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Is It Just Me?

By J. Neil Orth, AICA Executive Vice President

Is it just me? Or does anyone else feel like the proverbial Alice In Wonderland? We seem to have fallen down the rabbit hole where logic does not prevail. No matter how hard we try to present the facts backed by sound science and logic, and have a rational discourse, the facts get lost in translation.

Many, not involved in production agriculture, have decided our food system is flawed. Anyone with a Twitter account, a blog, a Facebook page or a microphone can say whatever necessary to further a cause. They can write books, make movies, and raise massive amounts of money to promote their beliefs. Their rhetoric makes for good interviews on network morning shows or 3 part series on the evening news. It doesn't have to be truthful, factual, or logical. It doesn't even have to be possible. But make no mistake, it is loud and it is gaining momentum faster than a snowball headed to hell!

Rather than supporting their argument with sound science and factual information, food terrorists use emotion, sensationalized rhetoric and misinformation to confuse the consumer. Production agriculture is being blamed for everything from social inequities to the obesity epidemic. In fact, the documentary, Food, Inc. was nominated for an Academy Award for "enlightening" the public about the methods used to get food to their tables. Food, Inc., was damning to all things related to livestock production. Thankfully, it did not win. For most of us, it is beyond comprehension that this supposedly factual documentary received one minute of fame. Yet, the fact that it was nominated for the most coveted award in the movie industry speaks volumes about the precarious position we face.

An entire generation of misinformed consumer is trying to force radical change and, ultimately jeopardize, a delicate system of food production that almost guarantees every retail store selling food never worries about adequate supply. A confused consumer has been force-fed convincing junk science and propaganda that pit those of us involved in the production of beef against each other. A simple lifestyle choice, organic versus grain fed or locally produced versus the alternative, has now become disguised as some convoluted moral dilemma.

No doubt, the facts are on our side. But, we must find a way to make our voice louder than the food terrorists absolutely committed to undoing the most efficient, cost effective, and safe food production system in the world.

The consumer simply doesn't understand the unintended consequences of their demands. If we "connect the dots" to what consumers say they want and apply the very basic economic principles, it is not only illogical, it is improbable.

In Kansas and Missouri alone, the livestock industry accounts for more than 62,000 jobs and has an induced economic impact of more than \$39 billion. Research into affordable, localized food production, particularly community gardening would be laughable if the consequences were not catastrophic. Costs range from \$20 per square foot just to build the garden to input costs upwards of \$25,000, with the land being donated! While many with alternative agendas are working non-stop to convince a vulnerable consumer about the need for sustainability, the very nature of their model is not sustainable.

Livestock production has committed millions of dollars to developing a system where not only the land is sustainable, but each segment of the process is economically sustainable. In other words, the environment is protected, the land replenished and each segment of the food chain has an opportunity to be profitable. Meanwhile, the consumer has multiple choices—all safe, healthy and nutritious.

The demands being made on production agriculture will literally move our system back more than 50 years. Yes, we have agencies and organizations looking out for our best interest everyday and waging this war, as best they can on the political front. They cannot do it alone. The cards are being stacked against us. You and the next generation must do more. Call your elected officials, write letters to the editors, do anything and everything you can to make sure the public in your area understands, not just the facts and sound science, but what's at stake for them as well as you.

This column should be reserved for communication about Charolais and AICA. After all, you mind our own business. You go about your profession of producing registered seedstock and commercial cattle that enter a complex food chain, ultimately contributing to a seemingly endless supply of fresh, nutritious, wholesome and safe beef. You are incredible stewards of the land. You are finding ways to sustain value in an end product while sustaining a business model during the most difficult economic environment in more than a century. So who could find legitimate fault with your mission? Today, the answer is both shocking and sad.

No doubt, we must continue to be vigilant within our industry and make changes when changes need to be made. But, talking to each other and tossing kudos back and forth, making us feel good about ourselves, serve no purpose and may, in fact, delude us into thinking the challenges ahead are not serious. Let's make some noise!