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Op Ed: Is the Ag Community to blame for Michael Pollan's success?

Memo

To: The food, agriculture and forestry community

From: Marshall Matz

Re: The problem

Question: How is it that Michael Pollan can take issue with the National Academy of Sciences, the Heart Association, the Cancer Society, the US Dietary Guidelines Committee, Dr. Norman Borlaug and still become a best-selling author commanding large speaking fees?

Answer: We have created an environment that allows this to happen.

Discussion: We, the larger agriculture community, are the victims of our own success. We have created an environment that makes Michael Pollan possible.

Our production capacity is a marvel of the world. The United States has developed from a rural country where virtually everyone farmed to a country where less than 2% farm....and we all know that statistic is greatly exaggerated. A few hundred thousand farms can feed the country.

In addition, there are a billion hungry people in the world...one out of six. It is not just a moral challenge it is a practical problem. It is a threat to world peace. There are a billion people who are dependent and yet have the potential of being productive and participating in the world economy.

One would think that this fact alone would make it impossible for TIME magazine and the Michael Pollans of the worlds to be taken seriously. Yet they succeed and have a constituency.

The problem is, in short: US, all of us. If only 2% farm and the consumer no longer understands what we do or what it takes to bring food from the farm gate to the kitchen table, Michael Pollan is possible.

Solution: We need to tell our story. We need to communicate with the customer. A business, any business, cannot survive if it stops communicating with its customer. We are so focused on the next farm bill, support prices, CAFO regulation, crop insurance and other issues, that we have taken our collective eyes off the larger picture.

The American consumer is spoiled. We, the larger farm community, can deliver virtually any food, every day, anywhere in the country. And we can do it cheaper than any country on earth. As we all know, consumers spend only 10% of their disposable income in food. It is our productivity and efficiency that drives the consumer economy and allows Blackberries and flat screens to become a necessity.

Yet, we are criticized for causing obesity and the killer diseases of the day. Multiple use in our national forests is seen as a problem, not as a solution. Something is very, very wrong indeed.

We need to stop talking to each other and start talking to the consumer, the press, editorial writers and urban Members of Congress. We need to talk to public interest groups and consumer groups. We need to make our case not just to the Secretary of Agriculture but to the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of the Treasury and the President's Council of Economic Advisors.

We need to recognize that it will take commercial agriculture, sustainable agriculture and organic agriculture to get the job done feeding the world. It is time to stop pitting one against the other. With only 2% farming, ranching and producing renewable energy, we all need to work together to make our case to the American public.

FIRST STEP: Perhaps the place to start is to approach the Department and the Congress on behalf of a public-private partnership to establish a national agricultural education program. Many of the child nutrition organizations are seeking to re-establish a nutrition education program in the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Let's combine nutrition education with agriculture education.

In the last farm bill, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture was established to expand the Department's research scope. Research lays the foundation for education. Let's work with the Secretary to build upon "Know Your Farmer" and his effort to demonstrate that the Department is important to all Americans. It is a dynamic effort that is well suited for a partnership on agriculture education. As the Secretary says, you can live without an attorney or doctor (if you are lucky) but you can't live without a farmer.

Marshall Matz was Counsel to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and is the Founding Chairman of Friends of the World Food Program. He chaired the Obama Agriculture Committee in 2007 and 2008.