

Misconceptions in Agriculture:  
The Role of Public Relations to Communicate with and Educate the Public

A Senior Project  
presented to  
The Faculty of the Journalism Department  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Science in Journalism

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Winter 2013

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## ABSTRACT

The following study aims to investigate the misconceptions in agricultural communications, why they exist, and what communicators can be doing to further the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging. Agricultural issues are a source of media attention, from policy changes like Proposition 2 or Proposition 37 in California, to commercials such as the Dodge RAM Super Bowl spot in 2013. By studying what professionals are currently doing in the fields of public relations, marketing, and agricultural communications to reach and educate the consumers, it becomes clear the strategies that should be taken when presenting key messaging. This study focuses on uncovering these strategies, and ends with recommendations for practice for experts in the field to build on: use emotion to your advantage, engage in two-way dialogue, and develop an integrated message across platforms.

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# Chapter 1

## *Introduction*

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study focuses on developing and managing effective messaging in the field of agriculture to educate the publics, and what tools public relations professionals are currently employing to advance key messages in the agricultural industry. It has been found that the media acts as an intervening public in this industry. “According to Nelkin (1987), reliance on the media helps to define the public’s sense of reality and its perceptions of risks or benefits. Mass media are consistently ranked by the public as a primary source of food safety information.” (Tucker, Whaley & Sharp, 2006, p. 137)

History shows that an information gap exists between the agricultural industry and the consumer due to ineffective communication strategies implemented by communicators in the field. By using traditional public relations tactics along with a transparent and two-way communication model with the media, the publics will receive and understand key messages of the agricultural industry.

### **Background of the Problem**

The existing literature about the field of agriculture, its communicators, and their relationship with the media mainly focuses on case studies that examine media coverage of agricultural issues. “Media spikes were often a result of ‘drama’ (uprooting of field trials, hunger strike, health issues of a cultural minority) forwarded by environmental groups, thus, suggesting that biotech articles tend to gravitate towards events rather than to the science.” (Ghatak, 2010, p. 5)

There is some research on how to present key messaging to the publics to communicate and educate them on these topics. According to Lochridge, “the media world has changed so much that it’s hard to cut through the clutter. We have to be saying the right things in the most effective, persuasive way to make our voices heard. Over time, it seems, the rules have changed.” The literature points to specific ways that agricultural communicators should use to “drive your message home and make it stick.” (Lochridge, 2012, p. 46)

Since the agricultural industry is constantly evolving and incorporating transparency and two-way communication tactics, it is imperative to conduct research on current strategies being utilized by communicators in the marketing, public relations and agricultural communications by collecting expert opinions on the topic of agricultural key messaging.

### **Purpose of the Study**

According to current trends in the field of agricultural communications, there is an information gap between the industry and the media, which prevents agricultural key messaging from being heard and understood by the publics. Communicators and public relations professionals must employ specific strategies and tactics to effectively send out their message.

By investigating the current strategies used to develop and manage agricultural messaging, it will benefit marketing, public relations, and agricultural communication industry professionals who consistently develop and manage these messages.

### **Setting for the Study**

This study will be done as part of a Senior Project at California Polytechnic State University located in San Luis Obispo, California. Interviews will be conducted to with three experts to obtain qualitative data to be discussed in the following fields: marketing, public relations, and agricultural communications. The experts will each be asked the same set of

questions. The questionnaire is designed to answer the research questions and fill the gaps in previous literature on the topic of developing, managing and assessing effective agricultural communication messaging.

### **Research Questions**

The study used the following research questions that were designed to answer fundamental gaps in the existing literature on the topic of developing effective agricultural communication messaging. Each question was created after investigating the existing information on the topic, in order to acquire additional data from professionals in the fields of marketing, public relations and agricultural communications for the study.

1. How does the agriculture industry provide factual understanding to the consumer through public relations?
2. What are the gaps in the public relations process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving key messaging?
3. How does emotion effect agricultural key messaging, and what are the key differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?
4. How does one develop a public relations strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?
5. How can agricultural communicators manage their key messaging?
6. How can success and widespread knowledge of key messaging in agricultural communications be measured?



## **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined to clarify several of the terms on the topic and assist the reader and provide context to the remainder of the study.

Marketplace Activists: those who modify their buying behavior based on limited information (Bennett, 1995, p. 16)

Social Activists: those who shape opinion within the family and community and are active in food/environmental organizations (Bennett, 1995, p. 16)

Cooperation: joining with public interest groups and government on issues that you hold in common (Jon, Betz & O'Connell, 1997, p. 1007)

Participation: including stakeholder groups in the corporate planning process (Jon et al., 1997, p. 1007)

Negotiation: corporations and stakeholders are devising new ways to reconcile conflicts, which are quite complex and may involve third parties (Jon et al., 1997, p. 1007)

Direct Anticipation: a series of goals for improved performance, targets that would put the corporation ahead of regularity requirements if achieved (Jon et al., 1997, p. 1007)

Engagement: the collective experiences that readers or viewers have with a media brand (Mersey, Malthouse & Calder, 2010, p. 40)

Experience: a specific set of beliefs that consumers have about how some media brand fits into their lives (Mersey et al., 2010, p. 40)

Personal Engagement: manifested in experiences that are similar to those that people have with print newspapers and magazines, users seek stimulation and inspiration from the site, they want to use the site to facilitate their interactions with other people, they feel the site affirms

their self-worth, they get a sense of intrinsic enjoyment in using the site itself, they feel it is useful for achieving goals, and the value input from other users (Mersey et al., 2010, p. 51)

Social-interactive Engagement: more specific to Web sites, users experience some of the same things in terms of intrinsic enjoyment, utilitarian worth, and valuing the input from the larger community of users but in a way that links to a sense of participating with others and socializing on the site (Mersey et al., 2010, p. 52)

### **Organization of Study**

Chapter 1 included the background of the problem, purpose of the study, and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 will identify the trends regarding messaging in agricultural communications by reviewing the current literature on the topic. Chapter 3 will present the methodology of the study. In Chapter 4, the findings will be presented and organized based on the original research questions. The data will then be analyzed compared to the current literature on the topic. Lastly, Chapter 5 will include a summary of the study and recommendations for professionals in the agriculture, public relations and agricultural communications industry to develop, manage and assess effective agricultural messaging.

## Chapter 2

### *Literature Review*

The review of literature focuses on the existing literature on agricultural communication messaging including the development, management and assessment of said messaging.

#### **Providing Factual Understanding to the Consumer Through Public Relations**

According to Lages and Simkin (2003), public relations is defined as a management discipline, which implies “that PR activity is broader than a communications technique and broader than specialized PR programs, such as media relations [and emphasizes] overall planning, execution and evaluation of an organization’s communication with both external and internal publics.”

Jensen (2001) found that the role of public relations varies depending on three distinct company types. First, there is the economically successful but socially innocent company. “This idea is that if the company follows its unambiguous economic ends it will contribute to economic wealth at the societal level.” In this situation, public relations serves more marketing-related activities, including sales promotion, product information and publicity.

Next, there is the economically successful and legal company. “It is considered necessary and legitimate that the government repairs market inefficiencies by means of legally based regulation of the company. This means that laws are supposed to restrict the company from harming common goods (health conditions of the laborers, environment, human rights, etc.) ... The reactive [PR] function is to observe and analyze tendencies in the public debate so as to be able to forecast regulations. The proactive [PR] function is to take an active part in pre-political discourses to make sure that the perspectives of the focal business are taken into consideration,

or to consider other solutions to the pre-political discourse that could improve the legal scope of the company.”

The third type of company is the economically successful, legal and responsible company, where the “focus of management is value-based management, internal and external negotiations, value-defining processes and ‘the multiple bottom line’.” This company is held responsible for any societal consequences within and beyond the legal scope. Public relations then, must include “a multiplicity of values in its strategic goals,” and must consider corporate social responsibility. (Jensen, 2001, p. 133)

### **Gaps in the Process that Cause Misinterpretation of Key Messaging**

A study by Reber and Berger (2006) aimed to define influence in public relations by asking 93 industry practitioners. It was found that influence could be defined as multiple things: shaping decisions and actions, the ability to persuade, being heard and power. The research also looked at specific instances and what it means to have influence: “to have influence is to have a role in shaping organizational decisions and actions... to effectively practice the art of persuasion...” In addition, they concluded that practitioners are most influential “when organizations face crises... [and] in framing institutional messages.” Where public relations fails in being influential is in strategic decision-making, and when they are seen as technicians rather than practitioners.

A study was done by Duffy, Fearne and Healing (2005) that investigated the information gap that exists between the agri-food industry and the consumers on these key messages: support for agriculture, sustainable food production and sourcing systems, and the link between food and health.

They found that “the communication activities of organizations in the agri-food industry confirms an extremely fragmented delivery, particularly to consumers, and a distinct lack of resources to effectively communicate the information that exists and evaluate its impact on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of different target groups.” The approach that the agricultural industry uses does not engage the consumers “with food and farming and [does not give] them a reason to consider the implications of their purchases for the farming industry and the environment” (Duffy et al., 2005, p. 17).

After research was done by Tucker, Whaley and Sharp (2006), it was found that consumers who had negative connotations of the agriculture industry also relied most heavily on the media. The authors offer some insight into this discovery:

“It is important to note that food safety programs are often justified on the basis that they educate and empower audiences by providing useful information to help avert risks. Under these circumstances, it would be expected that increased reliance on mass media for food safety information would result in *lower* levels of perceived risk. The finding that increased reliance on food safety information tends to result in higher levels of perceived risk raises some question as to the effectiveness of current communication programs” (Tucker et al., 2006, p. 135).

### **Agricultural Industry Emotions vs. Consumer Emotions**

In an article by Bennett (1995), two types of consumers are defined: marketplace activists, “who modify their buying behavior based on limited information, and social activists are those who shape opinion within the family and community and are active in food/environmental organizations.”

They found that “while consumers’ concerns are broadening and deepening, their awareness of agriculture is becoming more limited. They recognize that the food supply is

among the safest; however, they want it to be even better.” In addition, they are placing more importance on foods that are natural, authentic and organic. As they become more and more confused about production practices, they begin to “oversimplify them in absolute terms as either good or bad, leaving no room for compromise.”

Mass media also contributes to fear of agricultural issues like genetically modified food (GMF), according to a study done by Laros and Steenkamp (2004). “Consumers’ fear is enhanced by the numerous fear appeals concerning GMF that appear in the mass media... Many of these messages appeal directly to consumer fears by using terms like ‘Frankenfoods,’ ‘unreliable,’ ‘fears,’ ‘disaster,’ and ‘risk.’ The content of the messages is consistent with appraisals that belong to fear (Roseman, Antoniou & Jose, 1996). Because of the proposed ‘environmental risks,’ ‘risks of cancer,’ and ‘food health fears,’ the public acquires the belief that GMFs are a major problem in that they affect both the natural habitat and the health of the world’s population” (Laros & Steenkamp, 2004, p. 890).

Consumers also care about animal welfare, which was seen in a study done by Frewer, Kole, Van de Kroon and de Lauwere (2005). “This research suggests that consumers think about animal welfare in terms of two broad categories related to their health and living environment, but do not think about welfare issues at a more detailed level. Emotional responses to animal welfare increase the perceived importance of both animal health and animal environment, as does the belief that animals experience negative emotions if poorly treated with respect to these factors” (Frewer et al., 2005, p. 362).

On the industry side, the farmers’ or producers’ opinions are not taken into consideration in public debates about agriculture, according to a study done by Driessen (2012). “When farmers and their views are not obviously included in these debates, or if the ability of farmers to

take part in ethical debates in questioned, a choice is already made on whose terms these debates are to be performed, and what constitutes legitimate arguments and a meaningful debate...

