

BRIDGING THE URBAN RURAL DIVIDE

Keeping it Real Conference

Launceston Tasmania

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Introduction

Sadly Australia is complacent about the challenges to food security. There is a lack of appreciation by society in general of the interconnectedness of environment, agriculture, food and health. If we are to move forward and meet the mushrooming food needs of the cities and the community's expectation about environmental sustainability then both rural and urban communities must have greater empathy for one another.

Farmers today see themselves equally as dedicated to the health and sustainability of the land they live on, as to the production of food and fibre.

Meanwhile urban consumers often purchase their food and fibre with some innate suspicion or little knowledge of the value chain that provides it.

So in essence it is obvious the value chain model is flawed.

Why the current value chain model is out-dated

Let's start with acknowledging that a true value chain puts the consumer first and everyone else subordinate to their need.

This requires much a much better understanding by all value chain stakeholders of who buys what, where, when and why.

Today's consumers want to feel good about the purchases they make; they want food that is produced in a way that is consistent with their own personal values. They want to know more about their food - yet we continue to promote value chain thinking that filters the details of the people and places behind the food they eat through each step of the value chain

Equally farmers want to know more about the consumers and suffer the same frustrations as the consumer.

The results of this 'Chinese whisper' mentality with so many sets of ears involved is a poor understanding – suspicions about farming practices and food safety and quality and farmers not being valued or paid enough.

This value chain model undersells both what the farmer can provide and what the consumer wants. For farmersthe inability to positively influence the price we are paid for our produce is not good for the sustainability of primary industries and severely impacts on our ability to pitch agriculture as a career of first choice and attract and retain the best and the brightest. The model doesn't allow farmers to build trusted relationships with consumers and it doesn't allow consumers to connect with the people and the places behind the food they eat.

Impacts of the out-dated value chain model

This is a really big problem for us farmers.... More and more communities and governments are showing a lack of confidence and questioning our ability to make sensible decisions.

They are adding red and green tape for primary producers on issues such as workplace safety, pesticide use, noise and odour management, land use planning and animal welfare regulations, all in the apparent interest of the wider community.

This potentially threatens our right to farm and the costs and stress incurred when social license moves to social control.

And what affects farmers, affects every-one as a healthy agriculture sector is important for all businesses and service providers along the value chain

A new value chain model – the ‘value bracelet’

The challenge – how do we fix it?

The experts tell us the key enablers of a successful value chain are:

1. RELATIONSHIPS – collaborative partnerships built on trust AND
2. INFORMATION FLOW – efficient and timely flow of relevant information to all partners in the value chain

But how can we farmers have a close relationship with our consumers when there are so many people between us and our customers?

So our value chain needs some major surgery!

They say a chain is only as strong as its weakest link and presently we don't even have the most important link – the link that connects farmers and consumers.

So logically, the value chain should be a value bracelet

.... For consumers this allows a direct connection with the beating heart of the value chain the farmers who know and love and work the land.

.....For the farmers this allows a new way of thinking, a new way of operating and a new way of communicating.

Completing the new ‘value bracelet’

Every good lock has a secret key – and this is what we are working on – developing the keys to locking our consumers into a life-long relationship with the people who provide them with their most basic of needs – their food.

Clover Hill Dairies - the journey to bridge the urban-rural divide (see profile following)

Firstly we started with a mission to “be” the image we want our customers to see.

Our customers want to purchase from farmers who practice the things they value – whether it be animal welfare or environmental protection. They want food produced in a way that is consistent with their own personal values and our aim has been to develop a highly efficient dairy system on a small acreage that meets or exceeds those consumer expectations.

We know that building trust with consumers will be what set asides the successful primary producers of the future.

My family and I milk 450 cows three times daily on two farms on the NSW south coast, two hours below Sydney. The region has a rich heritage based on dairy farming. The home farm Clover Hill Dairies is situated on the north-east face of Saddleback Mountain at Jamberoo and is 100 ha, of which 50 ha contains large areas of important remnant rainforest.

