

Bringing Transparency to the Farm

By Jessica Ziehm
New York Animal Ag Coalition

“Why do you take the calves away from their mamas?”
“Why are their tails so short?”
“Why are dairy farms so big these days?”
“Will the mom and baby ever reunite on the farm?”
“How do dairy farmers make any money?”
“What happens to the boy calves?”

Every question asked of the agriculture industry is an opportunity to educate the consumer. And that is exactly why the New York Animal Agriculture Coalition (NYAAC) has been working so diligently to make itself

– and farmers – more accessible to the public.

The mission of NYAAC is to reconnect the public’s understanding of and appreciation for animal agriculture through media engagement, public education and fostering cooperation between industry stakeholders. In order to make that connection, we must first establish relationships with the public. We must establish a sense of trust. The most effective way to establish trust with consumers, according to the Center for Food Integrity, is to provide transparency.

The word transparency implies openness, communication, and accountability. It means operating in a way that is easy for others to see our actions and the ‘why’

behind them. As important as it is, transparency can also be uncomfortable because it makes us susceptible to criticism. That’s where NYAAC comes in.

Recognizing that there is a risk to opening up ourselves and our farms to the public, NYAAC works closely to offer public relations assistance and programs to ease any anxiety. One example is helping dairy farmers develop a newsletter for their neighbors. Often times, the people that live closest to a farm are the ones that know the least about what takes place there. A newsletter is an easy, affordable and effective way to share what’s happening on the farm, and enables a conversation with those around your farm.

NYAAC is serving as a direct voice

on social media. Currently, NYAAC is reaching almost 15,000 people weekly with positive messages, stories and industry news simply by being present and engaged on Facebook and Twitter. NYAAC also helps farmers be more active on these sites by encouraging a healthy discussion online and offering posts that can be easily shared. By maintaining a positive and active presence on social media, the dairy industry can come across as more accessible and trustworthy.

When things get tough and the industry is attacked or criticized, NYAAC is part of an issues management group, along with New York Farm Bureau, American Dairy Association and the Northeast Dairy Producers Association. Together, we strategize and implement a plan that works to mitigate any effect on the dairy industry. Our strategies vary from proactive to reactive, and from obvious to subtle, depending on the situation. If you ever have a crisis or issue on your farm that you need help with, please don’t hesitate to reach out to any of our organizations.

NYAAC also works to empower farmers to tell their own story and provides an opportunity for them to do so – at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. The Dairy Cow Birthing Center is NYAAC’s largest project that attracts over 213,000 people with the opportunity to witness the miracle of birth. While the births are the draw for this free exhibit, the goal is to enhance the public’s understanding of modern dairy farms by offering transparency in how farmers care for their animals, as well as engaging in a two-way conversation with fairgoers about dairy farms today.

Carrying out that conversation this year was more than 300 dairy industry volunteers who shared their passion and story with fairgoers. Volunteers were provided a training document and short webinar, produced with the help of New York Farm Bureau, to familiarize themselves with the types of questions they would be asked, along with other topics and techniques they could use while interacting with the public.

While some volunteers did feel challenged by fairgoers’ questions, one volunteer said, “It’s good that consumers are willing to ask farmers these tough questions, instead of going to the Internet to find answers.” Between the training and the opportunity to interact with the public, the exhibit empowered a new crop of advocates in agriculture and helped re-establish consumers’ confidence in the dairy industry.

When we take the challenge to open our farms and our lives to the public, we are taking a risk, but we are also inviting the public to trust us. Offering transparency – whether through written communication, on farm visits, social media or some other form – helps establish credibility.


As a farmer founded and funded organization, NYAAC will continue to find opportunities to help the ag industry be more accessible in order to enhance the public’s understanding of our business and our choices. For more information about NYAAC, please visit www.nyanimalag.org. You can also follow @NYAnimalAg on Facebook and Twitter.

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