Understanding farming practice as the integration of the mosaic of concerns in the light of a wide variety of moral experiences would foster public appreciation of the mixed motives of farmers” (Driessen, 2012, p. 176).

### **Developing an Effective Public Relations Strategic Plan**

When deciding what will be most effective when developing an effective public relations strategic plan, it's important to look to the Uses and Gratification theory. This “asserts that people are active users of media and select how they will use it,” according to Lattimore, Baskin and Keiman (2012). It has been found that people use the media five different ways: as entertainment, to scan the environment for items important to them personally, as a diversion, as a substitute for personal relationships and as a check on personal identity and values.

What's important to note here is that “not everyone will see or hear the bad news about a company or product. It also means you can't count on people seeing or hearing the good news.”

There are specific strategies that Public Relations practitioners should take into account when working in food communication, according to Peter and Sven (2011). The first is to be open and honest, which is important in building credibility and trust. Next, practitioners must disclose incentives and conflicts of interest, which uncovers any potential bias and promotes objectivity.

Take all available relevant knowledge into consideration, which “should not be interpreted as implying that every bit of information has to be communicated. Instead it means that one should carefully consider all the available science when deciding what to communicate.”

“When possible, quantify risks: Providing appropriate quantifications can be seen as part of what is required to make information about a risk comprehensible to its recipients.”

Practitioners should also describe and explain uncertainties associated with risk assessments, and take all the public’s concerns into account: “the public’s concerns relate both to those aspects the risk itself the public considers particularly important and other aspects more or less closely related to the risk, for example, animal welfare, the environmental impact of food production, and social or ethical concerns about measures taken to reduce a risk.”

Finally, it is important to take the rights of individuals and groups seriously. “Most risks do not affect everyone to the same degree, with has important implications for risk communication” (Peter & Sven, 2011, p. 313).

It’s also important to “tell [a] story using the words and the context that will resonate with consumers, elected officials and other opinion leaders,” according to Lochridge (2012). In her article, she highlights findings that were presented at the Ag Institute’s 2012 Luncheon Workshop Series to help agricultural communicators effectively state their message.

These include: use opinion leaders as the target audience, test communication materials with the target audience before release, make sure to consider non-agricultural audiences, design attractive websites to ensure that key messages can be in two minutes or less, identify the target audience before creating a website to ensure that the elements will appeal to that audience, incorporate components into messages that are personally relevant to the target audience and determine which kind of appeals work best with your audience.



## **Managing Agricultural Key Messaging**

An article by Shephard, Betz and O'Connell (1997) highlights four ways through which a company or organization can become more proactive, rather than reactive in relationships with their key publics: through cooperation, participation, negotiation and direct anticipation.

Cooperation involves joining forces with other public interest groups on issues they have in common. "Some corporations have joined with public interest groups and government on issues they hold in common. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce worked with Nader's Congress Watch and the Sierra Club against proposed disclosure requirements of grass-roots lobbying activities. Similarly, in 1985, 41 environmental and health groups joined with the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, and companies such as Shell, to reach agreement on amendments to pesticide control legislation" (Shephard et al., 1997, p. 1)

Participation means involving key publics in the planning processes of a company. Negotiation is way to resolve conflicts between groups, and usually involves a third party since it can get messy and complicated. Direct anticipation involves knowing what key publics are concerned about and what the company could be doing to help those concerns.

In times of crisis, Gillingham and Noizet (2007), lay out a four-point plan for managing key messaging that has been proven effective in multiple case studies. The organization must think of the public and the media. "At the moment that an incident takes place the organization needs to think about the crisis from the point-of-view of the public and the media. The organization needs to base its communications on the perceptions of the public and not on its own understanding of the event" (Gillingham & Noizet, 2007, p. 545).

They must also act fast: stakeholders need to be informed of the incident within hours, the media must be made aware before they find the information from another source, and they

must take control of the information. The authors stress that “the communication messages need to be agreed and understood by all those involved and the appointment of a single spokesperson helps to maintain a consistent message” (Gillingham & Noizet, 2007, p. 545).

Next, be straight. Tell the truth, because denying any problems or issues will only cause further damage. “Transparency is essential and there should be clear signs that the organization takes the matter very seriously and that investigations will be undertaken. In responding to incidents organizations should reflect their own positive values.

Last, it is critical that the organization show concern and compassion. “The company’s initial behavior towards the victims sets the tone for all subsequent situations. It is essential to show commitment to victims and providing assistance” (Gillingham & Noizet, 2007, p. 545).

### **Measuring Success of Agricultural Communications**

Measuring success in public relations is important, according to Phillips (2001): “the PR industry has been seeking value measures for its press relations work for a long time. The requirement has been for a financial measure that reflects the effort put into generating sufficient editorial sympathy for client messages.” He argues that “combining the capability of content analysis, semiotic analysis with neural nets and data mining provides some very powerful analytical tools to the PR and, in particular, media relations practitioner” (Phillips, 2001, p.77).

One way to measure success is through engagement, as seen in a study done by Mersey, Malthouse and Calder (2010) found that there are two types of online engagement, personal and social-interactive, and that both are positively associated with readership.

“Personal engagement is manifested in experiences that are similar to those that people have with print newspapers and magazines... Social-interactive engagement, however, is more specific to Web sites... While social-interactive engagement is more closely associated with the

Web, aspects of it can be found for other media. For example, ‘A big reason I like this site is what I get from other users’ could also apply to the letters-of-the-editor page of a daily. The utilitarian experience is a manifestation of both forms of engagement.”

After confirming that both types of engagement are positively correlated with readership through their methodology, the authors went on to conclude what this means for communicators.

“We recommend a strategic approach to create a media brand. The media organization should articulate a concept that will guide its creation of contacts for the media brand... The audience’s ideas about the concept create expectations, which can also affect their experiences with the brand, including the actions they take beyond it and any co-creation of content with it” (Mersey et al., 2010, p. 52)

Phillips (2001), argues that “for the practice of PR there is a requirement to identify what is available for analysis, methodologies available and the applications of the resultant findings.” He finds three ways to measure the success of public relations: data (press clips, advertising inquiries, uptake of stories, etc.), information (analysis of media drivers, number of clips/media, content and context of media type, etc.), and knowledge (issues and content, press releases issued, media calls/meetings, press events, extent to which content is used, etc.).

He concludes, “the relatively new and inexpensive PR tools that are now available offer the practitioner much more powerful capabilities. These can be used to create more relevant content to motivate audiences and, in the Internet age, provide content that users want to find and relate to. The industry may find the adoption of such capability essential, as digital communication becomes the norm and as demand for high volumes of content becomes common” (Phillips, 2001, p. 77).

## **Chapter 3**

### *Methodology*

This chapter presents the methods used to collect data for the study including the data sources, collection and presentation of the data and delimitations.

#### **Data Sources**

For this study, one expert from the field of public relations, agricultural communications and marketing were interviewed based on a single questionnaire. This questionnaire was specifically developed to answer the original research questions regarding the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

#### **Participants.**

The public relations expert selected for the interview was Amy Kull, a Senior Vice President and Group Manager at Ketchum, an international, award-winning public relations firm with an office in San Francisco, CA. The agricultural communications expert selected was Dr. Scott Vernon, a professor in the Agricultural Education & Communications department at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA. The marketing expert selected was Lindsey Higgins, who has an extensive background in agricultural economic and marketing, and is a professor in the Agricultural Business department and the advisor for the National Agriculture Marketing Association (NAMA) team at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA.

#### **Interview Design.**

The following questions and probes were asked to each of the experts and served as data sources for the study:

1. How would you, as an expert in your field, describe how the agricultural industry presents their key messaging to the consumer? Do you feel this fosters learning and complete understanding of said messaging? Please give an example of either effective or ineffective strategies.
2. Where do you see gaps in the communications process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving an agricultural company's key messaging? Please give an example.
3. How much do you think emotion effects agricultural key messaging? How would you define industry reactions versus consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?
4. What strategies and tactics would you use when developing a strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture? Please give an example of a campaign that you think have been effective or ineffective in communicating.
5. How would you then manage that plan or campaign through integrating:
  - a. Traditional media
  - b. New technology
  - c. Crisis communications
6. How would you measure the success of agricultural messaging? Please provide examples.

### **Data Collection**

The method of data collection for this study was three individual interviews with each expert. The interviews were conducted during March 2013 and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. During the interviews, experts were asked questions from a single questionnaire designed

to provide answers to the original research questions while gaining insight into current strategies in managing and developing agricultural messaging.

### **Data Presentation**

The data collected during each interview was documented through audio recordings using a digital voice recorder as well as written notes during and after the interviews to clarify the context of the responses. This method of data collection ensures that the data is presented in the most complete and objective way possible.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study based on the type of data collected in the interviews. The study was conducted to gain insight into current strategies being employed for managing, developing and assessing agricultural messaging. Therefore, some limitations may exist due to the assumption that responses are qualitative and opinion-based and cannot be generalized. In addition, the research was conducted and analyzed over a ten-week project at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA, which place time constraints on the research that could be done.

### **Delimitations**

There are delimitations to this study as well. Three respondents were chosen to be interviewed, one for each field in marketing, agricultural communications, and public relations. While interviews with Lindsey Higgins and Scott Vernon were face-to-face interviews, the interview with Amy Kull was conducted by phone. A face-to-face interview was not feasible due to her location in San Francisco, California and the time constraints for the study.

## **Chapter 4**

### *Data Analysis*

Chapter 4 will provide descriptions of the experts interviewed in the study and summarize each respondent's answers to the questionnaire. Since the data was collected through record interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each, it will be presented in the form of direct quotations and paraphrased responses. The answers will then be analyzed and compared to the original research questions and the existing literature on the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

#### **Description of Participating Experts in Related Fields**

##### **Public Relations.**

The public relations expert selected for this study was Amy Kull. Kull has served as a Senior Vice President and Group Manager for the Food & Nutrition Practice at Ketchum West in San Francisco and Los Angeles for over four years. This international firm, and more specifically, the Food & Nutrition Practice, has one countless awards in PR, and develops communications programs for clients which include: California Milk Advisory Board, American Pistachio Growers, National Honey Board and California Dried Plum Board. Kull has worked in public relations for over 20 years, received a degree in communications from the University of California, Los Angeles, and is currently enrolled the University of Southern California's Master of Communication Management program.

##### **Marketing.**

Lindsey Higgins was the marketing expert selected for this study. Higgins currently works as an assistant professor in the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo Agribusiness department. She focuses on food and wine marketing, agribusiness, consumer

behavior, business and economic simulation and market research. In addition to teaching, she coaches the Cal Poly National Agricultural Marketing Association (NAMA) team, which is comprised of students who have the opportunity to compete with other teams to create and present a complete marketing plan for a new agricultural or food product. She received her Bachelor's of Science in Agribusiness at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and went on to receive a Master of Science in Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University.

### **Agricultural Communication.**

Scott Vernon was the selected agricultural communication expert for this study. Vernon currently teaches in the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo Agriculture Education and Communication department as a professor. He also helps leads an organization called 'I Love Farmers, They Feed My Soul,' which is an all-volunteer movement among young people who are passionate about creating conversations about agriculture with their non-agriculture peers. Vernon travels throughout the United States to deliver speeches and seminars focused on agriculture; he is considered one of the nation's leading agriculture advocates. Some of his specialties include: leadership development, media training, and crisis communication in agriculture. He received his Bachelor's of Science and his Master's of Science in Agricultural Education/Agricultural Business at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. He obtained a Ph.D. in Agricultural Leadership/Beef Cattle Management from Texas A&M University.

### **Agricultural Communication Questionnaire**

Each expert was asked to respond to the following questions and probes regarding the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging:

1. How would you, as an expert in your field, describe how the agricultural industry presents their key messaging to the consumer? Do you feel this fosters learning and



complete understanding of said messaging? Please give an example of either effective or ineffective strategies.

