

Grace D. Vehige

761 State Highway 413
Billings, MO 65610

(573) 644-4414

03/04/1999

AGJA Member #51070

Topic: Explain in your own words how you continue to adapt to public perception in relation to the industry and continue producing a high-quality consumable product, market your family's operation, or educate the public about the beef community. Provide examples.

Word Count: 1000

Hear Me Roar

A research phenomenon I have become particularly accustomed to studying is what is known as the knowledge gap. In very simple terms, a knowledge gap is best defined as the following: a well-educated individual is able to extract information more efficiently from mass media and can therefore learn and absorb information better than a less-educated individual. What is commonly mistaken, however, is how education is classified. When breaking down the meaning of knowledge gap, the education-level used as the parameter for the phenomenon is, in fact, dependent on the topic being discussed. In this case, we are discussing the public's knowledge of the beef industry.

Currently, I am pursuing my master's degree in agricultural communications. One of the courses I had the privilege of undertaking was focused on the public's opinion of agriculture and natural resources. In this course, I was challenged to develop a public opinion study. I, of course, chose to conduct my research regarding the public's perception of the beef industry. What I found was that the knowledge gap regarding the public's education of the beef community is directly tied to influences on public perception.

As background research, yet relative facts to the objective of this excerpt, the following points are known to be true (U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance Survey, 2011):

- The average American is said to be about three generations away from a farm.
- Less than 2% of Americans are actively involved in food production.
- 72% of consumers know nothing or very little about farming or ranching.
- 70% of consumers say their purchase decision are affected by how food is grown and raised.

When reflecting over these facts, one can only be weary of the current level of education that the public has about the beef industry. This, however, is not a new feat the beef industry is facing. Misinformation is a tactic utilized to combat the beef industry every day. Whether it be through social media, misleading food labels, or the use of false statements, organizations and groups around the world are deceiving consumers about agricultural and beef products.

In my public opinion study, I conducted a series of interviews with individuals who did and did not have exposure to the agricultural industry. I gathered thoughts and opinions regarding sustainability, the beef industry, and fast-food restaurants. Then, I showed interviewees a Burger King commercial, which was released in 2020, that addressed cattle methane emissions through a song performed by Mason Ramsey. Following this, I questioned the interviewees about their levels of brand trust and whether or not they were influenced by the message in the commercial.

While my research was for a class project, it is not a published study. Like my findings criticized the Burger King commercial for utilizing research that is yet to conclude and has not been peer-reviewed, my findings are not scientific. They are, however, a very brief snapshot of the reality we face in the beef industry every day. My study found that commercials like Burger King's are able to influence the public's perception about a particular issue. In this instance, Burger King targeted the beef industry. Consumers with little-to-no education about methane emissions, the beef industry, or the scientific method would not be able to detect the red flags in the commercial, nor would they be able to decipher an alternative perspective.

As identified in the facts stated previously, the majority of consumers know very little about farming or ranching. With social media increasing in demand as a popular news and communications outlet, it has been reported that individuals who rely on it for information are

less likely to get the facts right and are more likely to believe unproven claims. Here, we are presented yet another obstacle in the beef community.

If I have learned anything during my extensive studies in agricultural communications and agricultural leadership, it is that no matter the hurdle, you have to be willing to make the jump in order to succeed. What excites me as a young professional in the beef industry is how adaptive we are becoming with our communication tools. I have always been told our best and most powerful weapon is our mind, but I believe that in the beef community, our heart is just as valuable as our mind. And boy, do we have great strength in both.

As I have searched for my place in the agricultural industry, I have continuously been drawn back to opportunities in which I can serve the beef community as a storyteller and an advocate. I find my outlet through writing and the use of social media. The communications tool I have found most effective is knowing how to address and serve a target audience. Too often, the beef community is targeting beef consumers about topics that may or may not influence them. In turn, we are communicating with individuals who already value and trust our industry. Rather, we must learn to better understand our target audience's perspective. That is the only way we will be able to cater messaging that resonates with the audience.

While I may never fully understand the certain food choices an individual may make, I can better serve the beef community by attempting to understand the lifestyle of this individual, the things they value, and the activities they enjoy. Perhaps through this information, I am able to uncover tips for marketing beef products to the prospective consumer.

I am a proponent of perspective, and I fully believe that through perspective and open-mindedness, the beef community will be better able to educate the public about its products and practices. Ultimately, the first step to the adaptation of public perception is being willing to

listen. It is through listening that we learn, and with knowledge, we are better equipped for battle. I, for one, am not willing to allow growth in the beef industry's knowledge gap.

I am a student of opportunity. I am an agricultural advocate. I am a beef producer. Hear me roar.

Source: U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance Survey (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.csgmidwest.org/policyresearch/1111agreporing.aspx>