the results from the pilot test, the researchers identified the words that would be most effective to test with the public and were able to edit the protocol to increase understanding and conciseness. The pilot test also helped to improve the methodology and the validity of the protocol (Krueger, 1998). After making the needed adjustments to the protocol from the results of the pilot test, the protocol was reviewed by a panel of researchers and professionals to ensure face and content validity.

Three different validation strategies were employed throughout the research to ensure validity, including triangulation, peer review, and recognizing and clarifying bias among researchers (Creswell, 2007). “Triangulation is the combination of two or more data sources, investigators, methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives, or analytical methods within the same study” (Thurmond, 2001, p. 253). For this study, two or more data sources were used, in that the data was collected from four focus groups in two different locations to obtain triangulation. The two different locations allowed the researchers to gather data from different types of individuals with different backgrounds and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2009). Peer reviewing or debriefing encourages the researchers to question the analysis and place their research before a body of peers for review and questions (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). For this research, a co-researcher questioned the lead researcher about the interpretations drawn from the data. Identifying and clarifying researcher bias provides readers with an understanding of how the analysis and interpretations may have been influenced by the researchers (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Four focus groups were conducted for this research during a two-week period to help mitigate the threat of history effect (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). Two focus groups were conducted in one location, and another two focus groups were conducted in another location, within Florida. Each focus group was approximately 90 minutes in length and directed by the same experienced

moderator. The four focus groups had a total of 36 participants, with seven to 10 participants within each focus group. For each focus group, an assistant moderator accompanied the moderator and two note takers. Each focus group was recorded for both audio and video to be used in the transcription process. As part of the protocol for the research, the focus group participants were given clarification if needed, and all participants verified a summary of the conversation upon the conclusion of each focus group. These combined efforts of the protocol, validation strategies, and pilot test ensure the results are valid, credible, and trustworthy (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Krueger, 1998).

Upon the completion of all of the focus groups, the data were transcribed, then uploaded and reviewed using Weft-QDA for qualitative data analysis. Using the constant comparative method, themes were identified within the data (Glaser, 1965). Similar themes were collapsed to create overarching themes that appeared within the data. To ensure accuracy, the co-researcher reviewed and analyzed the results found by the lead researcher (Creswell, 2007).

Results

The participants in the focus groups included stay-at-home moms, educators, health professionals, manufacturing personnel, administrative personnel, and business professionals from two urban areas of Florida. A third of the participants had a bachelor's degree and most participants reported an annual household income of \$60,000 - \$80,000. The participants primarily represented Caucasian and African American ethnicities; 18 of the participants were female and 18 were male.

Objective 1: To understand focus group participants' perceptions of words commonly used to communicate about the agriculture industry.

Farmer and Farm Worker

When discussing the words *farmer* and *farm worker*, focus group participants began the discussion by indicating a *farmer* was the owner of a farm and a *farm worker* was someone employed on a farm. One participant said, "Farmer to me means the main person. The guy, the person, the man or woman who owns the actual land and the farm. And the farm workers are just those that he employs or she employs to help out."

The discussion of *farmer* and *farm worker* also included several personal stories about the participants' experiences visiting, working, or living on a farm. For example, one participant shared a story about growing up on a farm and said:

I just remember that my father owned all the big machinery and we would go around to all of the neighbors with threshing rigs and everybody would pitch in. He'd do everybody's [field], but it was up to me to feed all these people and all the farm workers.

Farmer

After identifying the initial distinction between *farmer* and *farm worker*, the participants began to discuss each word separately. Farmers were discussed as also being farm workers and different than farmers seen throughout history. Although participants referred to a *farmer* as the one who owns a farm, they discussed that *farmers* could also be *farm workers*. "I think they're one and the same because if you own a farm, and you are a farmer, you would be working it as well," said one participant.

Participants discussed that today's *farmer* may look different than what they traditionally think of as a farmer. For example, a participant said:

I think we have to consider change here. What farmer and farm worker were then and now, then in the past and now is different. Because of mechanization, I think we're looking at a very different farmer now than we did in the past.

Farm worker

Participants discussed *farm worker* as being associated with migrant labor, hard work, and work for little pay. A participant discussed his or her perception of *farm worker* and said, "I was just going to say that the farm worker to me is basically like a migrant, someone who does the picking of grapes, cotton, oranges, and just subsistence existence." Another participant said, "A lot of our farm workers are migrant workers at the bigger farms." The focus group participants recognized the hard work completed by *farm workers*. One participant said, "And [farm workers] work very hard. [It's] very hard work!" Several participants also discussed the wages of farm workers. A participant said, "I always think of someone not from this country, perhaps who's working below minimum wage and having a tough time of it."