Question #1 was asked to gain insight in ways professionals would define what agricultural messaging should aim to do, and the current state of agricultural communications today. It was designed to give the reader a solid foundation of what agricultural messaging is, and how it currently translates from industry to consumer.

- Amy Kull: “Well, I think that right now the agricultural industry is finally really getting together to present a more cohesive face to consumers, more of showing all of the farmers that are behind the food that they produce and making sure people know that most of the farms are still family farms, even if they may be really big” (Appendix A).
- Lindsey Higgins: “There are a lot of differences, so it is hard to communicate all of that through one clear message when consumers are already faced with so many other messages going on. So, ya, maybe a lack of consistency, but at the same time it is hard when there is so much diversity in ag, what is one consistent message that we can share that’s going to reflect everything that goes on” (Appendix B).
- Scott Vernon: “When we look at the bigger picture, and begin to understand as an industry what, you know, what shortcomings the industry has, they understand now that they have to be better at key messages and I think we look to trade organizations, farmer producer organizations as well, to provide some of that key messaging and historically it’s been a family farmer and rancher. It’s a family operation. And the key message, I think, historically has been American agriculture and the United States has the safest, most abundant, most affordable food supply in the world” (Appendix C).

2. Where do you see gaps in the communications process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving an agricultural company's key messaging? Please give an example.

Question #2 was asked to further develop the state of agricultural messaging today, and discuss potential factors that can make key messaging get lost in the communication process from the producers to the consumers to the media.

- Amy Kull: "There's a group of people who are becoming activists that are really vocal. It doesn't necessarily mean just the Michael Pollan's of the world, but these are people who are bloggers and who listen to some Alpha moms in certain neighborhoods; they're the people who are really really emotionally involved in the food world. And the gap is in reaching them; we're calling them food e-vangelists. These are the people who can take down an industry quickly" (Appendix A).
- Lindsey Higgins: "Well, I think just the biggest gap is getting interest from consumers, maybe, and, you know, they have so much going on and so many other messages coming through. I think there are maybe a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes about Ag and production agriculture and consumers; they just don't have that interest. So it has to be presented in a manner that's going to allow consumers to connect with" (Appendix B).
- Scott Vernon: "The gap sometimes, I think, exists between the producer and the consumer. The producers have one message that they'd like to get out about how they're producing food and that type of thing. But there are a lot of people who have a hand in food production along the supply chain in distribution, food processing, and all that. So by the time products get to the consumers, they're different than when

they came of the farm. And so that gap exists between the evils of processed foods that consumers have a perception of, and what the farmers produce” (Appendix C).

3. How much do you think emotion effects agricultural key messaging? How would you define industry reactions versus consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?

Question #3 was designed to determine the impact of emotion on agricultural messaging, but also to find the variations between industry and consumer emotions. This is especially important since agricultural issues influence not only the consumers affected, but producers of food as well. It serves as a source of comparison between the difference between reactions from the industry to a particular issue and consumer reactions.

- Amy Kull: “It’s probably one of the top emotional issues because people are so passionate about what they do eat, what they don’t eat, what they put in their bodies... You know, it’s an incredibly emotional issue and I think that it’s emotional on both sides, and let’s see, what happens, especially on the side of activists and consumers; they definitely play to scare tactics and emotions. And the industry reaction often is more cerebral and more fact based and you can’t cite emotion with fact. They need to get more emotion based as well” (Appendix A).
- Lindsey Higgins: “A lot. Especially with some of the more dramatic incidences and the PETA driven stuff, emotion is absolutely tied in there and, you know, it’s tied in to the Dodge commercial... And it can go either way – either in support and educating consumers about Ag but then also continuing to perpetuate some stereotypes and kind of the negative side of things as well... I think one of the challenges on the industry side, again, goes to the fact that we’re not all that cohesive

- in how we go about things... On the consumer side I think it goes back to lack of knowledge or education, lack of awareness about food and food products and where they come from and how they're produced. Because there's that lack of awareness, they see one thing, and it causes a very dramatic response" (Appendix B).
- Scott Vernon: "Huge... It's emotion now, when you think of the power of emotion, agriculture is beginning to understand that more completely in their messaging... And so the messaging is changing there. We still rely on science when we get deep into the issues. But to get their attention we first have to understand the emotional impacts of our messaging" (Appendix C).

4. What strategies and tactics would you use when developing a strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture? Please give an example of a campaign that you think have been effective or ineffective in communicating.

Question #4 was asked to get a description from each respondent about specific ways that communicators in agriculture are taking or should be taking when developing their key messaging in both public relations and marketing. This question was also included to get the experts' insights on any current or past campaigns that have been effective or ineffective in communicating with the publics, and why.

- Amy Kull: "Well, I mean I think a strategy that you absolutely have to have is open dialogue with all of your key stakeholders. You have to be willing to discuss with them and listen to their points of view because they have lots of valid points of view on all different spectrums and issues... [Tactics include] bringing these food opinion leaders actually to the source and letting them ask questions of animal experts, animal welfare experts, veterinarians, air and land quality sustainability type experts,

nutritionists for the animals, that kind of thing and dieticians... Another strategy would be putting a face on farming... [Tactics would be] putting a face on videos and trying to get farmers doing media events, where you actually bring farmers to New York and let the media talk to them and ask any kind of questions about what they're doing in their methods" (Appendix A).

- Lindsey Higgins: "I think the biggest thing is really educating consumers. To get some sort of a long-term, sustainable response it has to be about education. And therefore, helping to mitigate stuff later on when the next scandal or the next food safety scare comes out. I think education is the only one that's going to get you through those bumps. Then, how do you get consumers to have that level of interest and engagement with food and agriculture? That's maybe where the emotional messaging and those opportunities come into play" (Appendix B).
- Scott Vernon: "One, I would work to understand who is the target audience. First, what is the target audience? What is important to them? And then, what is our message to that audience? And stay on message, keep the message simple" (Appendix C).

5. How would you then manage that plan or campaign through integrating:
  - a. Traditional media
  - b. New technology
  - c. Crisis communications

Question #5 was asked to follow the previous question regarding strategies and tactics that should be taken when developing agricultural messaging. It was designed to find ways in which experts and professionals in the agricultural field manage agricultural messaging once it

has been established. Several probes in Question #5 narrowed down previous strategies to include traditional media, new technology and crisis communications.

- Amy Kull: “Well, I would structure a team that includes people who are crisis and issues experts; you want to have social media experts on the team as well, and you want to have people who have a more traditional media relations kind of background... Someone who’s a crisis expert, someone who really has to have deep knowledge of the difference of the food industry, of the regulatory industry, a public affairs background is really helpful because the food produced in this country is overseen by USDA and FDA... You don’t want to abandon traditional media, but for the timeliness and the breaking stories and for a more two-way dialogue, you want to have people who are social media experts and who are always keeping up on the newest communication channels” (Appendix A).
- Lindsey Higgins: “Well, you know I think incorporating all of those things is going to be important. And with that messaging, thinking about consistency across all those different platforms and the response in a crisis situation can’t be dramatically different than your response all along. I think you have to build that consistency throughout the communications process. And then when something does happen, you reiterate those messages that we’ve been saying all along. And only through that process do we really have any hope, I think, of getting the message through to consumers” (Appendix B).
- Scott Vernon: “Well, in terms of crisis communication, the paradigm has shifted, we know that, with social media channels more available now to everybody. That changed the game – we are no longer dependent on mass media to help distribute our

message. And so, as a result of that, we've been able to be more effective with our messaging, more authentic with our messaging, more present. And so in essence we've been more proactive about getting the message out instead of reactive" (Appendix C).

6. How would you measure the success of agricultural messaging? Please provide examples.

Question #6 was specifically designed to gain insight on how professionals in public relations, marketing, and agricultural communications measure the success of agricultural messaging. It was meant to illicit responses that are unique to each professional field, and are subjective in nature.

- Amy Kull: "It's always great to do pre- and post-awareness attitude testing, before you start the campaign and after so you can possibly have some measureable metrics there... I think the very best way to measure the success of the communications campaign is really attitude and awareness. How many people are aware of the fact that 99% of California dairy farms are family owned? Did they go up? How many people... you could do focus groups before and after to see what happens, you can do online surveys of, you know, identifying some of these people who are the food e-vangelists and if you could get them to take an online survey before and after the campaign to see if any of their feelings had changed" (Appendix A).
- Lindsey Higgins: "Ideally, through consumer awareness and consumer understanding, so they're base knowledge level – where the food comes from, and how it is produced. That would be the metric that I'd be looking for. How measureable is that? I don't know, unless you were to survey or take a sample, do that sort of thing. I think

that's the most important thing that we can do, and that's what we should be trying to do throughout the messaging process" (Appendix B).

- Scott Vernon: "Well some of it is going to be in this new environment of social media. You do it through, how large is your audience? What's your exponential reach? And so, the metrics there become likes, comments, interaction, conversation, dialogue, you know that's how you measure some of that... Those are powerful mediums for us to access and to promote. And it's a cost effective way. It's not free, while you might be able to be on those things for free, it takes an investment in time, energy, and intellect to be able to make them work... Ultimately, the real measure of messaging is going to be what happens in policy and with consumers. Buying behavior and voting behavior are two measures of how successful you are"

(Appendix C).

### **Agricultural Communication Research Questions**

For this research project, the following six research questions were create for the study to determine what current practices and strategies are being used among public relations, marketing, and agricultural communication professionals and collect expert opinion on the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

#### **Research question #1: How does the agriculture industry provide factual understanding to the consumer through public relations?**

- "PR activity is broader than a communications technique and broader than specialized PR programs, such as media relations [and emphasizes] overall planning, execution and evaluation of an organization's communication with both external and internal publics"

(Lages & Simkin, 2003, p. 298)



- Public relations then, must include “a multiplicity of values in its strategic goals,” and must consider corporate social responsibility. (Jensen, 2001, p. 133)

**Research question #2: What are the gaps in the public relations process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving key messaging?**

- “The communication activities of organizations in the agri-food industry confirms an extremely fragmented delivery, particularly to consumers, and a distinct lack of resources to effectively communicate the information that exists and evaluate its impact on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of different target groups” (Duffy et al., 2005, p. 17)
- “It is important to note that food safety programs are often justified on the basis that they educate and empower audiences by providing useful information to help avert risks. Under these circumstances, it would be expected that increased reliance on mass media for food safety information would result in *lower* levels of perceived risk. The finding that increased reliance on food safety information tends to result in higher levels of perceived risk raises some question as to the effectiveness of current communication programs” (Tucker et al., 2006, p. 135)

**Research question #3: How does emotion effect agricultural key messaging, and what are the key differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?**

- “While consumers' concerns are broadening and deepening, their awareness of agriculture is becoming more limited. They recognize that the food supply is among the safest; however, they want it to be even better. Attitudes toward new technology such as irradiation and biotechnology tend to be more fluid; consumers are initially resistant, but

become more favorable with additional information about personal benefits such as improved quality and better taste” (Bennett, 1995, p. 16).

- “Consumers’ fear is enhanced by the numerous fear appeals concerning [Genetically Modified Foods] that appear in the mass media” (Laros & Steenkamp, 2004, p. 890)
- “Understanding farming practice as the integration of the mosaic of concerns in the light of a wide variety of moral experiences would foster public appreciation of the mixed motives of farmers” (Driessen, 2012, p. 176)

**Research question #4: How does one develop a public relations strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?**

- “Not everyone will see or hear the bad news about a company or product. It also means you can’t count on people seeing or hearing the good news” (Lattimore et al., 2012, p. 1)
- “When possible, quantify risks: Providing appropriate quantifications can be seen as part of what is required to make information about a risk comprehensible to its recipients” (Peter & Sven, 2011, p. 313).
- “Tell [a] story using the words and the context that will resonate with consumers, elected officials and other opinion leaders” (Lochridge, 2012, p. 46).

