

Public Perceptions of Dairies

Bill Stone

Diamond V

Technical Support and Field Research, Eastern US and Canada

bstone@diamondv.com

This paper is a compilation of my thoughts relating to this subject, along with insights provided by Charlie Arnot (1; 2007, 8th Western Dairy Management Conference).

Obviously, we want the public – the consumers of our products- to have a positive view of our dairy industry. Unfortunately, milk's wholesome image has various groups throwing mud at it. This tarnished image has been caused partially animal activist groups, and part by our own industry as we grapple with bST, grazing, and large dairies.

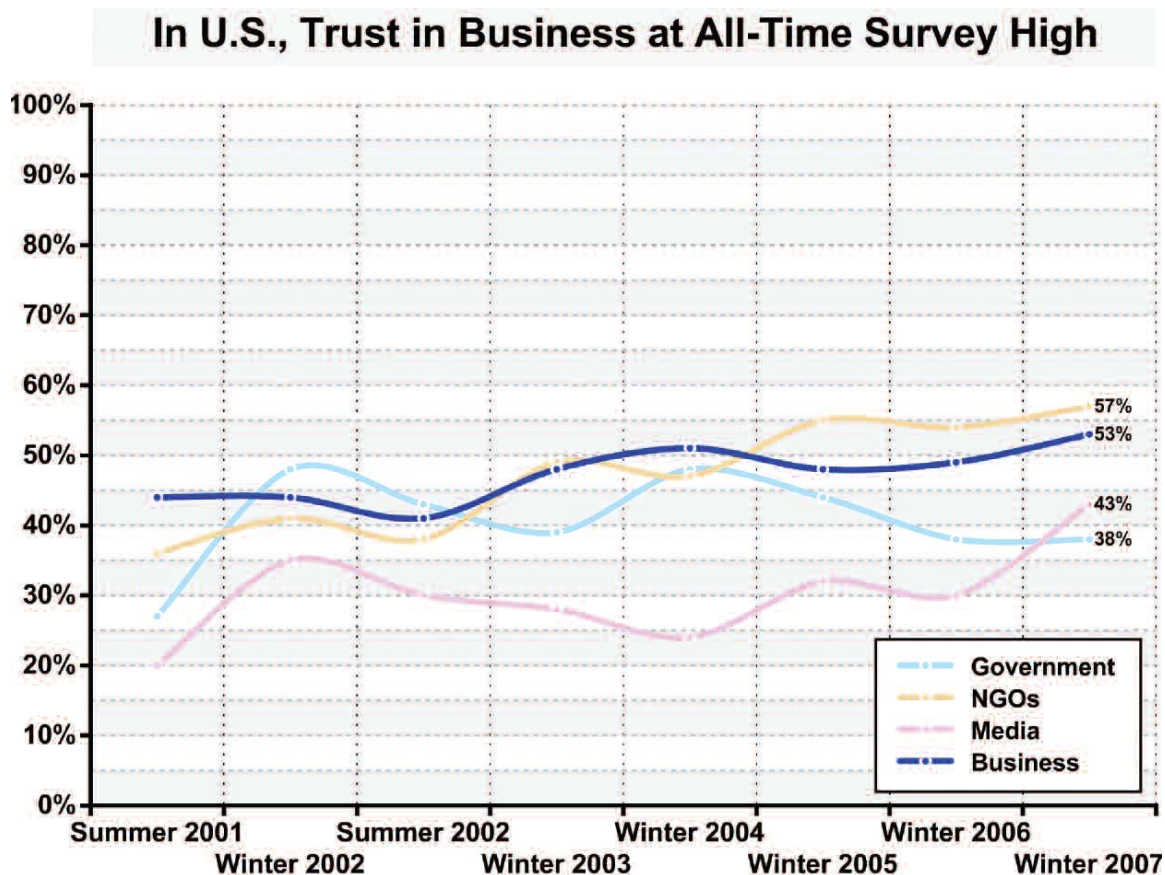
Fewer and fewer consumers have a direct connection to agriculture. Approximately 36% of the workforce had an agricultural occupation in 1900. That dropped to 11.6% by the 1950's. Today, less than 1% of the workforce is employed in the farming, forestry, and fishing industries (1). Since the vast majority of U.S. citizens no longer are from or have a family member directly involved with agriculture, they are not familiar with the culture and practices of agricultural enterprises. This lost connection and agricultural knowledge base makes it much easier for an activist group to sway someone's opinions and even beliefs. Let me give you some examples of what I mean. Several years ago PETA was putting on a seminar in an auditorium at Cornell's veterinary school. They showed a video clip of a sow being killed with a sledge hammer as an example of typical animal husbandry. People in the audience were appalled, as any normal person should be. The seminar did not allow a "counter point" discussion time, although written questions could be submitted and then some were selected to be answered. Another approach is the use of anthropomorphism (humanizing animals). We love calf hutches; PETA describes them as a sin where calves, forcibly removed from their mother immediately after birth, are placed in isolation from other calves in a calf crate (and they are referring to calf hutches, not veal crates). Anyway, we have work to do.