Agribusiness and Agriculture

When discussing the words *agribusiness* and *agriculture*, participants first discussed that *agriculture* was the growing and/or raising of crops and livestock, while *agribusiness* was the business side of agriculture including the finances and management. One participant discussed *agriculture* and said, "The agriculture itself, I assume, is the growing or how you grow just anything that's grown. Wouldn't that be considered agriculture?" Another participant said, "Agriculture is the crops, the animals, and whatever is involved." When discussing agribusiness two participants conversed about the business side of agriculture. The first participant said, "The business is probably the business part of agriculture like financial or...[second participant interrupts]" "Yeah, the money" added a second participant.

Agribusiness

After the initial discussion of *agribusiness* and *agriculture*, the participants began to focus on and discuss *agribusiness* further. Agribusiness was discussed as being associated with corporate farming and genetic alterations. One participant said, "Agri-business. When I think of that I think of Monsanto, Cargill, Dupont. I don't think of a farmer. I think of controlling conglomerates that are controlling our agriculture." Another participant said, "When I see agribusiness I have to admit the first thing I think of is the factory farm. You know mass production at whatever cost." The discussion of corporate farms also led participants to discuss genetic alterations. A participant said, "I think of agribusiness. I think of companies like Cargill, the big, multinational [companies] that are involved in not just food production, crop production, and also genetic development of seeds."

Animal Rights and Animal Welfare

During the discussion of *animal rights* and *animal welfare*, the participants primarily discussed the terms together. When discussing *animal rights* and *animal welfare*, the participants shared many thoughts about their perceptions of the words. However, an overall consensus of the meaning of the words was not reached. When discussing *animal welfare*, some participants discussed the safety and health of animals, while others discussed *animal welfare* as appropriate care that varied as a result of the person caring for the animals. For example, a participant said, "I mean [animal care] can be positive. I guess it depends on who's taking care of the animals, who owns them, or who is in charge."

When discussing *animal rights*, some participants discussed an animal's right to exist, live well,

be healthy, and be protected. Other participants questioned whether or not animals had rights, while other participants indicated that animals needed more rights. The discussion of *animal rights* also included discussion of laws and ordinances, issues such as fur trade and the killing of seals and animal rights activists. During this discussion one participant said:

Animals have a right to exist. I'm not really an animal person. I'm not really in tune with your pets or anything like that. But [animals] have a right to live well [and] have health. If you choose a pet, then I think that you should donate the time to treat it correctly.

Another participant asked, “Do [animals] really have rights?”

The participants did come to a consensus when discussing organizations associated with *animal rights* and *animal welfare*. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was discussed as being associated with *animal welfare* and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was discussed as being associated with *animal rights*. A participant said, “The first word that comes to my mind when I think of animal rights is PETA [general agreement from other participants]. And for animal welfare I think of the ASPCA [general agreement from other participants].”

The discussion of *animal rights* and *animal welfare* included the influence of media on the participants’ perceptions of these words. One participant said:

There was something years ago on TV about one of the big beef and pork suppliers. And what they would do. How they would kill [cattle and hogs] and they weren't dead by this part. What they would do is they would shoot them in the head. It's like I'm not going to buy your beef.

Sadness (as observed in the quote above) as well as other feelings and emotions were demonstrated in the discussion of *animal rights* and *animal welfare*. Unhappiness, empathy, fear, and distrust were some of the emotions and feelings that were most prevalent in the discussion. A participant demonstrated several emotions, and said:

It's really funny. The other day I did some grocery shopping at Wal-Mart. I guess I was feeling very sensitive that day. Anyway, I started looking at every product in a multidimensional way. I looked at the packaging and saw how unsustainable the packaging was. And then I thought about the animal and how the animal was treated, and the hormones and then I thought, 'Can I really buy this for my children?' And I'm like, well I've got to feed them something. And then by the time I got home, I just felt so unhappy with myself for contributing to all this really bad stuff. I called the local food co-op and joined. Now I can [feel happy], because they have all the animals that are treated well, free range chickens, things like that. And I can feel good about that, it costs a little bit more money, but I can sleep well at night and not go, 'OMG what am I doing? What am I feeding my kids? What am I contributing to?' I think it's really scary when you think about chickens and what's going on with our food.