**Research question #5: How can agricultural communicators manage their key messaging?**

- “Some corporations have joined with public interest groups and government on issues they hold in common. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce worked with Nader's Congress Watch and the Sierra Club against proposed disclosure requirements of grass-roots lobbying activities. Similarly, in 1985, 41 environmental and health groups joined with the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, and companies such as Shell, to reach agreement on amendments to pesticide control legislation” (Shephard et al., 1997).

- “At the moment that an incident takes place the organization needs to think about the crisis from the point-of-view of the public and the media. The organization needs to base its communications on the perceptions of the public and not on its own understanding of the event” (Gillingham & Noizet, 2007, p. 545).

**Research question #6: How can success and widespread knowledge of key messaging in agricultural communications be measured?**

- “We recommend a strategic approach to create a media brand. The media organization should articulate a concept that will guide its creation of contacts for the media brand... The audience’s ideas about the concept create expectations, which can also affect their experiences with the brand, including the actions they take beyond it and any co-creation of content with it” (Mersey et al., 2010, p. 35).
- “Combining the capability of content analysis, semiotic analysis with neural nets and data mining provides some very powerful analytical tools to the PR, and in particular, media relations practitioner” (Phillips, 2001, p. 77).

**Agricultural Communication Data**

For this study, it was important to discuss what other experts said due to the relatively small amount of information that is currently available on the topic of agricultural communication. In order to acquire this data, Amy Kull, a public relations expert, Lindsey Higgins, a marketing expert, and Scott Vernon, an agricultural communication expert were interviewed for the study. They were each asked identical questions from a questionnaire designed to help answer the original research questions in an interview setting. The following tables present the respondents’ answers in the form of their individual perspectives on the original research questions.

**Research question #1: How does the agriculture industry provide factual understanding to the consumer through public relations?**

This research question was studied in order to analyze the current literature that exists on the topic of agricultural communication and how they are currently presenting their messaging to the consumer in an attempt to foster learning and complete understanding of said messaging. According to Jensen (2001), there are three types of companies who present their messaging in distinctive ways: the economically successful but socially innocent company, the economically successful and legal company, and the economically successful, legal and responsible company. The focus of management must include “value-based management, internal and external negotiations, value-defining processes and ‘the multiple bottom line’” (Jensen, 2001, p. 5).

This question was studied again in the questionnaire to gain insight in the way professionals in different fields would gauge the effectiveness of agricultural communication in the state it is currently. It was meant to build upon the existing literature, which provides multiple case studies on agricultural communication influencing consumer behavior, whether that is a positive or negative change. The question was asked to clarify current practices and strategies being used in the agricultural industry.

Table 1 summarizes the answers to this question, and show that each expert has somewhat of a different response to how the agricultural industry presents their messaging. Both Scott Vernon and Amy Kull believe that messaging is about the farmer’s story, while Lindsey Higgins believes we’ve gotten further from this specific messaging. All three experts agree that the agricultural industry has a long way to go in order to present a cohesive message to the consumers and really educate them on the issues, but Kull believes that the industry has come further in their efforts, as seen by agricultural companies winning more and more awards.

Table 1

*Providing Factual Understanding to the Consumer Through Public Relations*

Respondent	How the agricultural industry presents its messaging	The effectiveness of messaging on educating consumers
Amy Kull	Starting to present a cohesive face to consumers, showing the farmers behind the food	Ag teams win multiple awards, shows they have measureable results
Lindsey Higgins	We've got further from the farm, don't have that connection; lack of consistency because of Ag diversity	Hard to communicate one clear message when consumers are faced with so many other messages
Scott Vernon	Commodity specific messaging within agriculture; historically has been about a family farmer	So many different messages that consumers get confused about what Ag is trying to say

**Research question #2: What are the gaps in the public relations process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving key messaging?**

This question was asked to begin to investigate the potential breaches in the communication process that prevent consumers from understanding the messaging of the agricultural industry. The literature that currently exists on this topic suggests that a gap exists between consumers and the agri-food industry on topics that include: support for agriculture, sustainable food production and sourcing systems, and the link between food and health (Duffy, et al., 2005, p. 17). In a study done by Tucker, Whaley & Sharp (2006), it was also found that consumers rely heavily on media for information on agriculture, and that there are negative connotations associated with the industry.

The question was studied to get a description from each expert on where they believe the gap exists, and current examples of said gap in the agricultural industry. It was designed to build

on the ideas discussed in research question #1, and start to home in on what the agricultural industry could be doing to reach their target markets.

Table 2

*Gaps in the Process that Cause Misinterpretation of Key Messaging*

Respondent	Where the gap exists in agricultural communication	Example of how the gap effects messaging
Amy Kull	Gap is in reaching food e-vangelists, who have the power to take down an industry and are difficult to have an open dialogue with	Pink slime – within 24 hours of announcement, there was a policy change
Lindsey Higgins	Getting interest from consumers, breaking through misconceptions and stereotypes in agriculture	Dodge Super Bowl Commercial – presented in a way consumers connect to
Scott Vernon	Between the producer and consumer; by the time message reaches consumers, it’s different than when it came off the farm	Prop 2 – one company made changes, HSUS still rejected that company

In Table 2, all three experts agreed that the gap in the communications process exists between the consumer and the producer, whether that is to gain interest in consumers, or educate them on the facts, rather than misconceptions in the agricultural industry. Kull and Vernon provided examples of how that gap effects policy change, while Higgins provided an example of how the industry filled the gap to provide messaging that consumers understand and connect with.

**Research question #3: How does emotion effect agricultural key messaging, and what are the key differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?**

This question was studied to determine how much of an impact emotion has in agricultural messaging. According to the literature, “while consumers’ concerns are broadening

and deepening, their awareness of agriculture is becoming more limited. They recognize that the food supply is among the safest; however, they want it to be even better” (Bennett, 1995, p. 16). Bennett also discusses two types of consumers that are beginning to emerge when relating to agricultural issues: marketplace activists and social activists, who each shape and modify their buying behavior due to different factors.

The question was also posed to the three experts in the fields of public relations, marketing and agricultural communication to further gauge the importance of emotion in this industry. While the literature touches on this issue and discusses the impact of consumer emotions in agriculture, more expert opinions are needed since emotion could be a huge factor that plays into how agricultural messaging should be developed and managed. It also aimed to examine the differences in how the industry reacts to an agricultural issue as compared to the consumers.

Table 3

*Agricultural Industry Emotions vs. Consumer Emotions*

Respondent	Industry Emotions	Consumer Emotions	Example of the impact of emotion
Amy Kull	More cerebral/fact; need to get more emotion based as well	People are passionate about what they eat; Activists and consumers play to scare tactics and emotions	Prop 37 – defeated, but got tons of votes; Ag is politicized
Lindsey Higgins	Not cohesive in messaging, particularly related to production livestock	Lack of awareness about the issues, which causes a dramatic response	PETA Videos – attacks Ag, rather than educating consumers
Scott Vernon	Defensive about how they are portrayed in the media; misunderstood	Often times hear only “whining,” so they respond to emotion very much so	Dodge Super Bowl Commercial – huge response on social media

Table 3 describes the responses given by the three experts about emotion in agriculture. Each expert agrees that industry reactions to agricultural issues are not ideal, but have different reasons why. Vernon believes the industry is defensive about how they are portrayed and Higgins thinks, again, that they are not cohesive in messaging. Kull believes that their responses are more fact-based, and need to tap more into emotion. On the consumer side, each expert agrees that passion and lack of awareness together result in dramatic responses to agricultural issues.

**Research question #4: How does one develop a public relations strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?**

This question was studied to examine what strategies and tactics should be used in a public relations campaign to effectively communicate key messaging to the consumer. The literature on this topic suggests that it is essential for companies to remain open and honest, disclose incentives and conflicts of interest, take all relevant knowledge into consideration, quantify risks, and take the rights of individuals and groups seriously (Peter & Sven, 2011, p. 313). Researchers stress that one must “tell a story using the words and the context that will resonate with consumers, elected officials and other opinion leaders” (Lochridge, 2012, p. 46).

The question was also studied with the experts in the interview process to determine what strategies and tactics are currently being used in the three industries to develop a communications plan that benefits both the producer/company and the consumer. By evaluating their responses, we can begin to develop how the agricultural industry should be presenting its key messaging to consumers to reach the largest audience, as well as educate them.

Table 4 describes the respondents’ answers to ways to manage agricultural key messaging through strategies and tactics. Each had their own unique ideas: Kull believes an open



dialogue with key stakeholders is crucial; Higgins argues that emotional messaging will help consumers connect to the message; Vernon stresses really understanding your target market and what motivates them.

Table 4

*Developing an Effective Public Relations Strategic Plan*

Respondent	Strategies and tactics that should be used include...	Example of an effective campaign
Amy Kull	An open dialogue with key stakeholders – town hall meetings, education videos; Putting a face on farming – grower videos, farm fam trips	USFRA – open tent policy that frames a discussion that is open to everybody
Lindsey Higgins	Education, getting consumers interested in agricultural issues; Emotional messaging to make a connection	Farmers Feed My Soul – educating consumers and bringing back awareness
Scott Vernon	Work to understand the target audience – who it is, what’s important to them, the message that relates to them	Farmers Feed My Soul – narrow demographic so there’s no distractions with those who don’t understand messaging

**Research question #5: How can agricultural communicators manage their key messaging?**

This question was studied to further develop what current practices and techniques are being used in the agricultural industry to present their key messaging to the consumer. The current literature on this topic stresses that a company needs to be proactive, rather than reactive with their key publics when it comes to agricultural issues. This is done through four ways, according to a study done by Shephard, Betz and O’Connell (1997): through cooperation, participation, negotiation and direct anticipation. Other authors suggest that it is essential for an organization to have a four-point plan when managing a crisis: think of the public and media, act fast, be straight, and show compassion and care.

This question was posed to the experts as well to gain further insight into different ways agricultural messaging should be managed in the industry. While the literature presents key topics and clear-cut values for managing a campaign, an expert each in public relations, marketing and agricultural communication can provide key information into how professionals can better communicate in the agriculture industry.

Table 5

*Managing Agricultural Key Messaging*

Respondent	Managing Agricultural Messaging	Traditional Media	Social Media	Crisis Communications
Amy Kull	Structure a team of experts in these three categories; Integration of message across platforms	Some people still utilize this – don't abandon	For breaking stories and two-way dialogue	Need someone with deep knowledge of food industry
Lindsey Higgins	Need consistency across platforms; Reiterate the message we've been saying throughout	Build consistency throughout the communications process	Make sure to have consistent online presence; don't be reactive	Response in a crisis can't be dramatically different than all along
Scott Vernon	Be proactive, rather than reactive, about getting the message across	No longer dependent on mass media to help distribute message	Allows us to be more effective, authentic, and present in messaging	Paradigm has shifted with introduction of social media

Table 5 describes each respondent's answer on the topic of managing agricultural key messaging. All experts agree that in order to be successful, key messaging must include an integration of traditional media, social media and crisis communications. Vernon believes that matters have shifted with the introduction of social media – an organization can now be more authentic and present, rather than waiting on mass media to distribute the message. Kull believes

in having a team of experts in traditional media, social media, crisis issues or public affairs and nutrition experts to help manage and maintain key messaging throughout. Higgins stresses that it is essential to remain consistent with messaging, whether or not the organization is in a time of crisis.

