

Information flow in Washington agriculture

Trends and trusted sources

Washington State Department of Agriculture
Future of Farming Project

June 2008

Approach

Questions we asked

The Future of Farming project interviewed a variety of producers, association representatives, agricultural economists and others with communications expertise in the agriculture arena. The aim was to learn more about how they exchange information within the industry and with the public.

The interviews were in-depth and conversational, though they are not intended as a substitute for a statistically validated survey or full communications audit.

Many common trends and opinions emerged as we asked:

1. How agricultural professionals get and share industry information
2. Which information sources are trusted and used most frequently
3. What distribution methods are effective for reaching producers, the public, and industry leaders
4. What current issues and anticipated future events may be affected by accurate and coordinated communication

A planning tool for effective communication

This paper is designed to give legislators, government agencies, industry analysts, and others a snapshot of important issues in Washington agriculture and how to communicate about them. It is a tool to help choose the most effective channels, methods and timing for sharing information.

We also note some known and emerging perception gaps between agricultural realities and the public perception of how agricultural products come to market. Closing these gaps will support public understanding about the complex network of business, environmental, regulatory, and scientific factors affecting agricultural production and consumer choices.

The role of active individual communicators

Everyone interviewed for this paper agreed that face-to-face, word-of-mouth information sharing was the most powerful way to build trust and move issues forward. It is also the most prone to distortion as it trickles down to coffee-shop chatter and conversations through the windows of idling trucks.

Those who carry out the most active and factual face-to-face communicating could be described as **information ambassadors**. They stay abreast of news and market trends, may be active members of boards and commissions, take formal or informal leadership roles in their local communities, and are trusted to spread good information. They are the types of people that others listen to. Engaging and equipping these influencers with information sharing tools and directives should not be overlooked in future communication plans.

Perspectives

The following interview excerpts highlight some issues critical to the industry experts we interviewed. They discussed which issues were going to affect their segments of the industry in the future, and how information sharing may play a role in problem solving.

There is a lack of education and awareness—in the public and even within government agencies—about what constitutes farming, who the farmers are, or what constitutes a farm product.

Agriculture is not good at telling non-agriculture audiences about our industry in a way that connects with their interests. We need to tell our stories and shop them actively.

There is a massive disconnect between the general public's perception and the reality of how our industry is regulated. And when producers don't understand the regulations themselves, it feeds misinformation.

Those who will make the most difference in the future are those who are silent now: non-respondents, non-participants in issues. They need to know the truth about issues like water quality and land use, and start to give a voice to what they feel.

Our future success is dependent on the ability of businesses to use their own property. We are threatened by the effects of development and upland pollution. But the urgency of these issues is not coming through to the public.

We care first and foremost for the land. We own it. We live off it. Our decisions have its long-term intentions in mind. The general public doesn't understand that the last thing we want to do is to send it downhill.

To stay on the leading edge we have to bring in the best information from other states and around the world. Whether they are forming formal or informal alliances, the more progressive growers don't stop at state and county boundaries to get their information.


Expanding export markets and climate change are two areas that will dramatically change our future, yet many of us in the industry are not incented to step up to work on these issues. We will have to communicate better with each other about them.

When it comes to public awareness of 'carbon footprints' and how farming ends up at the top of many high-impact lists, we have to be better about showing where our impact actually is. We also have to help mainstream media understand the difference between sound science and activist misinformation packaged as scientific news.

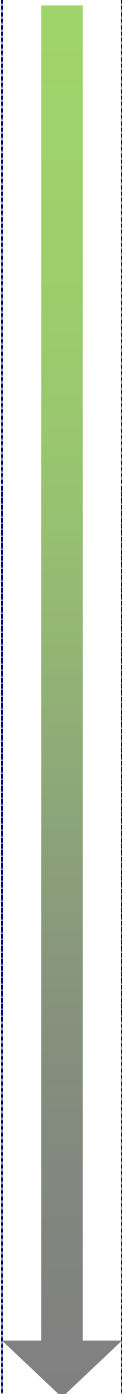
Special interest groups want to push particular agendas and we don't do a good enough job of knowing how our food system is under attack. Misinformation is far worse than no information at all.

Information sources


PRODUCERS / where they get information

Trust level	Source	Trends and considerations
	Word-of-mouth	<p>The most prevalent and trusted way that producers share information. Not always the most accurate. Can be myopic and complaint focused.</p> <p>Regular, face-to-face interaction among agency or association representatives and producers yields the most active problem-solving and relationship building.</p>
	Seminars and workshops	<p>Extremely valuable and trustworthy from a business, educational, networking and information sharing perspective—especially those hosted by associations, agencies, universities.</p> <p>People who are leaders and the most active in the future of the industry make time for these events and share what they learn.</p>
	Trade associations	<p>Act as key information exchange point for producers, government organizations, product wholesalers/ retailers, and commercial suppliers to agriculture.</p> <p>Most publications are electronic: newsletters or briefs sent weekly or monthly. Some special annual or quarterly publications remain in print form.</p> <p>Associations may be reaching only a partial segment of available producer audiences, due to their variable e-mail use.</p> <p>Trade associations reach the public directly through ads and promotions. They reach the media through press releases, tours and events.</p> <p>Producers may be participants in, or passive recipients of public-facing messages through these events and promotions. The most effective public promotions are those in which producers actively participate—showing the people behind the company names, and their passion for their products.</p>