A lot of the discussion surrounding *animal rights* and *animal welfare* focused on the mistreatment and abuse of animals. Participants gave examples of what they perceived to be mistreatment, including cock fighting, dog fighting, chicken debeaking, farm animal confinement, inhumane slaughter, the use of animals for entertainment, and the captivity of animals. Some participants indicated that because of animal abuse, *animal rights* and *animal welfare* has become important. A participant dis-

cussing the mistreatment of circus animals said: “Growing up my mom used to take us to the circus. Only now do I see that [the animals] were totally mistreated.”

Although the participants discussed *animal rights* and *animal welfare* as being important, several of the participants discussed situations where they would set limits on *animal rights* and *animal welfare*. These included instances of animals harming humans, spending a lot of money on pets, and being supplied with good tasting meat products. One participant said:

Once you start fighting and maiming people, then you lose your rights to exist. Just like prisoners. When you do a crime, you lose your freedom, you lose your right, you go to jail, so the same thing with dogs or animals that cause problems. Or even the type [of animals] that kill people, then you've lost the right to exist. You're gone. Boom. But other than that, you know the animal should live. You know, welfare, part of it.

A common element of the focus group discussions about *animal rights* and *animal welfare* was the sharing of personal stories about animals. Some participants shared their experiences growing up on a farm with livestock, volunteering at pet shelters, being a pet owner, or having a relationship with someone that was very involved in *animal rights* or *animal welfare*. Several of these participants described themselves as “animal lovers.”

Locally Grown, Family Owned, and Food Safety

The participants discussed the terms *locally grown*, *family owned*, and *food safety* separately.

Locally grown

When discussing the term *locally grown*, many participants discussed perceived attributes of local foods. Some of these attributes included safety, price, health, cleanliness, freshness, organic, and environmentally friendly. When discussing the environmental benefits of locally grown foods, a participant discussed the decreased environmental impact from shipping and said:

And then the environment piece comes in there because you don't have to pay for the gas or the trucker to bring it across country or fly [food] over or however [food] gets here. Transportation, because we know they're transporting here some type of way. You don't have to pay for that so you can cut down on fuel costs and stuff like that.

Another participant discussed the likelihood that locally grown foods were organic and said: “Locally grown at least, my impression is, it may or may not be true, but generally you think [local food] is going to be a more organically [general agreement] produced food. Usually it is, I guess.”

The attributes of price, safety, and health were debated among the participants. Some participants indicated locally grown foods were less expensive, safer, and healthier than non-local foods; however, other participants debated that this may not be true. For example, a participant discussed the health benefits of beef from a local grass-fed beef operation and said:

And they're supposed to have organic, grass-fed kosher beef, which is just as good for you as salmon. It's got as much as omega 3 oils as salmon does. It's entirely different beef than what we are used to.

Conversely, a participant questioned the health benefits of local food and said: “I think in advertising, a lot of times, they apply the words ‘family owned’ and ‘locally grown’ to promote the food as healthy and that’s not always the case.”

Family owned

Similar to the discussion of *locally grown*, the participants also discussed the attributes of the food products produced on *family owned* farms. These attributes included safety, health, quality, and organic. The participants debated whether or not *family owned* would produce a healthier and safer product.

In addition to the attributes of the products produced on family owned farms, the participants also discussed the characteristics of the family owned farms. They discussed that family owned farms were responsible, proud, old-fashioned, part of the community, complied with laws, had better environmental practices, and were respectable. A participant discussed how proud family owned farms must be of their products. This participant said:

And you know people who are like home growing and stuff like that, they’re probably so proud of their work. They know whatever they put out, it’s going to be like slammin’ good. They’re not going to give nothing slapped together, fake meat patties, or chicken, but that’s the sort of thing that they took pride, they took time, that’s part of who they are. So now when it comes out, it represents them.

Another participant discussed that family owned farms were more likely to comply with laws and have better environmental practices. This participant said:

And food safety, a lot of [family owned farms] do make sure they comply with the laws. They may not use all the chemicals, but they’ll use natural insects to take care of the problems that they might have. Which is better for the environment.

Some participants discussed that good attributes and characteristics of family owned farms might not be accurate depending on the family who owns the farm. One participant discussed personal experiences with good and bad family owned farms and said:

I’ve spent some time covering farm worker issues in Immokalee and some of those commissions out there are family owned. But you sure wouldn’t want to work for that family. Again, [family owned is] kind of a neutral term for me. It can be good, that wonderful Rockwell painting, family oriented farm thing, or it can be awful in near slavery like conditions.