The farm is quite unique, not only is it located in very step rainforest country it also includes a dairy-centric rural residential subdivision of blocks ranging from 1 to 100 acres. The farm and the 12 rural residential landholders have formed an incorporated body to access funding and work together to protect and enhance the unique community partnership of farming land, rainforest and waterways and ensure the dairy farm is a long -term thriving commercial enterprise.

We are proud to say Clover Hill Dairies is one of Australia's most water-efficient milk production systems, producing 125,000L milk per megalitre of captured water.

The Clover Hill Dairies Holstein herd holds numerous NSW milk production records and is believed to include the highest-producing cows on pasture in Australia. These achievements are matched with a passionate dedication to protect and enhance the landscape in partnership with our rural residential community.

The highlight of our farming journey is winning the 2009 NSW Landcare Heroes Primary Producer Award.

We believe we have achieved a WIN - WIN – WIN:

- Happy residents
- Happy cows
- Healthy Landscapes

Lemon Grove Research Farm Pty Ltd - Our second farm

Our second dairy is a new venture and we have only been there 12 months. The farm has been set up as a research facility and it has an even greater urban interface located adjacent to the Jamberoo Township

Our farm/ urban interface and the questions we are regularly asked have made us acutely aware that as primary producers increase both the distance most consumers have from the farm and the level of technology we implement in food production we have to dramatically improve our ability and commitment to build trust with our customers and consumers.

We believe Landcare farming principles meet or exceed consumer expectations, and practicing Landcare farming is doing the right thing by our business, our landscape and customers.

Community partnerships

At Clover Hill Dairies we believe partnerships between governments, scientists, farmers, and the community and all supply chain stakeholders offer the best opportunity for a sustainable future.

We open our farm to members of the public partnering with both Federal and local government to showcase sustainable farming practices to international delegates, indigenous farmers and the community. We work with local and international universities in the UK and Canada, opening the farm for work experience, as a case study for honours and PhD theses and as a research facility. We also provide a wide range of opportunities for school students including traineeships and work experience.

Engaging with the community on so many levels has opened our eyes to the passion they too share for agriculture and their thirst for knowledge ... so the thinking cap went on –

How do we tap this thirst and help quench it? And so the dream was born.

Our efforts have seen over 3500 children involved in campaigns on the South Coast and Tablelands of NSW over the past three years.

Picasso Cows

In 2007 I designed and attracted over \$100,000 sponsorship to pilot my first big community marketing strategy 'Picasso Cows'. This award winning agricultural and environmental education and awareness program taps into youth enthusiasm for the arts and technology. As part of the program primary schools students paint life size fibreglass cows in one of three environmental themes....."Healthy Landscapes" "Clean Water" and Energy Efficiency" and participate in on-farm Landcare projects.

The program is not just for budding Picassos and includes a customised curriculum, which includes a teacher manual and a comprehensive electronic resource incorporating science, literature and maths as well as art.

The students' written work was described by the judge as world class. This inspiring and creative, high quality work now delivers contemporary Australian dairy industry information to students across the globe via the Landlearn NSW website

The program has proved to be a productive, assessable and authentic learning tool

Outcomes from Picasso Cows were monitored by entry and exit surveys. Post-project, the total who "very strongly" felt that protecting the environment was important increased by 33%. Similarly, the number who felt they now "very strongly" knew how to look after the environment rose by 25%.

Surveys taken before the primary students started the project showed that nearly 40% were "uncertain" if dairying was important to their region of NSW. Following their involvement with the project, there was a 120% increase in the number of students who "strongly agreed" that dairying was important.

Following the project the students who "strongly agreed" they knew about dairying rose by over 700%.

Dairying as an environmental manager earned mostly negative or "don't know" votes before the project. Afterwards those who felt strong the dairy industry was a responsible environmental manager rose by more than 400%.

Our public displays of the artworks at a regional level and at the 2009 Sydney Royal Easter Show, the largest event of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere exposed the program and its key messages to tens of thousands of people. The social and cultural environment generated by the artistic component of the project has allowed us to attract new and different kinds of young people to agriculture helping the rapid transmission of knowledge and ideas.