**Research question #6: How can success and widespread knowledge of key messaging in agricultural communications be measured?**

Question six was studied to determine ways in which agricultural messaging can be measured on a concrete scale in order to conclude if said messaging was effective in reaching and educating consumers and target markets. The literature on this topic focuses mostly on what organizations can be doing to increase engagement with readers. “Personal engagement is manifested in experiences that are similar to those that people have with print newspapers and magazines... Social-interactive engagement, however, is more specific to Web sites” (Malthouse & Calder, 2010, p. 45). Phillips (2001), lays out tools for companies to use when measuring the success of campaigns, which include data, information and knowledge. He argues “the relatively new and inexpensive PR tools that are now available offer the practitioner much more powerful capabilities” (Phillips, 2001, p. 77).

This question was again studied to hear expert opinions on how to measure the success of PR campaigns in the agricultural field. As the literature suggests, there are new and innovative tools that PR practitioners in general can use when measuring the success of any kind of campaign. By gaining insight from the experts in the agricultural industry in public relations, marketing and agricultural communications, we can establish the best and most useful measurement tools for the industry.

Table 6

*Measuring the Success of Agricultural Communications*

Respondent	Measuring success of agricultural key messaging	Example(s) of successful campaigns
Amy Kull	Best way is to look at attitude and awareness – pre- and post-awareness attitude testing; website visits, video views, likes, shares	California Milk Advisory Board Dairyman Docs – shows a face behind farming, gained a lot of attention
Lindsey Higgins	Consumer awareness and understanding – comparing base knowledge level to level after campaign	Chipotle’s Back to the Start Campaign – clear in what they were presenting and what values they hold
Scott Vernon	Real measure is through what happens in policy and in consumers; Social Media – audience size, exponential reach (through likes, comments, shares)	Prop 2 vs. Prop 37 – messaging <i>not</i> effective in Prop 2 (it failed), messaging effective in Prop 37 (it passed)

Table 6 outlines the answers that each respondent gave in response to how to effectively measure the success of an agricultural communication campaign. All three experts agreed that the best way to measure success, and where change can really happen, is with the consumers – what is the difference in attitude before and after the campaign? Vernon also stressed that a huge measure is what happens in policy, as seen in the differences in messaging between Prop 2, which failed, and Prop 37, which passed.

## Chapter 5

### *Discussion and Recommendations*

#### **Summary**

This study was performed in order to uncover the mysteries and misconceptions that are associated with the agricultural industry, and what professionals in the communication sphere can do to reach and educate consumers with their key messaging. Today, agriculture is a heated topic that is consistently discussed in both traditional media and new technology, such as with bloggers. With the literature and case studies focusing on agriculture's portrayal in the media and what communicators can be doing to further their efforts, it was essential to obtain data from experts in public relations, marketing and agricultural communications regarding their opinions on successful agricultural messaging.

To find more information on current strategies and tactics used by practitioners in these fields, one expert in each was interviewed based on a single questionnaire designed to answer the following research questions for the study:

1. How does the agriculture industry provide factual understanding to the consumer through public relations?
2. What are the gaps in the public relations process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving key messaging?
3. How does emotion effect agricultural key messaging, and what are the key differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?
4. How does one develop a public relations strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?

5. How can agricultural communicators manage their key messaging?
6. How can success and widespread knowledge of key messaging in agricultural communications be measured?

Each research question was altered slightly in order to make each applicable for interviews with each respondent. The questionnaire elicited a variety of responses that were tied to the existing literature on agricultural communication campaigns and strategies.

## **Discussion**

After analyzing the data from Chapter 4, and looking at connections between respondents' answers with the existing literature on the topic found in Chapter 2, it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the following original research questions.

### **Research question #1: How does the agriculture industry provide factual understanding to the consumer through public relations?**

All three experts agreed that the way that the agricultural industry provides their key messaging to the consumer is not effective, and they have to really come together to form a cohesive message that works across platforms. Higgins thought it was hard to communicate when consumers are faced with so many other messages, Kull said they are beginning to show the face behind farmers and Vernon agreed that historically agricultural messaging has focused on the family farmer and rancher.

The literature provides a broader overview of what public relations and communicators should be doing to effectively communicate. Public relations must include “a multiplicity of values in its strategic goals” (Jensen, 2001, p. 135). Vernon argues that the industry “understands now that they have to be better at key messages and [they] look to trade organizations and farmer/producer organizations as well to provide some of that key messaging.”

Overall, one can conclude that in order for the agricultural industry to provide factual understanding to the consumer, they must employ a variety of strategies and tactics that really speak to the consumer and show the emotion behind the message, most likely looking to the farmers, and who is producing the food.

**Research question #2: What are the gaps in the public relations process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving key messaging?**

Question 2 elicited varying responses from each expert, though they concluded that the gap exists mostly between the producer and the consumer. Kull believes the gap is in reaching food activists or e-vangelists that can bring down the industry. Higgins believes the gap is in reaching and educating the consumers, and Vernon agrees that by the time the messaging reaches the consumer, it could be completely different than when the producer created it.

The literature reflects this statement, agreeing that the gap exists between producers and consumers, and that the agricultural industry needs to start doing things differently if they want to reach consumers. “The communication activities of organizations in the agri-food industry confirms an extremely fragmented delivery, particularly to consumers...” (Duffy et al., 2005, p. 17)

Generally, then, we can conclude that the gap in the public relations process that prevents consumers from receiving key messaging is due to the producer, and the communication tools that they employ to get their message across. Kull argues that consumers or activists “don’t always want to listen – they don’t seem to, it’s very hard for us to have a dialogue with them because they don’t always want to listen.” Finding ways that will make these types of consumers listen and understand the messaging will be important in the agricultural industry.

**Research question #3: How does emotion effect agricultural key messaging, and what are the key differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way the agricultural industry is portrayed in the media?**

Every expert agreed that emotion plays a huge part in agricultural messaging, and is one of the most important factors that communicators must look to when developing said messaging. Kull stresses that agriculture is one of the top emotional issues since people are so passionate about food, while on the industry side their emotions are powered more by facts and knowledge. Higgins agrees that emotion can go either way, either in support and education of consumers or perpetuating stereotypes and the negative side. Vernon concludes that the industry still relies on science to communicate, but that emotion is becoming a much bigger part of the puzzle in reaching consumers.

The literature mostly agrees, stating, “consumers’ fear is enhanced by the numerous fear appeals concerning [Genetically Modified Foods] that appear in the mass media” (Laros & Steenkamp, 2004, p. 890). Kull concurs: “especially on the side of activists and consumers, they definitely play to scare tactics and emotions. And the industry reaction often is more cerebral and more fact based and you can’t cite emotion with fact.”

Overall, it’s important to understand the huge impact that emotion has on agricultural messaging. If communicators can find a way to work this into their campaigns and key messaging in a way that can reach and influence consumers, the industry will go much farther in their efforts.



**Research question #4: How does one develop a public relations strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?**

Each respondent had a different answer for how to develop a strategic plan in agriculture, but they provided good insight that can be tied together to create a plan overall. Kull states that it's important to stay transparent and keep an open dialogue with key stakeholders. Higgins believes that it all goes back to educating the consumer, and finding ways to do so. Vernon stresses the importance of understanding who your target market is and what motivates them.

The literature overall demonstrates that it's important to "tell [a] story using the words and the context that will resonate with consumers, elected officials and other opinion leaders" (Lochridge, 2012, p. 46). This is similar to what Higgins stated, in that "to get some sort of a long-term, sustainable response it has to be about education."

Overall, it's important to find strategies and tactics when creating a public relations strategic plan that will educate the consumer on agricultural issues in the long run, rather than produce a short-term change. It's also important to really focus on your target market, rather than trying to appeal to a large group of people. Vernon describes his own work with the "I Love Farmers, They Feed My Soul" campaign by stating: "having that narrow demographic that we have, we're not distracted by those who don't understand or share our message. It makes sense to our target audience."

**Research question #5: How can agricultural communicators manage their key messaging?**

All three experts had a variety of responses for this question. Kull believes in structuring a team with multiple experts in each field (traditional media, new technology and crisis communications) to make sure the industry provides one clear message to the consumer. Higgins believes that incorporating all three strategies will be very important, and in addition the industry

must “reiterate those messages that we’ve been saying all along.” Vernon sees that there has been a shift in crisis communication with the introduction of social media, which makes it easier to stay more authentic in messaging.

The literature focuses more on crisis communication, and stresses that “at the moment that an incident takes place the organization needs to think about the crisis from the point-of-view of the public and the media” (Gillinham & Noizet, 2007, p. 545). This idea is reiterated in Kull’s response. “Someone who’s a crisis expert, someone who really has to have deep knowledge of the difference of the food industry, of the regulatory industry, a public affairs background is really helpful because the food produced in this country is overseen by USDA and FDA.

Overall, when managing agricultural key messaging, it is important to look to traditional media, new technology and crisis communications in order to effectively communicate with your target audiences. As both the literature and the experts suggest, a combination of these three will be important in integration your campaign across a variety of platforms to best reach the consumer.

**Research question #6: How can success and widespread knowledge of key messaging in agricultural communications be measured?**

Each respondent had a similar response to this question, and agreed that there are specific tools that communicators can use to gauge the success of a particular agricultural campaign. Both Higgins and Kull agreed that the best way to measure success is through consumer attitudes and awareness, which can be done through pre- and post-awareness testing. Vernon and Kull stressed the importance of social media influence, which can be measured with likes, comments and shares.

The literature reflects similar trends, while giving specific tools that can be used in the PR field. “Combining the capability of content analysis, semiotic analysis with neural nets and data mining provides some very powerful analytical tools to the PR, and in particular, media relations practitioner” (Phillips, 2001, p. 77). The literature also stresses that companies take a more strategic approach in developing campaigns in order to determine the success of specific parts later.

In conclusion, it is important to gauge consumer awareness of an agricultural issue before a campaign is started, and again at the end. By measuring the success of the campaign throughout the process, rather than just at the end, practitioners will be able to determine exactly what strategies, tactics and messages are reaching the consumer.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

After completion of this study, substantial data has been collected and analyzed on the topic of the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging. Given the information, it is important to highlight the most interesting content and present it for future public relations, marketing, and agricultural communication professionals. Recommendations for practice include paying attention to emotion in agricultural messaging, engaging in two-way dialogue with consumers and key stakeholders, and creating an integrated message across multiple platforms.

#### **Use emotion to your advantage.**

Everyone in the agricultural industry, or those directly affected by it, agree on one thing – emotion is huge. In order to reach markets with your messaging to educate them on agricultural issues, professionals must incorporate emotion into all parts of their campaign. As Bennett (1995) discussed, consumer concerns are broadening and deepening, but they still want their

food to be even better. Amy Kull, a vice president at Ketchum mentions, “Especially on the side of activists and consumers, they definitely play to scare tactics and emotions. And the industry reaction often is more cerebral and more fact based and you can’t cite emotion with fact. They need to get more emotion based as well.” The best way to educate the consumers must be through emotional messages that they can connect to.

As discussed by Lochridge (2012), it’s important to tell a story with words and context that resonates with key publics. One example that stood out for Lindsey Higgins, Cal Poly Agribusiness professor, was the 2013 Super Bowl commercial for Dodge RAM, “God Made a Farmer.” She discussed that even though only 2% of the population is involved in production, but this commercial started trending on Twitter right away. Dodge wasn’t just appealing to the farmer, but bringing feelings of nostalgia to all consumers. Scott Vernon, Cal Poly Agricultural Communications professor, reflected this sentiment. Tapping in to consumer emotions in any way possible, whether it’s bringing to the surface old memories, or putting a family face on farming, is crucial when developing agricultural messaging.

**Engage in two-way dialogue.**

Consumers are faced with a variety of messages today, and many times they become confused as to what the real message is. One of the most important things communicators in the agricultural field can be doing to dissolve confusion is to engage in a two-way dialogue, not just with consumers, but with key stakeholders as well. This idea is reinforced through multiple studies in the literature. Peter and Sven (2011), stress to be open and honest to build credibility and trust. Kull agrees, and continues: “You have to be willing to discuss with them and listen to their points of view because they have lots of valid points of view on all different spectrums and

issues.” Shephard, Betz and O’Connell (1997) strengthen this idea, and agree that companies must engage with key publics by participating with them in the planning process.