Another participant cautioned that family owned is not always as good as it seems. This participant said, “Family owned that’s an ideal. A lot of people think with family owned the family is going to be more concerned with what they’re producing. It’s just not always the case.” The participants also discussed skepticism around the term *family owned* and indicated that they thought some corporate farms might be titled as *family owned*. A participant said:

I think family owned could be used deceptively. I don’t know if the Purdue company could call themselves family owned. But I have a feeling that there are some large owned corporations that could legally say that they’re family owned. But that would be somewhat deceptive.

Food safety

When discussing *food safety*, the participants initially discussed the meaning of *food safety*. The participants discussed that *food safety* was the handling and testing of food. In addition, they indicated that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was associated with *food safety*. A participant said: “Food safety to me means testing for the quality and the ingredients that are in there. If it’s safe for human consumption.”

Several participants indicated *food safety* was important, while others did not express favorable thoughts toward *food safety*. A participant discussing the importance of *food safety* said:

Requirement. I think you have to have food safety. You can only do so much yourself. To buy local you’re still taking a risk, unless you know, you’ve watched the plants grow. Most of us don’t have time and have never had time to [watch plants grow]. But I think we all place faith in a system that does protect us. The likelihood that any of us sitting at this table is getting sick from what we eat is relatively small. Certainly, compared to any other country in the world.

Another participant discussed his or her dislike toward *food safety* by sharing a story about his or her preference for raw products. This participant said:

When I think of food safety, I think politely, I would say its malarkey. I really love raw dairy. I like real cheese. I like food that hasn’t been pasteurized to the point where there are no nutrients left in it. And you can’t buy raw dairy products because it’s not safe. But that’s where all the vitamins and nutrition is, in your raw cheese, your raw dairy, fresh stuff. But the big business can’t keep it going that way so they put all these limits on the small business. There was a story the other day about this Amish farmer. They woke him up at three in the morning and raided his farm because he was selling raw dairy. And I buy raw dairy and it’s funny because when you go to buy it, it’s like you’re buying drugs. ‘Can I get some of that raw milk for my pets? And they’re like, ‘you know it’s for pets only’ and you’re like, ‘yeah, I know.’ And it’s like you’re doing something really wrong because you just want some raw, fresh milk. So when I hear food safety, I think that it’s crap, for the most part.

Perceived issues with *food safety* were also discussed. These issues included pesticides, harmful pathogens, animal hormones, animals raised in poor conditions, and the effects of food on human health. One participant said:

Well, I think food safety has two levels. In the long term, which are pesticides, which will get you in 20 or 30 years. And then there are things like E. Coli and salmonella. They get you right now. So I think that’s there two things going on there in food safety [other participants agreeing].

Green Industry, Sustainable Agriculture, and Organic

The participants discussed the last set of words by focusing on one word at a time.

Green industry

The participants discussed that *green industry* was a term that could be applied outside of agriculture to things such as light bulbs and recycling. A participant said: “When you think about green industry, it’s beyond agriculture and food. [Green industry] goes further than that for a lot of things like changing light bulbs.”

Additionally, the participants discussed *green industry* was a term that referred to bettering the environment and reversing damages that bad practices had caused in the past. A participant said, “Green to me is [the agricultural industry] shaping up their industry so that it’s better for everything.” Another participant discussed *green industry* as reversing damages and said:

You’d actually save the world. We’ve done so much damage to it already with all the chemicals and our advancement. The fact that we want to advance so fast is leading to our destruction and now it’s time to go back. To start at the very beginning where everything was green [Agreement heard].

The discussion of *green industry* also included participants sharing that the term was not favorable because of the incorrect use of the term or bad experience with green products. A participant shared the idea of green washing and said:

It’s what people these days are calling green washing. It’s when you try to make a big deal out of a little tiny thing that you do. It’s ideal and hopefully everybody would like to have a green industry and be sustainable. But there are people who are taking it and just like having better light bulbs in their offices and saying they’re green.

Sustainable agriculture

When discussing *sustainable agriculture*, several participants indicated they had never heard of the term or were unsure what it meant. For example, a participant said, “I’ve never heard of sustainable in agriculture.” Another participant was unsure about the meaning of *sustainable agriculture*, but offered a guess and said: “Sustainable agriculture, I’m not sure exactly what that is. I think it’s something that just in terms of the land, the quality of the dirt, and being able to sustain growing products.”

The participants who indicated they were familiar with *sustainable agriculture* offered suggestions about the term’s meaning. A participant said:

Agriculture by its very definition is self-sustaining. You plant, you harvest, and you go back and plant and harvest, plant and harvest, you can’t be more sustainable. So that’s a very null term for me, or redundancy if you will. Agriculture by its nature has to be sustainable.