PRODUCERS / where they get information (continued)

Trust level	Source	Trends and considerations
	Extension agents	<p>Extension agents are relied-upon information sources, especially for producers. Extension bulletins and publications are well-read.</p> <p>Shorter job tenure among extension agents (due to more attractive private sector salaries) has diminished the bonds of decades past when agents stayed in jobs longer and built long-term relationships with producers.</p>
	Trade media	<p>Trade papers and magazines—<i>Capital Press</i> was universally mentioned—are considered more accurate, informed and thorough than mainstream media. Trade radio and Web reports produced by the Northwest Ag Information Network (Allen Media) are considered relevant, trusted and easy to catch while driving.</p>
	Government agencies	<p>Producers rely on agencies for regulatory information, and in crises or emergencies, turn to their government for guidance. Local governments play an important information sharing role in growing regions.</p> <p>Associations and producers note that information is often put on agency Web sites in a passive manner (no additional communication directing people to it). And the practice of organizing Web sites in ways that make sense to agency insiders--but not necessarily to their constituents--persists.</p> <p>Agencies are regarded as uncoordinated when sharing information with each other (especially where multiple agencies permit or regulate a commodity, production facilities, and farmland).</p>
	Company reps and field agents	<p>Field agents for chemical companies, packagers, pharmaceuticals, and other supplies are in regular face-to-face contact with producers, field managers and foremen. Reps stay abreast of industry issues and share news in the field. The biases and commercial motivations of their companies may lend a particular slant to the information. Trust level varies.</p>
	Mainstream media	<p>Major market papers and television are least trusted or used by producers. Producers feel agricultural issues are not covered with expert depth, and pseudo-scientific information is repackaged as news with little fact-checking.</p>

GENERAL PUBLIC | where consumers get information

Trust level	Sources	Trends and considerations
	Word-of-mouth	<p>Interviewees felt that many consumers form opinions about agriculture at a young age—and make later buying decisions—based on emotion. Perceptions are built when teachers, friends relatives and opinion-makers (the Oprah Winfrey effect) say that particular or products or production methods are better than others.</p> <p>Good/bad messaging from activists can compound the “gut reaction.” Gaps between the public’s perception and agricultural realities are being filled by the loudest, most emotional voices.</p>
	Point-of-sale	<p>Consumers get much of their education about agriculture and agricultural products in stores. Displays, demonstrations, labelling, packaging and salesperson opinions have great influence on buyers’ perceptions regarding health, nutrition, quality and safety of products and production methods</p>
	Mainstream media	<p>Cooking, travel and décor magazines and TV programs are highly influential in boosting understanding of—and public enthusiasm for—foods, building products, textiles, growing regions, production methods and the crafts behind getting all kinds of agricultural output to market.</p> <p>Interviewees perceive that regional television news outlets are prone to accepting pre-packaged corporate PR information as news. They also note that activist groups effectively assume pseudo-scientific or academic mantles and easily place agenda-based material with regional TV news outlets.</p>
	Trade associations	<p>Associations and commissions remain largely in the background of public awareness, though their various regional and national public information campaigns reach consumers in the form of event sponsorships, advertisements, in-store materials, recipe placements and other point-of-sale contexts.</p>
	Government agencies	<p>Interviewees felt that public understanding of the role of the government in agriculture is limited. Federal and state government information is sought out in food safety, disease management and land use contexts.</p>

Choosing communication methods

When considering how to share information with agricultural producers, it is easy to make assumptions about how well they are connected, how they use technology, what they read, what language they use, and how they prefer to communicate.

The industry leaders and communicators we interviewed pointed out some characteristics of communication channels that reach in and out of the agriculture arena.

e-mail

- there is no easy way to reach large numbers of producers; some don't use e-mail
- e-mail is so prevalent that most who do use it reported feeling overloaded by it
- consider the season: e-mails requesting action won't be answered during harvest

Web sites

- considered very useful for getting access to policy documents, regulations
- considered time consuming to use, especially when organized for insiders
- very active with blogs, informal networks and international information exchanges

Radio

- agricultural briefs running several times a day are popular with agricultural producers driving around
- non-English language stations are available in state's major growing areas
- wide range of news/talk radio media reaches driving public; food & recipe context is popular

Newspapers

- major market daily newspapers are not frequently read or highly regarded for their agricultural coverage.
- local weeklies and dailies—especially in the state's major producing areas— are perceived as more trusted and informed on agricultural issues.

Trade, association and commission publications

- sector and general agricultural news publications are trusted and widely read in both print and electronic forms
- associations and commissions are uniquely positioned to compile and publish a hybrid of market and regulatory news that is highly relevant their commodity.

Resource list

General agricultural trade media

- Capital Press
- Northwest Ag Information Network (Allen Media)

Sector-specific trade publications

- Cascade Cattleman
- World Apple Report
- The Good Fruit Grower – Washington Fruit Commission
- The Ketchpen – Washington Cattlemen’s Association

State publications

- Washington State Agricultural Statistics Service Monthly Report

Federal resources

- The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)
- USDA Market News Service (MNS)
- USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)
- USDA Economic Research Service (ERS)

Other