Yesterday's smaller herds usually produced all of their own forages and grain carbohydrates; proteins and minerals/vitamins were the only feed ingredients that may have been purchased. Additionally, reduced fertilization, poorer weed control, and old plant genetics resulted in lower crop yields. The net effect was less manure per acre than what occurs on most of today's dairies. Additionally, it used to be customary for dairies to spread manure daily. It may have been piled only during winter time periods when accumulated snow prevented equipment from getting to the fields. There were not any of the eye-watering, obnoxious gaseous compounds produced during longer term storage in today's uncovered lagoons. One evening last summer I was feeling wealthy and took the entire family out for ice cream. Yes, we had a good time, but it was also an eye-opener (or eye waterer...). It was right between second and third cuttings, and all of the large dairies had been spreading pit manure on their hay fields. There were six separate times on the drive home when the stench truly was horrific. Fortunately, the industry is working to address this, and it needs to.

A fellow Auburnian regularly sends editorials to our local paper. Each letter targets animal agriculture and its alleged abuses. Interestingly, the exact same letter will appear in other

papers but is signed/submitted by a different local citizen. Obviously, they are form letters written by some activist group and then made available to people to use in this manner. We need to do the same thing, but obviously sending a different, and correct, message.

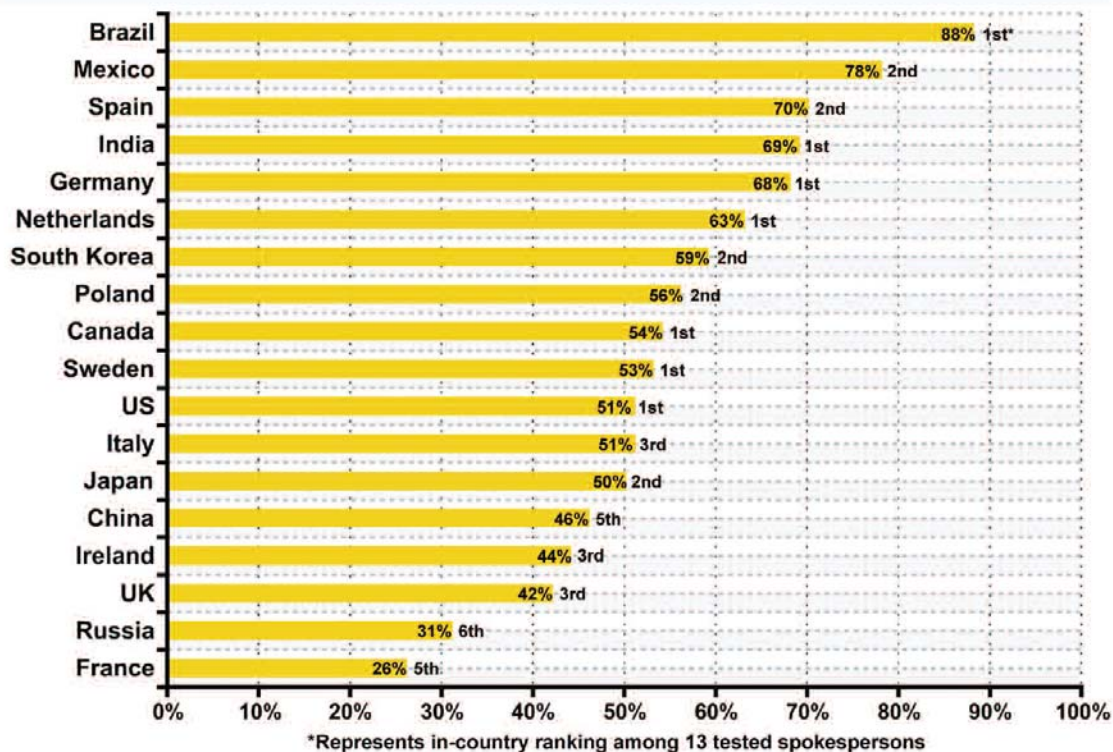
The Edelman Group (www.edelman.com) is a public relations firm that has been in business for 55 years. For the past few years they have provided the Edelman Trust Barometer. This “barometer” is based on a 25 minute telephone survey, not of the general public, but of “opinion leaders” screened to be 35-64 years old, have an annual income of over \$75,000, college graduates, and report being engaged in media, business, and public policy issues. The 2006 effort surveyed 400 individuals in the US and 2700 throughout the world. They report a continued rise in the level of trust placed in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO; examples would be Greenpeace, Sierra Club, etc.), along with a rise in trust in business and a fall in trust in government.