Organic

Organic was discussed by the participants as having several attributes including healthy, natural, not processed, expensive, and similar to home-grown food. A participant discussed the health and expense attributes of organic food and said: “It is good quality food but it’s expensive. But I did hear on the radio from that John Tesh guy, that organic is better, as far as health is concerned. But it is expensive.” Another participant discussed several attributes and said: “Organic is something like home grown. It hasn’t been processed with the things that [food] shouldn’t be processed with, and the things that will cause [sentence trails off]. It’s just more natural, more expensive, too.”

In addition to discussing the attributes of organic food, the participants also discussed the over-use of the term *organic*. A participant discussed this concern and said:

Well, when I see organic, it’s being used everywhere. Probably in a week or so, there’ll be an organic Coca-Cola. They’re overusing it to the point that I’m wondering who really is monitoring to make sure [food products are] really organic. I’m not sure about that.

Conclusions/Discussion

The results of the focus groups showed that for some of the words tested, such as farmer, farm worker, agriculture, and agribusiness, participants would share their initial reactions, which elicited attitude activation and rich discussion. In addition, the results indicated that participants were unable to reach a consensus on the words animal rights and animal welfare and several of the participants were unsure of the meaning of sustainable agriculture. For words like locally grown, family owned, food safety, green industry, and organic divergent attitudes and perceptions were observed.

As reported by Goodwin et al. (2011) and observed in these results, some words may require additional information or context to aide in audience understanding of the terms. For example, words such as animal rights, animal welfare, and sustainable agriculture had limited understanding or consensus as to how they were perceived among the participants and could have benefited from additional context to provide clarity. In addition, the results showed that framing of words is important to the interpretation. Words such as farm worker and agribusiness can have positive associations, but when left to the participants' interpretations, negative associations may arise, such as associations with migrant labor and corporate farming. This finding reaffirms Kapetanovic's (2010) statement that there is an opportunity to strategically use agricultural terms to avoid negative connotations. Similarly, while locally grown, family-owned, and organic had initial positive associations, some participants questioned the positive attributes of these words as well as voiced concern about potential advertising ploys behind the words. Context may have also been beneficial to the interpretation of the term green industry, as many participants associated this term with recycling and other green initiatives outside of agriculture. This finding is consistent with Goodwin et al.'s (2011) research that showed the association of agricultural terms to other industries.

The variation in meaning and favorability of words in this study is likely due to differences in experiences, background, and exposure to communications using the words that were tested as well as different frames that participants may have developed over time (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). In addition, reactions to words such as agriculture, agribusiness, farmer, and farmer worker may have elicited more general agreement among participants because they are words the participants have likely been exposed to repeatedly throughout their lives, creating salience, and increasing cognitive digestion of the words (Entman, 1991; Entman, 1993), whereas words such as organic and green industry, for example, are newer words that participants may not have been exposed to as repeatedly throughout their lives, thus being less salient. Additionally, words such as organic and green industry, for example, may have had more than one meaning to the participants, as exhibited by some participants in the discussion, who may have been confused by the terms and, therefore, have come to distrust their use (Croney, 2010).

This study showed frames can be as small as a single word or two, and, when that is the case, providing context becomes critical to ensuring that shared understanding occurs. Researchers and communication practitioners understand the importance of testing longer format messages such as slogans, themes, and catchphrases, but the findings from this study indicate that such care and consideration should be applied to any descriptors that are going to be consistently used. For instance, in this study, participants' reactions to "green industry," a term commonly used to describe the horticulture and landscape industries, is an example of the need for added context and for testing of a frame before implementation. Although industry members use the term to describe their industry in positive terms, when used without context, participants in the study thought of associations, such as light bulbs and recycling, not agriculture. As discussed by Kapetanovic (2010) there is an opportunity for agricultural communicators to strategically use words and context so that they enhance

favorable perceptions. Therefore, it is recommended that communicators not only understand their target audience but also provide a context to descriptors used so an audience can understand the term as intended without relying on their own interpretations, which may have been influenced by their own experiences (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) or the media (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1991). It is recommended that further research be done to test consumers' perceptions of words used to describe agriculture when paired with transparent contexts. In addition, future research should compare the strength of media influence versus industry-provided context on the interpretation of such words. By continuing to study perceptions of all communications elements, including individual words, the agricultural industry can continue to improve their communications.

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