The first step to two-way dialogue is understanding your target market. Vernon begins by asking, “Who is the target audience? What is important to them? And then, what is our message to that audience?” By understanding whom you’re trying to reach, engaging in conversation becomes easier. One way to begin a two-way dialogue is with family farm trips, similar to models California Milk Advisory Board have used in the past. By inviting media contacts on a trip to a family farm, they are able to interface directly with the farmers behind their food, and get answers to any of their questions. Engaging in transparent conversations like this will help uncover the myths that exist in agriculture, and provide a more direct channel to consumers.

#### **Develop an integrated message across platforms.**

When developing an agricultural campaign, take into account different platforms and approaches that should be used: traditional media (newspapers, magazines), new technology (social media, blogs) and a platform for crisis communications. By utilizing all three, an agricultural company provides an integrated message that can reach consumers and key publics a multitude of ways, ensuring that the correct message is heard. Mersey, Malthouse and Calder (2010) outlined two types of engagement that increase readership: online, and personal and social-interactive. In order to take advantage of both, multiple tools must be used. With the rise of social media, it’s easy to get carried away – but don’t abandon traditional media. Kull agrees: “Some people still do like to sit down on the couch and read a glossy magazine, and have an in-depth article that’s in their hands. So you don’t want to abandon traditional media, but for the timeliness and the breaking stories and for a more two-way dialogue, you want to have people

who are social media experts and who are always keeping up on the newest communication channels.”

In terms of crisis communication, it's important to have a clear, consistent message that doesn't change. Gillingham and Noizet (2007), advise that companies have a four-point plan for managing key messaging in times of crisis. Higgins concurs that the response in a crisis situation can't be dramatically different than what the company has been saying all along. Vernon concludes that with social media, “we've been able to be more effective with our messaging, more authentic with our messaging, more present. And so in essence we've been more proactive about getting the message out instead of reactive.” Integrating multiple strategies is crucial in educating consumers about agricultural issues.

### **Study Conclusion**

In conclusion, given the general findings of this study, more qualitative research could be done in order to further advancements in the topic of the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging. Data collection, interviews with experts in multiple fields, and case studies should be conducted based on the diversity of the agricultural industry, and issues that continue to dominate the media and the consumer mind. Overall, the study presented the collective opinions of different experts in related fields and a review of existing literature on similar topics. Since the agricultural industry is so diverse with different commodities and products, however, the study and overall recommendations for the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging can't be applied to all professionals. The study does however serve as a tool for public relations, marketing and agricultural communications experts who are interest in agricultural communication strategies. It also serves as a guide for agricultural producers who are looking to

connect with consumers in order to educate them on agricultural issues that have great importance to consumers. Anyone interested in the misconceptions in agriculture and how to better the industry's key messaging may use this study for further research.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Transcripts: Amy Kull*

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a public relations perspective based on a questionnaire about the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

Interviewer: Kimberly Taylor  
Respondent: Senior Vice President and Group Manager at Ketchum Public Relations  
(Amy Kull)  
Date of Interview: 2/26/2013

#### *Interview Transcription:*

Kimberly Taylor: “How would you, as an expert in public relations, describe how the agricultural industry presents key messaging to the consumer?”

Amy Kull: “Well, I think that right now the agricultural industry is finally really getting together to present a more cohesive face to consumers, more of showing all of the farmers that are behind the food that they produce and making sure people know that most of the farms are still family farms, even if they may be really big. They’re trying to combat the whole factory farm image, so clients like the United State Farmers and Rancher’s Alliance and others... when you look at a website of almost any commodity board and a lot of food brands, they’re showing the farmer. And we know from research that people love farmers they just don’t love *farming*. They don’t love the farming practices that are practiced today, um, that are conventional farming practices. You know, there’s definitely a difference in the way that local, locally produced and organic farmers present themselves versus conventional farmers. Conventional farmers are just trying to do a better job of getting their story out. They also care about the land, and the air and the quality and how they treat their animals because they want to leave their farms to their families, too. They live on those farms. They’re just trying to put a human face on farming.”

KT: “And do you feel like that kind of approach helps foster learning and more complete understanding of the messaging for the consumers?”

AK: “Well, the research that has been done for USFRA, I don’t work on that account but I look at it all the time, is showing that the consumers are appreciating the open dialogue that they’re willing to have, that they are um... Can you repeat the question? I want to make sure I’m answering the right question, answering it right for you.”

KT: “You’re doing fine, but I asked, do you feel like that kind of approach to how they’re presenting the key messaging is fostering learning and complete understanding for the consumers of that messaging?”

AK: “I think that it’s starting to. I think that some of the proprietary research that Dave’s done is showing that it is starting to, and the fact that the USFRA team is winning award after award after award, they wouldn’t be winning them if they didn’t have measurable results. So, I think

that people... right now in the world of food is just more politicized than it's ever been, and you can see that in things like Prop 37 in California, the GMO proposition in which it was defeated last fall. But it was still, got tons and tons of votes, but just because it was defeated in California, but now there are, gosh, dozens of propositions that are similar to it popping up in other states in the country. So you know, people are paying attention to all of the different food issues, from environmental and sustainability to GMO and health and obesity. So, boy, the farmers have a long way to go, but at least they're trying very hard to be transparent about what they do, and engage in a dialogue with people, which is so important these days."

KT: "Definitely. And kind of going off whole Prop 37 and that kind of thing, how much do you think emotion affects agricultural key messaging and what are the differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way that they're portrayed in the media?"

AK: "Well, emotion I think is HUGE. I don't think you can get... it's probably one of the top emotional issues because people are so passionate about what they do eat, what they don't eat, what they put in their bodies. You know, people who are anti-animal agriculture, um, the PETAs of the world and the US Humane Society people, they're *incredibly* passionate about how animal agriculture is done in America and around the world. But, you know, then there are people who are on diets and they don't want to eat, um, gluten, whether or not they have celiac disease, you know but it's part of who they are, 'oh you know, I don't eat gluten!' You know, it's an incredibly emotional issue and I think that it's emotional on both sides, and let's see, what happens, especially on the side of activists and consumers; they definitely play to scare tactics and emotions. And the industry reaction often is more cerebral and more fact based and you can't cite emotion with fact. They need to get more emotion based as well."

KT: "Mhmm, definitely. And where do you see the gaps in the communications process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving an agricultural company's key messaging and that kind of thing?"

AK: "Ok, um... I think one of the things, something that we've identified at Ketchum, we've been talking about with Linda Eatherton, kind of getting the issues and the food and nutrition groups together, is that there seems to, we feel that there is, in between what the marketers are saying and the consumers are saying and the different issues... that there's a group of people who are becoming activists that are really vocal. It doesn't necessarily mean just the Michael Pollan's of the world, but these are people who are bloggers and who listen to some Alpha moms in certain neighborhoods; they're the people who are really really emotionally involved in the food world. And the gap is in reaching them; we're calling them food e-vangelists, like an e-vite or an e-mail. These are the people who can take down an industry quickly, like with the pink slime. This is a great example that I've heard used before. So the gaps in the communications process I think is us reaching these people because they have so much influence and they kind of set the agenda for what's discussed. But they don't always want to listen – they don't seem to, it's very hard for us to have a dialogue with them because they tend to be very set in their ways and because they're so passionate, sometimes that makes you not as open to hearing the other side. So, finding ways to bring the conventional agriculture side and the farmer's side to these people, it's a gap that needs to be addressed. You know, if you want to use a great example of just the power of somebody like this, now this is a big deal person, but Jamie Oliver first

identified this pink slime, that is was in the school food service, I mean that basically whoever, I don't know who coined the term pink slime but they were brilliant. This is the by-product of ground beef making and stuff and it's *always* been in ground beef, but pink slime sounds so disgusting. They identified it within 24 hours, so he made it an issue, and these food e-vangelists and bloggers and people got on board, and some of them are traditional columnists, but a lot of them are just bloggers who are paying attention. Within 24 hours of him making that announcement and the fact that these food e-vangelists got out there and let everybody know and they put so much pressure on Washington that the USDA changed its policy about buying meat in school food service and they said they'd no longer buy ground beef that contains pink slime. Now, that's *US Government*, in 24 hours from announcement to a policy change. It's *unbelievable* how much power these people have."

KT: "That's crazy."

AK: "I know, it's an excellent example, I don't know what question you could use it for but it's definitely a good one to do some research on."

KT: "Ya, definitely, that really helps a lot. Um, changing gears a little bit... What strategies and tactics would you use in developing a strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?"

AK: "Well, I mean I think a strategy that you absolutely have to have is open dialogue with all of your key stakeholders. You have to be willing to discuss with them and listen to their points of view because they have lots of valid points of view on all different spectrums and issues. So, one strategy would be to engage key stakeholders in open and transparent dialogue about food production methods. And so tactics that would fall under that would be things like town hall meetings that USFRA is having around the country or Farm Fam trips like we do for CMAB – bringing these food opinion leaders actually to the source and letting them ask questions of animal experts, animal welfare experts, veterinarians, air and land quality sustainability type experts, nutritionists for the animals, that kind of thing and dieticians. You know, doing educational videos that you could post on websites and on YouTube... so those would be tactics that would work under this dialogue strategy, and making sure that, you know, using social media and answering questions and making sure that you have somebody, an informed person, on your end and on your team that can answer questions in a timely manner and not just hide them or get them off of a Facebook post unless they're really wrong and inflammatory. Another strategy would be putting a face on farming. And tactics for putting a face on farming, um, putting a human, family type face on farming, so people don't just think it's just these machines. Tactics for that are grower videos, to produce, CMAB had those Dairyman Docs, they're beautiful, if you want to link to those. I know the California Strawberry Commission has done a few, I mean, probably almost any agricultural company. Putting a face on videos and trying to get farmers doing media events, where you actually bring farmers to New York and let the media talk to them and ask any kind of questions about what they're doing in their methods. Maybe another tactic could be to bring student journalists on the farm, and do some kind of a fellowship or an internship in the summer, where you've got student bloggers or student journalists to actually see what it's like to produce food, and report on it – 'A Day in the Life of Farming' and do it for a summer. Those are some things you can do, some examples of tactics. Getting to

know the farmers and report or talk about who these people are. They're not just nameless, faceless corporations. Another strategy... Here's a good one they use with USFRA is they have an open tent policy where all types of food producers are welcome, so that they don't try to say one way's better than another way, to kind of frame the discussion so that there is room for everybody. You've got the people who don't have any money and they need food to be cheap, and they need to be fed, as well as people who might have more money and they can have community supported agriculture delivered to their house, or maybe they have a little more time to attend a community garden or that kind of thing. Having a really large tent that encompasses everybody, that doesn't vilify any one segment, is an important thing. To take the high road."

KT: "How would you then manage that kind of plan or campaign through integrating traditional media, new technology and especially crisis communication?"

AK: "Well, I would structure a team that includes people who are crisis and issues experts; you want to have social media experts on the team as well, and you want to have people who have a more traditional media relations kind of background. So I think that structuring a team is important because it's hard for everybody to be an expert in all things. I mean, you definitely want to use both traditional and digital media for this kind of a campaign. Some people still do like to sit down on the couch and read a glossy magazine, and have an in-depth article that's in their hands. So you don't want to abandon traditional media, but for the timeliness and the breaking stories and for a more two-way dialogue, you want to have people who are social media experts and who are always keeping up on the newest communication channels. And then, someone who's a crisis expert, someone who really has to have deep knowledge of the difference of the food industry, of the regulatory industry, a public affairs background is really helpful because the food produced in this country is overseen by USDA and FDA. You need to have nutrition experts too, to make sure that they can address the obesity epidemic. So I think structuring a team that has people who have deep knowledge in all of those different areas is a good way to go. So, with a great team like that, integration across... make sure that you have an integrated message across platforms so that your campaign looks the same, whether its on three different TV commercials, that you're telling the same story and using the same sounds and images and taglines. But also, making sure that you're integrated across platforms so that your TV ad, and your website all looks like a cohesive campaign. Whether it's a traditional print ad or your Facebook page, or if it's your radio ad with the same tagline or something."