Source: 2006 Edelman Trust Barometer

The Edelman survey reports that in the European Union, North America, and Latin America, “a person like me” is considered the most credible deliverer of information about a company. In Asia, “a person like me” is second to physicians. It’s interesting to think about this and the rise in popularity of reality shows featuring “normal folk”.

“Person Like Me” Highly Credible In 14 of 18 Markets



Source: 2006 Edelman Trust Barometer

What can and should we do?

1. Start local.

I think that we (anyone involved with the dairy industry) should be current in our knowledge and understanding of dairy products, dairy practices and why they are done, and public/NGO concerns. Hardly anyone knows that dairy products contain the highest concentration of the most potent anticarcinogen found in food. Wow! Transfatty acids of ruminant origin are completely different and have beneficial health effects as opposed to TFA in plant oils and manufactured (e.g. margarine) foods. Whenever we have the opportunity this message needs to be promoted. Remember, “folks like me” tend to be trusted.

Our industry should have short “fast fact” articles emphasizing positive attributes of milk, dairy products and the industry itself, usually less than 200 words for most papers, that any of us can download, sign our name to it, and send to the local newspapers. The website should also have facts to dispel myths (cows cause global warming), and current research emphasizing the health benefits of dairy products. I think institutions like the ADSA/FASS should lead this effort, but it needs to be done NOW. Look what has happened with BST as the industry took a backseat position with this issue.

Meetings like Bucknell '07 help to keep us current on ways to maintain high production yet minimize waste (and odors).

Encourage producers to engage their neighbors with goodwill gestures. Examples include free composted manure, sweetcorn, barbeques, farm tours and hayrides. I know of some dairies that have sent requests to neighbors asking them to inform the dairy about parties or activities they may be having so that the dairy will know to definitely not spread manure near that date.

Share experiences and methods you have seen used on other dairies that minimize odors. As an example, I visited a dairy in northwestern Wisconsin that had covered their dairy lagoon with a heavy rubber (plastic?) cover. This made the entire lagoon into an anaerobic environment. Accumulating gas was ventilated out of the lagoon through a pipe and burned. Neighbors commented that, for whatever reason, it didn't smell nearly as much as it used to when manure was spread. The dairy also had a lot less hauling to do, since all rainfall was kept out of the lagoon.

2. Go national and global.

McDonald's partnered with Greenpeace in pressuring Brazil to reduce/stop the deforestation of rain forests (*New Allies on the Amazon, McDonald's and Greenpeace Unite to Prevent Rainforest Clearing*, The Washington Post, April 24, 2007). No doubt influenced by NGO and public pressure, McDonald's also led efforts to reform animal handling at slaughter facilities. Dr. Temple Grandin from Colorado State University has led these reform efforts and slaughter facility inspections. These reforms and improvements in handling were necessary and have made an improvement both in the efficiency of slaughter facilities, and hopefully in the public's perception of animal handling at these facilities. Our dairy industry is taking similar steps in providing guidelines and evaluation programs for animal welfare on dairies (see accompanying article).

We should not rule out sitting down with and potentially working with NGO. The slaughter facility inspections/audits that occurred because of pressure placed on McDonald's is an example of where it can be a "win" for all parties involved.

Conclusion

NGO have a lot of money. But we have a great product, and a tremendous amount of talent. We need to channel a small amount of our talent and efforts to promoting, and at times and in some areas correcting, our industry. The rewards and benefits will be well worth the effort.