

Telling Our Story:
Partnering with the Media

July 2003



LEOPOLD CENTER

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Background

On September 6-7, 2003, the Glynwood Center near Cold Spring, New York, and the Leopold Center at Iowa State University hosted a meeting at Glynwood involving numerous organizations involved in sustainable agriculture to discuss how we can establish better communication between our rural and urban communities around farm and food issues.

Subsequent to that gathering a representative group met to develop strategies to achieve some of the goals that had been identified. It was decided that we needed to find better ways to engage the media. Consequently we hosted a meeting with several key journalists who regularly write about food and farm issues to discuss ways that we can work with the media more effectively.

To that end, on July 17, 2003 the Glynwood and Leopold Centers invited several key journalists and a small group of individuals representing sustainable agriculture organizations. Following are some nuggets of information gleaned at that meeting which we hope will be helpful to enterprises involved in our work. Participants are listed in Appendix A.

The Media in the current social/political climate

We should not expect the media to get too far out in front of any issue in today's political climate. The media cannot afford to be targeted in a manner that will seriously jeopardize their advertising revenue. So if we want to get our stories in the news and/or get our point of view into stories that are already in the news, we need to help provide political support for the story. Getting a quote from a politician or two who have some clout in the House or Senate that takes our point of view is always helpful in getting a story into the news. We also need to encourage the public to support politicians who are willing to work for change in the existing agricultural/food system. Furthermore, we need to imagine how we can make the media/politics/corporate relationship work for us. Helping CEO's, politicians and journalists recognize that they can benefit from working together to develop meaningful sustainable agriculture/food systems could create a new nexus that would make us attractive to the media. As one CEO of a major food distribution company put it: ". . ."whether farmer or corporate executive . . . we must trust in forces that are greater than we are individually if we are to renew, or to create something altogether new."

Chefs have emerged as a driving force

Chefs all over the world have become leaders in raising food and farming issues. Chefs linked to farmers make particularly interesting media stories. "Messaging through taste" is attractive to the media. Chefs are perceived as leaders of social change.

The “plight of farmers” doesn’t make a good story

The urban public largely believes that farmers are no different from anyone else---and there is a “shake out” going on out there---farmers have to face the changing times just like the corner druggist or the mom and pop clothing store. The family farm is a relic of the past. Farmers are perceived as “whiners” by the urban public. This doesn’t mean that we just forget this issue---in fact it is central to our cause---but it does mean that we won’t get the story in the press if we present it as a “plight of the farmer” issue. We need to frame this as a story that engages a suburban dweller in issues he/she cares about---what will they lose if the independent farmer disappears? Fresh, local food? Taste of place? Transparency? Wildlife habitat? Recreational landscape? The public is concerned about food security, safety, price and convenience. Obesity is a growing issue along with public school lunch programs. Many of these issues can be directly connected to industrial food systems that have emerged and to the disappearance of the independent farmer producing whole, local food. Turning farmers into “serfs on their own land” is linked to the production of food that fails to meet the expectations of food customers. Our concerns about farmers, farmland, environment, and health issues come down to marketing the type of food that meets our goals for a sustainable food system and the independent farmers that can produce the food for that system. So while professionals in the media will not be interested in stories about the plight of the farmer, they will be attracted to stories that promote food that meets the public expectations or threatens any of the conditions people want in the food they buy. What kind of farm, and what kind of farmer, can best deliver what people want?

Cultivate heroes on the Hill

Whether we like it or not, political elites define the boundaries of debate carried by newspapers. We need to identify the elites that are ready to be part of our stories---CEO’s, politicians, movie stars, etc. Positive stories that demonstrate alternatives can be especially effective in recruiting elites.

Recognize our power

Given that we do not have an advertising base we need to acknowledge the fact that we actually get great press! Many editors like what we are doing---we should capitalize on that. We should also recognize that “customer power” is especially strong in the food arena. If a food firm loses a food customer they cannot replace that loss by getting their remaining customers to eat more! Telling success stories about food customers, who have been successful in getting desired changes in the food arena, increases that power.

Stories versus subjects

There is a difference between a “subject” and a “story”. Stories are much more attractive and powerful than subjects. Journalists are always looking for good stories. Attend to the “quirky” idea that makes a story attractive and carries the “big” story. Stories about the farmer and the chef working together can carry the big story about food freshness and

taste---along with a host of other issues. Give editors the narrative---let them find the issue on their own.

Establish relationships

Journalists are always looking for good spokespersons that they can call to get information and quotes on the issues of the day. Develop a list of the best spokespersons, broken down by subject, on the ten important food and agriculture issues that are likely to be in the news. Ask yourself---who do you want as the one person to be quoted on each issue. Heads of non-profits are attractive because they generally don't have a personal financial or political interest in the story and therefore are credible. Develop a relationship with key journalists who write about issues you care about. Ask them what they are looking for. Make your list of spokespersons available to them with easy contact information. Create opportunities for journalists to meet critical people. A meeting of national experts (on our issues) with local journalists could be very effective. Other strategies: Focus on one magazine, one writer---cultivate the relationship. Don't overlook the importance of smaller, regional media outlets---they often have style sections that want food stories which have more political/ecological direction. Study the tone of a journalist's work---call with an angle he/she may be interested in. Write an Op Ed that conforms to the length, style of the paper---radio interviews often follow. **Meet with top business editors/writers.** Many food stories start as business stories then become wider consumer concern stories. Remember the two-fold objective: getting our stories told, and getting our point of view into existing stories.

Determine the "demon" in the story

Health and environmental impact stories have a fear component to them. It's a legitimate part of the story. But it can be overdone and backfire. Obesity, food borne illness, land degradation, secrecy, etc are all demon stories but they need to be combined with positive response. People want to know what to do and the new choice must be relatively accessible. Connect the issues---what does obesity have to do with sustainable agriculture? How is farm policy related to obesity and what can I do about it? Point to creative ways to reduce the complexity of consumer choice---eg, buy fresh, buy local. Must say X is preferable to Y. Stories should celebrate food---the right choice brings you satisfaction and pleasure!

Expand the writer's network

Help start clones of the Prairie Writers Circle in other regions of the country. The Kellogg Fellows may be an important resource in any given region to develop such a circle. The American Forum in DC will work with groups to do Op Eds and distribute to local and regional press. (www.mediaforum.org/boardaccess), or call 202-638-1431. Create a news service that picks up the best information from the many smaller services springing up around alternative agriculture---would be a real service to editors/writers.

Appendix A: Participants in the conversation

Dan Barber, Blue Hill Restaurant, New York, NY
Tim Bowser, FoodRoutes Network, Millheim, PA
Jane Daniels Lear, *Gourmet* Magazine, New York, NY
Hal Hamilton, Sustainability Institute, Hartford, VT
Fred Kirschenmann, Leopold Center, Ames, IA
Judith LaBelle, Glynwood Center, Cold Spring, NY
Richard Pirog, Leopold Center, Ames, IA
Michael Pollan, University of California, Berkeley, CA
Niel Ritchie, Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy, Minneapolis, MN
Carina Sayles, Stockton, NJ
Robert Schubert, CropChoice, Washington, DC
Gary Valen, Glynwood Center, Cold Spring, NY