KT: "And how would you measure the success of an agricultural messaging campaign? Please provide examples of ones that you think have been really successful in the past."

AK: "Ok... I think measuring success, if, let's pretend that we have money and a big ad campaign... it's always great to do pre- and post-awareness attitude testing, before you start the campaign and after so you can possibly have some measureable metrics there... you could say 'we improved/there was a 15 percentage point improvement in consumers saying that they think the US farming industry is headed in the right direction.' Those kinds of things, that's a really fantastic tool. You could also measure success by, if you have a campaign and you want people to go visit your documentaries, your online videos of these farmers, then you want to have visits to the website, who actually watched the video, how long they watched it, number of visits if you have a Facebook campaign, the number of likes, people who are Twitter followers... those kinds

of basic things. But I think the very best way to measure the success of the communications campaign is really attitude and awareness. How many people are aware of the fact that 99% of California dairy farms are family owned? Did they go up? How many people... you could do focus groups before and after to see what happens, you can do online surveys of, you know, identifying some of these people who are the food e-vangelists and if you could get them to take an online survey before and after the campaign to see if any of their feelings had changed. You could do direct interviews with anyone who attended a Farm Fam trip. You could do reports that actually analyze message quality and the tier of a publication for editorial and earned media. We could say, how much... cranking out stories doesn't do us any good if we have 80% message pull-through, if there aren't three of our important copy points in each article, you know, what percentage of articles included key message points. Then, if it was in the New York Times, that gets weighted much more heavily than if it was in the podunk weekly paper. You measure both the quality of the media vehicle and the quality of the message delivery."

KT: "Alright, I think that is all I have for you!"

AK: "Ok! Good luck!"

KT: "Thank you so much."

## Appendix B

### *Interview Transcripts: Lindsey Higgins*

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a public relations perspective based on a questionnaire about the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

Interviewer: Kimberly Taylor

Respondent: Cal Poly Agribusiness Department Professor and Cal Poly NAMA Team Advisor  
(Lindsey Higgins)

Date of Interview: 2/28/2013

Kimberly Taylor: “Okay, so the first question is, how would you, as an expert in marketing, describe how the Ag industry presents their key messaging to the consumer?”

Lindsey Higgins: “Um, how the ag industry presents their communications... I think maybe one of the challenges is that we’re not all that cohesive in our messaging. And, maybe, I know this isn’t directly answering your question, but, I think one of the big challenges is consumers don’t have a whole lot of awareness about ag and where their food comes from. So we’ve got further and further away from the farm, generationally speaking, so we don’t have that connection. So the average consumer doesn’t understand the process that the food goes through. Some of what they see in snippets seems very shocking or very foreign. They don’t understand it. So I think that’s where the communication lapse is, and then, I don’t know that there is any one agency that has a clear message in terms of educating consumers on what’s done. And maybe because there is so much diversity in, you know, everything from produce to livestock. There are a lot of differences, so it is hard to communicate all of that through one clear message when consumers are already faced with so many other messages going on. So, ya, maybe a lack of consistency, but at the same time it is hard when there is so much diversity in ag, what is one consistent message that we can share that’s going to reflect everything that goes on.”

KT: “And can you give an example of companies that you think have been effective or ineffective with that kind of challenge?”

LH: “Um, well the first example that comes to mind is Chipotle when they did that, what was it, the Back to the Start Campaign. It came out January, I think of last year. They were communicating through a simple minute-long commercial how industrial agriculture has changed and it kind of threw the rest of the ag industry under the bus as they’re pushing for their concept of, you know, hormone free or locally grown, or whatever makes up Chipotle’s communication strategy. I thought that commercial got a lot of attention, it pulled at everyone’s heartstrings and it was very clear in what they were presenting and the values that they hold true. So that’s the first example that comes to mind.

KT: “And would you say that that one, um, you mentioned that it ignored the other part of the Ag industry. Would you say that it bettered their company but not necessarily fostered learning and understanding of the whole industry, just their one little part?”



LH: “That was certainly their intention. Well, not necessarily pushing everyone else aside, but the intention was to improve the image and the brand equity that Chipotle has built up. When we think about industrialized Ag, and the process of efficiency, we have to have some economies of scale there. So, no one likes the thought of all this livestock in small confined areas, but ultimately that’s what consumers are continually voting for by choosing cheap food. We have an incredibly efficient system, and part of the output of that efficient system is that our food is less expensive than it is anywhere else in the world. So, it’s not all that realistic to all do the locally grown thing. We’ve got 9 billion people that have to eat, and hunger in this country alone is a real problem, too. I don’t remember what your question was.”

KT: “Examples of effective or ineffective strategies...”

LH: “Mm, ya. So I think Chipotle was effective in that sense. At encompassing the whole ag industry, probably not so much.”

KT: “Ok, next question. Where do you see gaps in the communications process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving an agricultural company’s key messaging. And give examples if you can.”

LH: “Well, I think just the biggest gap is getting interest from consumers, maybe, and, you know, they have so much going on and so many other messages coming through. I think there are maybe a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes about Ag and production agriculture and consumers; they just don’t have that interest. So it has to be presented in a manner that’s going to allow consumers to connect with. The Dodge Super Bowl commercial – that was a great example where, you know, only 2% of our population is involved in production agriculture, but yet this was a commercial that started trending on Twitter right away. A lot of people connected to that even though Dodge, they’re not just trying to sell to the farmer or the rancher. The market was a lot broader but they were able to communicate that nostalgia, that tradition, that connection that apparently resonated really well. They got a lot of talk as a result of that.”

KT: “Definitely. And how much do you think emotion affects agricultural key messaging?”

LH: “A lot. Especially with some of the more dramatic incidences and the PETA driven stuff, emotion is absolutely tied in there and, you know, it’s tied in to the Dodge commercial. I found myself getting teary-eyed watching that and the Chipotle commercial too. I mean, that’s a big way to, I think, gather some attention, is by presenting those emotional messages. And it can go either way – either in support and educating consumers about Ag but then also continuing to perpetuate some stereotypes and kind of the negative side of things as well.”

KT: “And how would you define industry reactions versus consumer emotions to the way that the industry is portrayed in the media?”

LH: “That’s a good question. I think one of the challenges on the industry side, again, goes to the fact that we’re not all that cohesive in how we go about things. You know, particularly related to production livestock, and the new PETA video will come out, and it goes immediately to

attacking that and trying to discredit that rather than really trying to educate consumers about the way things are really done. That may be an isolated incident, or from years ago. I think, having a more defined response, or really thinking about the message and what we need to do to really educate consumers and make consumers aware. On the consumer side I think it goes back to lack of knowledge or education, lack of awareness about food and food products and where they come from and how they're produced. Because there's that lack of awareness, they see one thing, and it causes a very dramatic response. But then, I would venture to say, and I don't have anything to support this other than my own opinion, that there's a dramatic response for a week, and then it kind of gets forgotten about because there's so much else going on, and they move on to something else. The news talks about something for a very short period of time, and it's very dramatic, and then we're on to talking about the pope leaving office, or the next scandal, or whatever it is. So, we have kind of a short life span memory-wise and media-wise when those things happen. Which, I guess, makes it all the more important that the response ag, the industry has when that kind of thing comes about, that we work harder to get those messages out there and use it as an opportunity to really educate consumers into what's really going on."

KT: "So, kind of related, what strategies and tactics would you use when developing a strategic plan to communicate those issues effectively in Ag?"

LH: "I think the biggest thing is really educating consumers. To get some sort of a long-term, sustainable response it has to be about education. And therefore, helping to mitigate stuff later on when the next scandal or the next food safety scare comes out. I think education is the only one that's going to get you through those bumps. Then, how do you get consumers to have that level of interest and engagement with food and agriculture? That's maybe where the emotional messaging and those opportunities come into play. But I think there are growing portions of the population that are becoming more interested in understanding production agriculture and have more connection with seeing all those from farm to plate programs. And that's maybe, this covers the majority of the population, but there are these smaller segments that are becoming more interested, more engaged in production agriculture."

KT: "And what kind of examples of campaigns that you think have been effective or ineffective in communicating or educating them?"

LH: "Um, I don't know! I don't know if I can think of anything... I have a graduate student right now looking at third party welfare certification programs, and the impact of those certification programs on the consumer's willingness to buy meat products – if there's a label there that says 'humane certified' or 'humane monitored' or some little logo. Does that affect your willingness to purchase this product or willingness to pay more for it? So I think there are a lot of, some of those messages coming out. I don't really know that one of them is all-encompassing enough to say that it really changed or really been successful on the grand scale, maybe in smaller instances. I don't know if I have an example industry messaging that's really yet caused a dramatic change. Have you talked to anyone in Ag education or Ag communication?"

KT: "I'm going to talk to Scott Vernon."

LH: “Good. He is the one that I was going to suggest for you. He’s going to be fantastic at answering these questions – way better than myself. And that’s part of what he’s pushing is the Farmer’s Feed My Soul. Really getting out and educating consumers and bringing back awareness of what we do and how we do it. It’s not those little snippets you see – they don’t truly reflect what’s going on. It’s the care that’s put into raising food and raising livestock.”

KT: “How would you manage a plan or campaign through integrating traditional media, new technology and crisis communications to effectively get the message out?”

LH: “Well, you know I think incorporating all of those things is going to be important. And with that messaging, thinking about consistency across all those different platforms and the response in a crisis situation can’t be dramatically different than your response all along. I think you have to build that consistency throughout the communications process. And then when something does happen, you reiterate those messages that we’ve been saying all along. And only through that process do we really have any hope, I think, of getting the message through to consumers.”

KT: “And do you have, possibly, any examples of that? Any campaigns, like Chipotle or the Dodge commercial that you think have been really effective?”

LH: “Well, in terms of kind of blending and integrating all those different media sources? Hmm.”

KT: “Or maybe any ineffective ones, too?”

LH: “I’m kind of drawing blanks right now! What Scott’s been involved with, they’ve really been doing some cool stuff. A lot of online presence, a lot of social media, and going around to current events and communicating consistent messages all throughout, not just in reaction or response to something happening. But I think that type of campaign, especially something that’s student driven or student run, really has a lot of potential. Breaking through some of those stereotypes about what Ag is, appealing to younger generations is going to be important.”

KT: “How would you measure the success of agricultural messaging?”

LH: “Ideally, through consumer awareness and consumer understanding, so they’re base knowledge level – where the food comes from, and how it is produced. That would be the metric that I’d be looking for. How measureable is that? I don’t know, unless you were to survey or take a sample, do that sort of thing. I think that’s the most important thing that we can do, and that’s what we should be trying to do throughout the messaging process.”

KT: “Ok, great! That’s all I have for you.”

LH: “I hope I was helpful!”

KT: “Yes, you definitely were. Thank you so much.”

## Appendix C

### *Interview Transcripts: Scott Vernon*

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a public relations perspective based on a questionnaire about the development, management and assessment of agricultural communication messaging.

Interviewer: Kimberly Taylor

Respondent: Cal Poly Agricultural Education & Communications Department Professor  
(Scott Vernon)

Date of Interview: 3/5/2013

Kimberly Taylor: “So, the first question... How would you, as an expert in Ag communications describe how the Ag industry presents their key messaging to the consumer?”

