

Summary

How New York State Farmers and Agriculture are Portrayed in the Media September 2008

Media stories are a major source of information about farming for millions of people in New York who really have no direct connection to farms. No one has ever collected these media stories and analyzed them to discover specifically how agriculture is being portrayed - until now.

In the summer of 2008, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County hired an independent public relations consultant company in Rochester, NY to perform an agriculture "media audit," the first of its kind in the state and possibly the nation. Funding for this unique study was provided by a grant from the New York Farm Viability Institute, as part of a broader project to offer training on public and media relations for producers.

The public relations consultant, Customericity, Inc. conducted a media issues assessment by interviewing 14 farmers across the state and conferring with Cornell Cooperative Extension. Then, they gathered more than 400 newspaper articles, television reports, and Internet articles from local and regional media outlets in Upstate New York from the past 3 years. They organized an independent team of non-farmers to analyze the media stories about agriculture on whether they were positive or negative portrayals, engaging or dry, and how well they were balanced if the story had contrasting points of view.

According to this report, agriculture and farmers are portrayed in a fairly positive light overall in the media. Newsrooms are providing the public with many facts about agriculture and the issues affecting farmers. Yet, this report suggests that the media is not yet able to offer an emotional connection to farming and does not often provide a farmer-level perspective. It concludes by suggesting that farmers should take advantage of workshops and programs that explain how to engage the media about their farm and current agriculture issues.

The agriculture media audit report provides many revealing charts that depict how the media portrays specific farming issues, like workforce needs, neighbor relations, environmental stewardship, and production practices. These issues will continue to be the source of controversial stories and commentary in local papers and broadcast news.

Among the specific recommendations of the study:

1. More Farmer Engagement is Needed.

"First, more human interest stories about farmers and their families are important. Secondly, promoting stories that tie closely to consumer interests – healthy food and environmental stewardship are important. Finally, farmers need training on how to be quotable so stories are less dry."

2. Increase Respect for Farmers.

“There is a tremendous opportunity to educate people about farmers and farming and to build upon the good will the public has toward farmers. The best way to do this is through media training, a proactive media relations strategy, presentation training, and message development that captures the nature of New York State agriculture through the eyes of its strongest proponents – farmers.”

3. Go Visual.

“People will take more away and have a more positive image if they can visually see and embrace what is happening on farms. . . In an age where everyone walks around with cell phones taking photos, this lack of visual story-telling truly misses the powerful story of what farmers do, what they face and most importantly, how they contribute to make the lives of every person so much better.”

4. Embrace the Internet.

“More and more even small, local newspapers are going on-line. One story can literally have a shelf life of years and an audience far beyond a county or even New York State. Media training among farmers needs to understand the implications of social networking and its power to influence issues. The implications of this growing access to media are massive. Once captured on video, everything becomes ‘on the record.’ Anyone with Internet access can break or post news just as fast as a mainstream media outlet.”

5. Clarity and Proactive Strategy on Issues.

“A coherent strategy on how New York State farmers need to talk about these issues in humanistic, business and family terms is needed in order to clarify these issues and build up the reservoir of good will to help through inevitable challenges.”

6. Feel Good But Cautious.

“Farmers and their supporters have been successful in getting the message out that farmers are integral to the community, stewards of the land and the producers of wholesome food. The caveat to this statement is that this audit focused primarily on local community media which tends to be ‘kinder.’ These local papers are also often strapped for resources and more apt to use well-written press releases with minimal editing or differing points of view.”

For the full report of this study, visit www.farmpublicrelations.info

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