In turn this has led to the formation of Dairy Youth Australia Inc.

Dairy Youth Australia Inc – who we are and what we do

This network allows me to work with young people I have met through my programs who now share my passion to tell others about the pivotal role Australian farmers play in feeding the world.

Originally formed to share dairy farming experiences with students and the wider community, the group no longer limits itself to dairying as we recognise primary industries share common ground. We have now extended our brief beyond dairy and tailored our new programs to both enhance the image of agriculture and encourage young people to consider agribusiness as a future.

For farmer participants and Dairy Youth Australia Inc members this allows us to build partnerships with other primary industries and share knowledge and skills.

We recently accessed \$50,000 from the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry's Australia's Farming Future initiative to design and deliver community events that are a true celebration of the people and the places behind the food we eat. Our initiatives partner with Landlearn NSW and other sponsors and include:

1. The award winning "*Jet and Emma Farm Management Series Education program for K to 12*" <http://www.dairyouthaustralia.com.au/jetandemma/> published on the web by Landlearn NSW.
2. The *Cream of the Crop Competition* <http://www.dairyouthaustralia.com.au/competition/> invites students' involved in primary industry and Natural Resource Management studies to create a PowerPoint about a unit of their studies with the chance to win \$1000 for their efforts. The winning entries will be loaded on the web providing contemporary authentic, positive and popular stories about agriculture and the environment written by young people for young people. This initiative is vital as the changes to the way farmers manage their properties have moved faster than educational resource development.
3. *The Archibull Prize* – takes Picasso Cows to the next level of sophistication and invites students in non rural high schools to learn with hands on experience about the challenges of feeding the world and the competition for natural resources. The finished artworks and curriculum activities must explore and communicate contrasting stories about the future of agriculture in their local area under the theme "Love it Or Lose It".

The next venture – bridging the urban-rural divide

With our next exciting project *Perceptions and Realities - Bridging the Rural Urban Schism* we aim to kick-start changes in the attitudes and behaviour of students studying in our cities and large regional towns that do not have an agricultural connection. When funded this program will recruit and train 'farming champions' to be the face of agriculture in their local region. Our farming faces & industry champions will partner with us to deliver our education programs directly into their local primary and secondary schools. The farmers will interact with the students to start them thinking about local issues and potential solutions. It has always been acknowledged to drive the process of change requires 'champions' and 'leaders' Too often these people do this on a voluntary basis with no support networks and burn out and walk away. Our program provides the necessary support both physically and emotionally. We will create and provide our farming faces with a range of flexible, authentic and contemporary learning tools that allow young people to explore the environmental challenges of modern agriculture and work with real farmers to seek solutions.

This model will be packaged up and can be spread right across the nation.

You might have noticed by now that all of these projects deliver strong rural sustainability messages - not just to the students involved, but also to the wider community. They showcase the positive things farmers are doing and empower them to share their stories. Our activities are genuine, contemporary, engaging, fun and full of hope for a sustainable future. On the way we have had a lot of help from the three tiers of Government and the wider community - not to mention the media

Getting involved

Other organisations have come on board and have really extended our reach.

For example our Picasso Cows program has now been handed over to large industry body and they are currently rolling out the program to 400 schools across Australia over the next 3 years. Maybe your kids will get the chance to paint a cow soon and learn more about the people and the places behind the food they eat

The key to success is recognising urban and rural communities are culturally different. Urban people often feel out of place on a farm and farmers often don't feel that comfortable in the city.

These programs just provide a means to invite the two communities to visit and get to know each other - share stories, improve their understanding and work through potential issues.

How you can help?

To realise my dream we must have support from all value chain stakeholders.

Farmers want to be more proactive and after all who better to educate our customers than us? However like everyone in the value chain we need to do it better. We need to work together and help each other.

We need everyone in the value chain to sell the message to consumers that contemporary agriculture is consistent with their values and expectations. That is – in what we ALL SAY and what we ALL DO.

We need everyone along the value chain taking the same message – OUR MESSAGE... out to our customers.

