

From East to West and Everywhere in Between America's Farmers and Ranchers Are Leading The Food Dialogues

Ketchum and maslansky + partners and U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, Jan 1, 2013

Summary: 2013 Silver Anvil Award of Excellence Winner — Community Relations — Associations / Nonprofit Organizations

Trust in American agriculture is eroding. Stories about antibiotic “superbugs” and GMO “Frankenfoods” run rampant in today’s media while consumers question how their food is grown and raised. Up until now, America’s farmers and ranchers have been left out of the conversation. That’s why the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) started a movement of putting farmers and ranchers at the forefront of these discussions through robust trainings, online tools and groundbreaking dialogues with everyone from across the food spectrum. For the first time, farmers and ranchers finally had the confidence, tools and platforms to share their stories and set the record straight.

Community relations includes programs that aim to improve relations with, or seek to win the support or cooperation of, people or organizations in communities in which the sponsoring organization has an interest, need or opportunity.

Full Text: **SITUATION ANALYSIS**

Trust in American agriculture is eroding as consumers’ concerns about the food they feed their families grow daily. Stories about antibiotic “superbugs” and GMO “Frankenfoods” run rampant in today’s media while consumers have begun to question how their food is grown and raised. Up until now, an important voice has been left out of the polarizing food production conversation – America’s farmers and ranchers – the people who grow and raise our food. That’s why the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) was launched in 2011 to renew trust in agriculture by starting a movement of putting farmers and ranchers at the forefront of the discussion about how food is grown and raised. In order to do so, USFRA traveled from Hawaii to New York and everywhere in between to train and empower thousands of farmers and ranchers to educate the public, listen to their genuine concerns and answer their questions. And through a robust online strategy, USFRA built the ultimate digital community for farmers and ranchers to engage consumers and influencers in these groundbreaking discussions. Farmers and ranchers finally had the confidence, the tools and the platform to share their stories and set the record straight.

RESEARCH

For more than a decade, commodity groups, food companies and agriculture associations have tried to improve the image of modern agriculture – often through beautiful campaigns about family farms and commitments to producing “safe, affordable and abundant food.” Millions of dollars were spent but public trust continued to deteriorate and the campaigns weren’t working. USFRA and Ketchum worked with maslansky, luntz + partners to conduct message testing through a research technique known as dial testing. Often used in the presidential debates, dial testing provides immediate feedback on how messages resonate with audiences *emotionally*

– what audiences hear and feel versus what messages say. Five dial testing focus groups were conducted with farmers, ranchers and food influencers in New York, Washington, DC and Los Angeles.

Here are the findings:

- **“Committed to Safe, Affordable, Abundant Food Production” didn’t resonate as a message.** 200+ messages were tested – most fell flat or were perceived as negative, even though they were true. The polarization of the food wars was so entrenched that almost no traditional messages were seen as credible. Specifically the mantra of the farming community: Safe, Affordable, Abundant food was falling flat. When farmers say “our methods are proven safe,” people heard “pesticides, antibiotics and hormones may not be safe in the long-run.”
- **Americans love farmers but not farming.** Americans still love farmers and ranchers as individuals but distrust farming and ranching as an industry. 75% of consumers and influencers view farmers and ranchers favorably while only 42% see the way our food is grown and raised favorably.
- **People care about long-term health effects of what they are eating.** Messaging wasn’t answering the questions people had. Today, the research shows people are most concerned about the long-term health effects of what they eat.
- **To gain credibility, farmers and ranchers need to acknowledge concerns, listen and show a commitment to continuous improvement.**

Overall, the research pointed to a strategy around conversation and listening, and shifting from safe, affordable and abundant to being dedicated to honestly answering consumers’ questions about how their food is grown and raised.

PLANNING

Objectives

- Train 5,000 farmers and ranchers to become agriculture’s storytellers.
- Create online community on Facebook to hold real-time dialogue on food production by securing 16,500 ‘likes’ and an online engagement rating of five percent.
- Establish an online destination for consumer-friendly information on food production and secure at least 17,000 unique visitors in the first six months.
- Create awareness for USFRA’s online properties by generating 22 million media partnership impressions.
- Increase the number of people who believe agriculture is headed in the right direction.

Target audience

- **Farmers and ranchers** and their **industry partners**;
- **Mass connectors** driving conversations about food (often the “**moveable middle**” who are women who make food shopping decisions and are active in their communities);
- **Influencers shaping food decisions** on large scales (policymakers, retailers, NGOs);
- **Detractors**.

Messages

- The U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) is a coalition of more than 80 agricultural groups and their partners that recognizes that Americans want to know where their food comes from, how it was grown or raised and if it is good for their long-term health.
- Farmers and ranchers haven’t always done the best job answering Americans’ questions about how our food is grown and raised. That stops now. Consumers rightfully want to know that we are treating animals well, maintaining food quality and doing our jobs in ways that don’t harm the environment.

