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Food safety a key link to consumers

By Catherine Norwood

Nuffield Scholar David Cussons has identified the Japanese obsession with product safety as a new opportunity to strengthen links between farmers and consumers in this market, and in other markets around the world – including our own.

He has also investigated modern communication strategies to improve public perceptions of farming and agriculture in the media, and to deal with industry crisis situations.

Mr Cussons, a woolgrower at Kojonup, in Western Australia, says while travelling on his Nuffield scholarship this year he found that consumer expectations about traceability and accountability in food and fibre production were highest in Japan. However, expectations are also rising in a many other countries including Europe, he says.

He believes this insistence on traceability back to the farm gate is not necessarily the burden many growers may see it as, but an important opportunity to promote agriculture and primary industries rather than food manufacturing. He says accountability for wool or meat products, for instance, starts with farmers and their livestock, not supermarkets and fashion stores.

Mr Cussons says understanding what shapes consumer sentiment was an important part of his Nuffield studies, sponsored by Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), and he found that markets were very different in each of the countries he visited. These included Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, US, Canada and New Zealand.

In researching crisis communication strategies, he met with present and past members of the National Farmers Union in the UK, to discuss the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, outbreak in the 1990s and foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001, and also met with members of the US Meat Export Federation, to discuss the ban of US beef exports to Japan in December 2003 when BSE was identified in US beef.

Mr Cussons says he chose countries for his Nuffield tour that had markets and media similar to those in Australia, but found significant differences in the scale of resources available, particularly in the US.

“For instance, the Californian Farm Bureau, which covers just one state, employs up to 24 full time public relations staff. Another company I visited had staff tailoring information kits to target individual journalists, based on background profiles they develop to identify the particular interests of these journalists. There are very few organisations in Australia that have the resources to do that.”

Mr Cussons says he also met with members of the communications team for the agricultural biotechnology giant Monsanto, who have developed an internet communications strategy in recent years, after realising the potential electronic communications help in getting closer to consumers.

“There’s been a big turn around in the company’s approach, largely through the internet, where it actually engages with customers, and it has become much more accessible and responsive to them,” he says.

In the US he also met with some of the many agricultural lobby groups, including the American Farm Bureau, The Hand the Feeds U.S., and the Centre for Consumer Freedom. He says some groups

target media relations, others target politicians and all seem well-funded, although the source of their funding was not always clear.

As part of his tour he visited AWI offices in Japan, Sweden, New York and Washington, where staff are involved in better understanding the local markets, trends and customer “hot buttons”, and identifying the best communication channels in each market.

“The issue of animal welfare, for instance, has gained more traction in Sweden than in other countries because of the culture in northern Europe. In other parts of the world I think manufacturers are still waiting to see how consumer sentiment on the issue develops, rather than responding to the issue itself,” Mr Cussons says.

As a result of his scholarship studies he is planning a crisis communication toolkit for rural industries, collating some of the “lessons learned” from past agricultural crises.

His key findings for crisis communication include:

- Understand your marketplace
- Have procedures in place to give consumers confidence in your ability to deal with the crisis
- Have a small number of well-planned key messages and stick to them
- Provide media training for key staff including the chief executive officer and president
- Use scenario planning with key staff to identify the five most likely crisis issues
- Put your response plan on paper (don't leave it in the ether).

Mr Cussons says while it is impossible to plan for every eventuality, he believes some basic preparation can help agricultural industries protect their reputation and markets.

Initial planning can help prevent poor decision-making on the run, and reduce the stress of those managing communications in time of crisis, as well as the stress of producers and customers caught in the crisis, he says.

“You need to be able to tell your customers that you have a problem and that you're working to fix it. You have to give your customers confidence that they can come back to your product once the issue has been resolved.

“How you communicate this depends on the market you're in and the mediums they prefer. Every market place is different and uses media differently. That's where it's really important to have a good understanding of your markets, what's driving them, and where they go to for information,” he says.

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A high-resolution photograph of Mr Cussons can be downloaded from www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, cnorwood@coretext.com.au if you have any problems accessing images.