I am sure you will agree at every stage along the value chain; farmers, wholesalers, distributors, and retailers and so on... it all begins and ends with the right image –

Image is not just something for someone else to worry about. Image is so important.... it needs to be created and then actively managed.

And what images do farmers want their customers to see?

What we don't want is to be portrayed as we have been in the past – as people to be pitied.

So what images do we as farmers, want our customers to see? We want our customers to see farmers as trusted profession producing life's daily essentials - our food

I am not asking you to mess with reality – but PERCEPTIONS ARE REALITY - work with it!!

Did you know that farmers are number 8 on the most trusted list?

They are our 2008 Sensis Yellow Pages 'Food and Beverage' Heroes.

They are passionate and committed stockman, water management gurus and cropping specialists, and maestros extraordinaire.

They are business people with families making decisions together

We want to set the record straight – ditch the stereotype images.

We want to counter those misguided lobbyists who argue that those on the land are merely extracting resources and using non-sustainable methods to do so.

We want to counter the perceptions that farming is a fast track to financial ruin and a dead end career. Sure, things have been tough recently – but over the last 6 yrs the community has witnessed through the media one agricultural natural disaster after another.

But enough is enough. The right images and perceptions will ensure correct empathy in the good times, and respect in the bad.

We must dispel the myths and perception that agriculture is sunset industry with no future - that needs constant propping up by government.

We want to be portrayed as we are - trusted professionals producing life's daily essentials.

Just think what we could achieve together if all members of the supply chain are rowing together:

- Great visibility
- Great community support
- Great media coverage
- Great outcomes

Help us create and build enduring education and community partnerships. Much of the work has already started. If you are wanting more ideas about how you can get involved come and talk to me!

Some excellent recommendations have also been made by Professor Fearn the 2008 Adelaide Thinker in Residence in his report "Sustainable Food and Wine Value Chains"
<http://www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/reports.html>

Take home messages

So the 'take home' message for today is to help me build the last, missing link in the chain. Help me create the value bracelet and lock our consumers into a life-long relationship with the people who grow their food and fibre.

Be a part of my 'dream' team. Let's rearrange the modern value chain – let's practice what we preach & call it a value-adding exercise. From a humble chain let's create the (high) "value bracelet" and let all the diamonds shine.

Though programs like Picasso Cows we have found urban people (our customers) want to engage across the divide with the agricultural sector.

Partnering with real farmers to deliver interesting and engaging programs taps into urban culture... and is the magic key to the missing link – the locket. These programs create a powerful and direct link between farmers and their customers.

Picasso Cows is just one spar of the 'Sydney Harbour bridge' that will be required to re-establish the emotional and psychological connection between urban and rural communities – and it is a big step in the right direction. Picasso Cows works with the next generation of consumers – these future consumers hold the key to the long term future of our agricultural industries.

Movements such as urban and organic agriculture, the slow food movements, farmers markets and farmgate trails are all helping to re-establish the physical and emotional relationships between consumers and the people who produce their food and fibre.

This physical connection is the beginning of the journey... farmers markets and farm retail are just a staging post – partnership right around a concentric value chain is the future.

The rewards for getting it right are huge – farmers..., customers.... – and all of the participants around the value bracelet benefit from a healthier agriculture sector.

And you can help right now - by re-examining the paradigms you personally hold about the agriculture sector – and ensuring that the messages coming out of your organisations add to the image of farmers being Trusted professionals producing life's daily essentials.

If you have the means, partner with us on projects that directly bridge the urban-rural divide. Strategic investments that finally complete the value chain and add the missing link will address many of the issues that currently undermine Australian agriculture.

Thinking long term is the best way to secure a bright future for Australia's primary producers....And everyone else right around the value bracelet.

I invite you to partner with me to fulfil my dream and help us deliver our programs – programs with a proven track record - into schools Australia wide

Contact details

Ms. Lynne Strong

Clover Hill Dairies

Address: 105 Clover Hill Rd

PO Box 20

Jamberoo NSW 2533

Phone: + 61 (2) 42 360 309

Email: lynnestrong@cloverhilldairies.com.au

www.cloverhilldairies.com.au