- We are creating channels to answer Americans' questions about food. USFRA is inviting people who don't always agree in addition to all types of farmers and ranchers, including organic and small farmers, as well as our agribusiness partners to be a part of the discussion.

Strategy

The research insights were used to direct USFRA's strategy to *answer* consumers' legitimate questions and start a dialogue – something that had never been done before in the agricultural community. USFRA started at a grassroots level and built an army of farmers and ranchers to become agriculture's spokespeople. While encouraging farmers and ranchers to step up and engage consumers and influencers on tough food issues like antibiotics and GMOs, USFRA then needed to create opportunities and platforms to continue those conversations and answer consumers' questions. Thus, a robust digital program was designed to encourage engagement and discussions that were led by farmers and ranchers.

EXECUTION

EASE Trainings: By bringing the EASE (Engage Acknowledge Share Earn Trust) training curriculum to thousands of farmers and ranchers throughout the country, USFRA empowered them to educate the public and tell their stories of continual improvement rather than combatting attacks.

Create Source for Facts: To aid farmers and ranchers in communicating the truth about the agriculture industry, USFRA created "FoodSource", a one-stop-shop for facts and reader-friendly data to answer all food production-related questions. FoodSource is part of FoodDialogues.com.

Invite Everyone To The Table: USFRA created The Food Dialogues panel events that brought farmers and ranchers and food luminaries from across the spectrum together for groundbreaking and provocative discussions. The events were livestreamed online and additional content was posted to FoodDialogues.com, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Strategic Media Partnerships: Developed proactive versus reactive agriculture news and access to influencers by creating two media partnerships surrounding Food Dialogues: LA and NY with *CBS Sunday Morning* and *Anderson Live*.

Online Buzz & Engagement: Through an intensive SEO/SEM campaign, USFRA needed to increase Facebook engagement while encouraging farmers and ranchers to lead online conversations; Tweetchats featuring farmers and ranchers to build engagement on Twitter.

Create a Place for Dialogue: Through Facebook, USFRA was able to engage everyone from food influencers, consumers and detractors and provide them with an educational and engaging platform to discuss food issues and have their questions be answered by farmers and ranchers.

Blogger Outreach: Invited food and ag bloggers to engage farmers and ranchers to learn more about food production.

EVALUATION

Objective: Train 5,000 farmers and ranchers to become agriculture storytellers

- USFRA conducted **39 EASE trainings** in 22 states to **5,629 farmers and ranchers**; 12.5% above the original goal.
- From thank you note to EASE trainers: *"Thank you for sharing your experience and advice for working with the media and being an advocate"* – Haley C., farmer

Objective: Create online community on Facebook to hold real-time dialogue on food production by securing 16,500 'likes' and an online engagement rating of five percent

- USFRA's Facebook 'likes' grew by more than **120,000 'likes'** in just five months, a **627% increase** above the initial goal.
- USFRA **Facebook engagement soared to 24%, a 380% increase** above the initial goal, while other personalities and brands receive a much lower engagement average, like: Barack Obama at 8%, the average brand with 0.5%; non-profits: 2.2%. (Engagement is calculated by the number of people who have 'liked' something on the page and then return to comment, post, share and/or 'like' additional content.)
- Via two tweet-chats, USFRA garnered **25.3 million twitter impressions**; both nearly doubled the average number of impressions for a tweet-chat.
- Additionally, USFRA was successful in transforming the perceptions of some of its loudest detractors: food blogger Ellen Molloy wrote in a blog post "... *the 'farmers' and 'ranchers' that are perpetrating the atrocities of factory farming, they actually believe that what they are doing is right and just.*" In Nov. after twitter engagement from trained farmers and ranchers, Ellen wrote "***'our side' is biased, largely uninformed and often just [expletive] wrong... And a good deal of this misinformation is coming from sources we trust...***"

Objective: Establish an online destination for info and secure 17,000 unique visitors in the first six months

- FoodSource, a one-stop-shop for all food production questions saw **58,748** unique visitors since its launch in Fall 2012, **246% increase over the original goal**, with each visitor spending an average **2:38** on the site.
- Throughout the year, FoodDialogues.com had a total of **606,366 unique visitors**.

Objective: Create awareness for USFRA's online properties by generating 22 million media partnership impressions

- USFRA achieved a **36% increase** over its original goal through media partnerships with CBS and Anderson Live that encouraged consumers and influencers to engage in the discussion online. (**Total: 32,981,668**; CBS media partnership garnered 22,621,600 broadcast impressions and 4,631,499 digital impressions with **clips airing in 11 markets**: NY, LA, Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas, San Francisco, Boston, Atlanta, Washington, Houston, and Detroit; Anderson Live partnership garnered 3.1 million broadcast viewers).

Objective: Increase the number of people who believe agriculture is headed in the right direction

- In Aug. 2011 and fall 2012, USFRA asked consumers "*Do you believe food production in America is heading in the right direction?*" Fall 2012 survey said consumers are **5% more likely to have confidence in American agriculture** compared with 2011 survey results.