Scott Vernon: “Interesting question because when it comes to key messaging, often times it is commodity specific within the many facets of agriculture. And so the key messaging often becomes a bit of marketing communication instead of message communication. When we look at the bigger picture, and begin to understand as an industry what, you know, what shortcomings the industry has, they understand now that they have to be better at key messages and I think we look to trade organizations, farmer producer organizations as well, to provide some of that key messaging and historically it’s been a family farmer and rancher. It’s a family operation. And the key message, I think, historically has been American agriculture and the United States has the safest, most abundant, most affordable food supply in the world. That’s been a big part of the key message for many years. But, that has less strength today than it has in the past. People want us to be more transparent with ‘what does that mean?’”

KT: “Do you feel that this kind of approach fosters learning and complete understanding, that kind of family operation approach?”

SV: “No, I don’t think so. And the reason why is because as you look at the demographics of American agriculture, there are so few engaged in production agriculture trying to message to so many. When they have less than 2% of the population trying to message to 98% of the population, we come to a very difficult task that’s very expensive, and one that takes quite a bit of coordination. Historically, agriculture has not been always on the same page because the nature of the industry is sometimes things that are good for one part of the industry is not good for the other. So finding that unified message has been very difficult, and so our effectiveness then, gets, it’s almost as if it’s divide and conquer. Our message has so many different messages going out there, that I think sometimes the consumers and the public get confused about what is it we’re trying to say.”

KT: “And can you give an example of effective or ineffective strategies that have been used in the past?”

SV: “The one that comes to mind, and I’ll use it at the ballot box right now. In 2008, we had Proposition 2 in California. It was about animal husbandry practices with poultry, egg-laying poultry, swine, and milk calves. It was sponsored and supported by the Humane Society of the United States, and was going to dictate production practices on the farm. It was really focused around poultry, but they threw in a lot of other things to get the public to buy into it. Agriculture by and large was, kind of blindsided by the strength of that messaging that the Humane Society did. And as a result, we used science technology to try and communicate with voters. HSUS used emotion and strong imaging to communicate with voters, and ultimately Prop 2 passed with 63% of the vote, dictating that production practices in Ag production were going to change. And so there’s one that we lost bad. We were not able to get around the messaging on that, and we were ineffective. Fast forward now to the latest election, when we look at Proposition 37. It was about genetically modified organisms in food, and labeling and that type of thing. In this instance, you know, early in that ballot dialogue, it looked very clear that the other side that wanted labeling on their food was going to win. But, agriculture then got onto a very strong message that while we appreciate choice in the marketplace and we were willing to be transparent, this was bad policy and will be very expensive and not really, this piece of legislation, did not want to achieve the outcome that they were communicating. So as a result of that then, Prop 37 failed. And so agriculture did a good job of clearly messaging to the voters on that. So there are two instances where one we failed miserably, and one we won on that ballot. The issue’s not going to go away, but at least give us more time to look at that issue from the industry perspective, say ok, ‘what is it that the consumers do want?’ and ‘how can we adjust that through normal channels of policy making through the legislature instead of ballot box law making?’ And so, there’s two prime examples of failure and success.”

KT: “That’s interesting that they’re both ballot issues that they can fail so miserably and come around and come back. Second question – where do you see gaps in the communication process that prevent target markets and consumers from receiving an agricultural company’s key messaging?”

SV: “The gap sometimes, I think, exists between the producer and the consumer. The producers have one message that they’d like to get out about how they’re producing food and that type of thing. But there are a lot of people who have a hand in food production along the supply chain in distribution, food processing, and all that. So by the time products get to the consumers, they’re different than when they came of the farm. And so that gap exists between the evils of processed foods that consumers have a perception of, and what the farmers produce. And so, again, when we look at gaps, part of it is the American public is so insulated from food insecurity. We have an abundance of food, it’s quality food, it’s all the things that make our country unique, so we take it for granted. And so when we have other issues that affect on-farm things, that’s where the gap exists. It’s hard for them to trace that food all the way back to the farm in their minds. And so we need to be better at being more transparent about our production practices, be more open-minded sometimes about what the consumer is demanding, what the consumer is expecting of that transparency. Now, with that said, agriculture has always met consumer demands, and we’ve done it very efficiently; we’ve done it very effectively. If the consumer wanted dinner in 30 minutes or less, we are able to produce products; the food distribution and processing channel has been able to do that as well. They create products that in 30 minutes you have dinner on the table. Whether that’s right or wrong, I don’t know if that’s the producer’s problem necessarily,

but it's a fact of life. That's what our society has wanted. We don't spend much time as a consumer on hunting and gathering and food production. Instead, we just go to the grocery store, and there's where our food is, and there's plenty of it. So that gap exists between experience in food production and what they, how they live their lives."

KT: "Can you give an example of that gap and where it's made things harder for an agricultural company? Someone who's really been affected by the gap."

SV: "If we go back to Prop 2. Prop 2 said that we were going to have enhanced housing, colony housing, for our chickens. And, so here's legislature that's coming down and the producers have to abide by. Well, one company did that. They created enhanced colony housing; they put videos on the chickens. You can go on the Internet and watch the chickens 24/7, 365. But ultimately, then, as they produced that, then HSUS and those who favored that, said 'oh no, that's not really what we wanted.' Wait a minute – we're following what you said, and now you're changing the rules on us. So that's very difficult, that's difficult for producers who have a lot of capital expense, to try to meet these moving targets of demand, of people outside the industry. And so that's one that's real."

KT: "How much do you think emotion effects agriculture key messaging?"

SV: "Huge. And here's where it's changing. Historically, agriculture is a scientific pursuit, by and large. You have the art and science of food production, but we have always relied on sound science and technology to respond to market conditions, climate conditions, production environments, all that type of thing. And so then we tend to share that message with science and technology. However, the consumer is superficial, you know, consumers, legislators, are so superficial and in some cases, science illiterate, that that message just goes right over their head and they don't care. So, to reverse that, it's emotion now, when you think of the power of emotion, agriculture is beginning to understand that more completely in their messaging. Companies are doing that, producers, growers. And so we have to get back to the heart of what agriculture is. And a good example of that is the tremendous response that Dodge, or Ram Truck got from the 'So God Made a Farmer' during the Super Bowl commercial. That was all based on emotion. But you see the impact of that very clearly. Internet blew up, Twitter blew up, social media blew up with a two-minute ad in the most watched media event in the world. So there's where emotion plays in. And the communications leaders and the leaders in agriculture are beginning to understand that. And so the messaging is changing there. We still rely on science when we get deep into the issues. But to get their attention we first have to understand the emotional impacts of our messaging."

KT: "How would you define the differences between industry reactions and consumer emotions to the way that the Ag industry is portrayed in the media?"

SV: "Agriculture's always been defensive about how they are portrayed, misunderstood, all that type of thing. You know, consumers, all they hear often times is the whining, and so they respond to emotion very much so. When we go back, again, to the ballots where we can measure, we see what the motion did to their decision-making."

KT: “Alright, next question. What strategies and tactics would you use when developing a strategic plan to communicate issues effectively in agriculture?”

SV: “One, I would work to understand who is the target audience. First, what is the target audience? What is important to them? And then, what is our message to that audience? And stay on message, keep the message simple.”

KT: “Do you have any examples of campaigns that you think have been effective or ineffective?”

SV: “Ya, the one that I’ve been involved with that’s moved the dial some with our target audience, is the ‘I Love Farmers, They Feed My Soul.’ It’s a non-profit organization but our whole mission is to celebrate the choice that we have in the marketplace for our food, and those who produce it. That’s our mission, that’s what we stand for. And, then we communicate to our target audience of young people 14-24 years old within their environments. So having that narrow demographic that we have, we’re not distracted by those who don’t understand or share our message. It makes sense to our target audience. And so as a result of that, we’ve been able to have millions of media impressions, we’ve been able to have an impact on the ground. We’ve energized a whole category of volunteers nationwide to help with that, and we’ve done it with pennies and passion. So there’s one that’s based on emotion – ‘I love farmers, they feed my soul.’ So we make an emotional connection back to their food based on what farmers do. So that’s one that’s been helpful. And then, within that we do things that make sense to that demographic. We make it fun for them to ask questions about agriculture, we take some of the mystery out of it, we do it around strong imaging, and it’s been able to get a lot of reach.”

KT: “How would you manage a plan like that or a campaign through integrating traditional media, new technology and crisis communication?”

SV: “Well, in terms of crisis communication, the paradigm has shifted, we know that, with social media channels more available now to everybody. That changed the game – we are no longer dependent on mass media to help distribute our message. And so, as a result of that, we’ve been able to be more effective with our messaging, more authentic with our messaging, more present. And so in essence we’ve been more proactive about getting the message out instead of reactive.”

KT: “And do you have any other examples of campaigns that have really been effective in their messaging?”

SV: “You know, there’s one in California that had some reach with producers to help them to understand the power of social media. It’s the one, ‘Know a California Farmer.’ That initiative gathered steam, gathered content, was getting producers more aware of how to message and how to create transparency on the farm in a digital environment. And so that’s been effective.”

KT: “How would you then, measure the success of agricultural messaging and those kind of campaigns? Please provide examples.”

SV: “Well some of it is going to be in this new environment of social media. You do it through, how large is your audience? What’s your exponential reach? And so, the metrics there become likes, comments, interaction, conversation, dialogue, you know that’s how you measure some of that. Ultimately, the real measure of messaging is going to be what happens in policy and with consumers. Buying behavior and voting behavior are two measures of how successful you are. And so, if you again go back to Prop 2, we weren’t very successful, it failed. Prop 37, you can measure that the messaging was effective, and it passed. And so, we need to learn from that and say what was effective, and how did that work, and try to build that in to whatever you want to do as you move forward. Now not everything’s going to have that level of controversy about it. But one, when you put it out there, you’ve got to invest in the messaging. You just can’t rely on others to do it. And so, agriculture has to be involved. They have to be able to execute key messaging using the tools available to us today: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest, whatever it might be. Those are powerful mediums for us to access and to promote. And it’s a cost effective way. It’s not free, while you might be able to be on those things for free, it takes an investment in time, energy, and intellect to be able to make them work.”

KT: “I’m interested in this difference between Prop 2 and Prop 37. What do you think they did differently to help Prop 37 pass? What were their communication strategies?”

SV: “Well, the difference there, I think early on in Prop 2, everyone thought it was about chickens. They didn’t understand that there was a threat to all of animal agriculture. And agriculture generally, now you have an outside group dictating to agriculture how you’re going to operate your farm. That’s the hindsight to that. We thought it was one little thing, but it’s really a much bigger thing. You have a group that’s intent on eliminating animal agriculture. And if you have a group that’s intent on doing that and they’re successful, what does that mean to other groups that might have intents on your production? And so that was a big threat. I don’t think that was recognized early on. With Prop 37, the change there was it was no longer just a producer issue. This was a major food issue. And as a result of that, a lot more money came into the campaign. So, money does drive behavior. Now you have some major corporations who understood the threat and wrote the check to push it back. And that was a little different than what you saw on Prop 2. Prop 2 was really an on the ground producer issue. They didn’t have the wherewithal financially to fight some of that. And there were no big corporate monies that come in behind it to help the producer. And so it was a money issue. And then, two, I think just the organization of it. Now, you get that much money, you get more people working to campaign against something, and you get that information in the hands of opinion leaders. Ultimately what happened on Prop 37, was every major newspaper in California said 'no.' That has strength, when you get that kind of endorsement.”

KT: “So the media, and how they portray the agriculture industry, plays a huge part.”

SV: “Oh sure, ya. And while there’s a level of distrust, agriculture distrusts media, media, it’s still, you don’t pick fights with those who buy the barrel, is an old saying. So even though, the paradigm has shifted from traditional media to social media, we still have to pay attention to it. And they’re changing their business model as well to make sure that they stay relevant in today’s communication environment.”



KT: "Alright, that is all I have for you. Thank you so much."

SV: "You bet."